

An Equal Partnership

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An Equal Partnership

by [Emily_F6](#)

Summary

Lucy isn't sure what exactly possessed her to take the Ghoul up on his offer to 'meet her makers' as he put it, but as they travel together, she realizes he might not be the monster he wants everyone to think he is. And she might not hate him quite as much as she used to.

Notes

It has been years since I've written for a new fandom...but I just cannot get the dynamics between these two out of my head! So I'm giving it a shot. I've only played a little bit of Fallout 4, so please forgive me if I'm off on the lore/specifcs of this world! I did my best with the show and the Fallout Wikipedia.

Chapter 1

There was a moment, right before she opened her eyes, that Lucy thought her dream might have been reality...that she was tucked into bed beside her new husband, only this time, there had been no distant screaming and no knife in her stomach and no blender blade ripping his face open. That all of *that* had been the dream, and Monty was just a man from Vault 32 who had been chosen to be her husband, and who she had been so nervous and excited to meet. Just a man that would hopefully impregnate her so that they could raise the next generation of Americans who would one day reclaim the surface and bring civilization back to the world, fulfilling the purpose of their vault. And maybe she'd even get to see it! Her children and Steph's would be friends, and they'd sit together and watch their children play. In her dream, she'd almost been able to see it...her and her husband and her best friend and her brother, all of them watching their children run and play under the projected sun.

Only the projected sun wasn't that bright. Her eyes flew open, and she winced at the brightness of it as it started to rise over the horizon. Nothing in the vault had been that bright. And in only seconds, the dream was gone, replaced by the absolute reality of her situation. Wincing at the way her back twinged and wishing for her clean, comfortable mattress, she pushed herself upright, looking around the makeshift campsite her new companion had set up the night before.

In the bright light of day, she wondered what had possessed her to follow the Ghoul out of that Observatory where her whole world had come crashing down around her...where she'd put a bullet through her mother's skull. Only it hadn't been her mother. Of course it hadn't been her mother. Not anymore. She wouldn't let herself think that. Her mother had been gone for a long time. Her mother was dead and her father...her father was a monster. And somehow the Ghoul knew her father and...and instead of tying her up again or shooting her or cutting off another finger, he'd invited her to come along with him to find her father.

To meet her makers.

And she had.

She'd shot her mother and she'd gotten up and she'd walked out into the night, following at his heels like that dog he insisted wasn't his as the Brotherhood of Steel had fought Moldaver's people outside.

She hadn't asked him any questions...had been too wrung out and exhausted and maybe even in shock to do more than nod when he'd finally told her they'd be stopping for the night. And so they'd stopped, and she'd laid right in the dirt, curled up on her side, and had cried herself into dreams of a husband who would never stab her and a father who would never betray her and a vault that was safe...that was her home. It hadn't occurred to her that he might kill her in her sleep...that he might just have brought her along to slit her throat and make ass jerky out of her. A snack for the road.

At least he hadn't said anything about the crying.

Lucy knew what shock was. She knew about trauma and she knew that traumatic events could lead to changes in brain chemistry, and so, she told herself as she sat up and squinted into the sunlight that threatened to blind her and remind her of her mother all at once, that's what had happened. Something traumatic had happened to her. Several somethings, in fact, starting with her wedding night. And now her brain chemistry was different and...and that different brain chemistry had made her leave a man who'd been kind to her...the first person who might actually be her friend up here on the surface, and instead follow the man who'd tried to sell her organs for whatever was in those little vials he carried around out into the wasteland.

Was he really going to help her find her father? He'd known her father, that much had been clear, and her father had known him too. From before the war. What would the Ghoul do when they found him? What would she do?

Pull the trigger? Would she be able to do it this time? The Ghoul would, she was sure of it. Did she care? Her father certainly deserved it after everything.

"Let's go, Vaultie. I haven't got all day."

The words jolted her out of her thoughts, and Lucy looked up, squinted against the sun, only to find the unmistakable figure of the Ghoul staring down at her. His face was hard to read, especially when so much of it was hidden in the shadow of his hat, but he wasn't actively pointing a gun at her, so she just nodded, forcing herself to her feet and jumping a little when a furry head nudged its way under her hand.

"You too, Dogmeat. We're burning daylight." And with that exchange, which ranked among the most civil they'd ever had, she followed him.

Lucy tried to take stock as she walked. Unlike the Ghoul, she didn't have much ammunition left for the single gun she carried. Her canteen was nearly out of clean water. Nearly all the supplies she'd left her vault with were gone. The supplies offered her by Vault 4 were still there, the offer rescinded when Maximus had attempted to 'save' her. She didn't dare bring any of that up, though. Not yet. Back at her vault, Lucy had been good at reading people. She'd spent her whole childhood learning how to effectively and politely communicate with the people in her community. To problem solve. To mediate. But none of her methods had worked on the Ghoul thus far.

Then again, he *had* invited her to come with him. She wasn't traveling with him as a captive this time. And he had the answers she needed...she just had to figure out the right way to ask for them. She tried to go over everything she'd heard him say to her father. So much of the night before felt like a blur that it was hard to put the pieces together, but as she walked, she did her best. He'd called him 'Young Henry' even though her father always went by Hank. And...the line he'd said...the one she was pretty sure was from the Cooper Howard movie her dad had loved...had the two of them watched that movie together? Maybe they'd been friends? Her father and the Ghoul had both been around since before the war. It was almost impossible to wrap her head around, no matter how hard she tried.

And he'd asked about his family. The Ghoul had a family. That was almost harder to imagine than him being alive before the war or having friends, but she guessed that he must

have been a normal man once, right? Not that she was going to ask. Not yet. Lucy had a feeling that the man she knew only as ‘the Ghoul’ wasn’t going to have a heart to heart about his missing family with her anytime soon. No, first she would focus on trying to have a civil conversation with him...not that he had the air of someone who *wanted* to have a civil conversation. Still. She would have to figure it out eventually. Maybe she was reading him wrong and he *did* want to talk to her? Surely he hadn’t asked her to come along so they could travel in absolute silence the whole time.

Or maybe he had. Who was she kidding? She had no idea what he wanted from her.

As they walked, Lucy kept her mind busy by trying to figure out the best question to ask first, hand absently scratching behind Dogmeat’s ears when she demanded attention. She had so many questions...how was she supposed to pick just one to start? How was she supposed to ask the man whose last real interaction with her had been selling her to organ harvesters to explain all of this? She didn’t even know what to call him! The woman in Filly had called him “Ghoul” but as far as she could tell, that was a descriptor, not a title. There were other ghouls, like the ones in the cages at the Super Duper Mart...like the Ghoul’s friend that he’d shot in the head. First, they were normal, and then, one day, it seemed like they forgot who they were. And then...then they were monsters.

He took the vials so he wouldn’t become a monster.

Well...a feral monster. She still thought he could be kind of a monster. But she’d saved his life. Did that mean anything to him? Was that why he’d extended this invitation? He’d said that the Brotherhood would kill everyone, including her? Had he been trying to help?

“Sir?” It wasn’t a perfect solution...she still needed to figure out what to call him. But for now, she was treading lightly. If he turned on her, which was a very real possibility, then she would have to defend herself...she would have to be ready. He was fast and he was strong, but she’d always been a good shot. At least...when it came to target practice. Then again, none of the targets had been people moving towards her with guns. But until he gave her a reason, she was determined to at least be polite.

The Ghoul grunted, which she took for an answer, but didn’t slow down, and she didn’t speed up, preferring to keep her distance just in case until she saw how this conversation was going to go.

“How...how do you know my father? You said he used to pick up your wife’s dry cleaning? What does that mean?”

Dogmeat barked, startling her and taking off into a cluster of bushes, but the Ghoul barely seemed to notice...just kept walking. He was quiet, and for a moment, she thought he might just ignore her. There was a crunch from the bushes, and a horrible skittering noise, and then Dogmeat was trotting happily back over to them, something disgusting-looking in her mouth as she chewed. Lucy flinched, averting her eyes, even though her own stomach was growling loudly enough that she wondered how long it would be before she too was eating giant mutant insects.

“He did. Your daddy was my wife’s assistant back in the day.”

There was a sardonic edge to his words, an almost smile in his voice. His voice reminded her of someone...something about the accent.

"I don't know what that is," she admitted, going for the direct approach. She had no idea which details were important so she'd try to get as many as she could. He did look at her then, a glance thrown over his shoulder, brow lifting. "Dry cleaning," she clarified, and he huffed, shaking his head and turning back around. Pulling her canteen out and taking a sip of her dwindling clean water, she wondered if he'd make her drink from another dirty puddle if she ran out.

"Don't matter. The point is, he worked for her."

"Before the war?"

"That's right. Your daddy worked for my wife, and my wife worked for Vault Tec."

Vault Tec. Just the name made her smile instinctively, chest filling with warmth and a feeling of safety, before reality caught up to her once more. Vault Tec was...it was bad! Vault Tec had allowed those scientists to run Vault 4...to run experiments on those poor people! Her dad had been part of Vault Tec! He'd been fine with letting so many people die! What else were they responsible for?

What was the experiment in her vault?

"Do...do you think they kept her...alive? Like...like they kept my father alive?"

"That's what I intend to find out."

"If she worked for Vault Tec...do...do you think she knew what they were doing? In the vaults?" Against her better judgment, she took a couple of quick steps to catch up to him. It would be easier to talk that way, she justified. He didn't show any sign that the closer proximity bothered him, so she tried not to worry. "Because...we...Maximus and I, we found a vault. Another vault. Vault 4. And they...originally they were run by scientists. But the scientists were doing these...horrible experiments." Her voice cracked a little when she remembered what she'd seen. "They...they were breeding...mutants. With humans. And killing them! Do you remember the...the thing? In the water?" The '...that you used me as bait to try to catch and almost drowned me' went unsaid. "The gulper?"

He grunted out what she assumed was a 'yes'.

"They did that! I saw a tape of a woman and she was in a tank filled with water...she gave birth to these...creatures and they...they ate her," she whispered, voice dying in her throat as the image of it came back to her...the sound of the woman's screams and the blood in the water. "Did the people who worked for Vault Tec...did they know? When they first made the vaults?"

He was quiet again, but when she looked at him, he had a strange look on his face. Like he was remembering something. "They knew. They all knew. It was the plan just about from the start."

“At Vault 4, they killed all the scientists and...and one of the people who lives there, she said that there were experiments at all the vaults. She asked what the experiment at Vault 33 was.” She hesitated when he was quiet. “I don’t know what the experiment was.”

His eyes darted over to her, just for a second, and he grunted, more like he was showing he was listening than answering her.

“Did you work for Vault Tec too?”

“Fuck no,” he bit out, like he was offended she’d asked. Her eyes darted to his gun but his hands stayed at his sides.

A thousand more questions came to mind. What *had* he done then? Who had he been before the war. But those were too personal, so she went with, “did you know about the experiments?”

Slowly, he nodded. “I knew some of it. Tried to stop it. Didn’t try hard enough, apparently.”

A moment of silence. Then, “Did my father know too?” Her voice sounded cold and hard in her own ears as she remembered Shady Sands.

“Yeah. Your daddy knew all of it. Helped plan some of it, probably.”

Of course he had. Of course he’d known.

“He killed my mother,” she whispered, not sure why she was telling him of all people. Maybe because there was no one else to tell. “She found out that there were people who were still alive. She went to the surface and she took me and my brother with her, and he came after her. And when she wouldn’t go with him, he...he destroyed the whole city. He bombed Shady Sands.”

The Ghoul nodded, not seeming surprised. “Yeah. That sounds like something Vault Tec would do, alright.”

“What are you going to do to him? When you find him?”

Here, he stopped, turning to look at her straight on, speaking slowly and clearly, the smooth accent belying his words. “Well, darlin’, I’m going to make him tell me where my family is. And then I’m going to put a bullet between his eyes. And I’d suggest you not get in my way while I’m doing so.”

Lucy swallowed hard, strangely unafraid. For some reason, she was almost glad to hear it. Even if she couldn’t make herself pull the trigger, he could. “I won’t.” Maybe as long as she didn’t give him a reason, he wouldn’t shoot her too.

He looked in her eyes for what felt like a long time, finally nodding to himself. “Well alright then.”

And then they were walking again, him pulling out his inhaler and taking a puff.

“The ghoul...the one at the table?” she offered into the silence a few minutes later, and he sighed like he’d been hoping for more silence. “That was my mother.”

That did earn her a full on look, and the place where his eyebrows should have been lifted once again.

“Huh.” Nodding a little to himself, he adjusted his hat so it sat further back on his head. “Well, at least I know you’re a decent shot.”

“I shot you, didn’t I?” she grumbled a little, forgetting for just a second who she was talking to, then flinched when she processed the words that had just come out of her mouth. Instead of biting her head off though...or one of her fingers, he just huffed, shaking his head to himself.

“Yeah. Try that again and I’ll take more than your finger.”

That, she absolutely believed.

Back at the vault, there had been all kinds of people, even people she didn’t necessarily get along with all the time, but there hadn’t been a single person like him. No one threatened another person so openly in the vault. No one resorted to violence so quickly...or at all, as far as she had seen. Disputes were solved with words. Diffusing physical disputes was practiced through role play in school since they so rarely happened. Everyone had learned from a young age that the survival of their community depended on kindness and a willingness to compromise and share resources. Never had she worried about talking to someone like she worried about talking to him. Never had she kept her mouth shut, choosing her words carefully, because she worried speaking might end with her hurt. Never had self preservation meant keeping her thoughts to herself. She’d never been very good at keeping her thoughts to herself. And she’d always had someone to talk to! Her dad or Steph or Norman...even Chet! They’d all been there for her whenever she’d needed them, and she’d done the same for them. Now though, she kept quiet, the only sound the Ghoul’s jingling spurs and her own breathing, and the occasional noise from Dogmeat.

But walking in silence gave her plenty of time to think, and she had plenty to think about. Her mother’s hand on her face in the sun, one of her only memories of her. Her brother’s teasing and how he’d annoy her when they were younger until she’d felt like she was going to scream...and how he’d come to her when he needed someone to talk to, all sheepish and hopeful. Steph and the husband she’d just lost to raiders, and the baby that was due any time now. The look on Chet’s face when he’d opened the door to Vault 32 so that her new husband could come through. And, of course, her father. Her father pushing her behind a door to keep her safe on the night of her wedding.

“You are my world.”

Her father in a cage, hands on the bars, listening to Moldaver tell her the truth that had been hidden from her for her entire life.

“If the problem with the world is factions, endless fighting, endlessly at war, then what is the solution? To get rid of the factions. To make the world us. Only ours to shape.”

He'd done it on purpose. That was the part that was so hard to fully wrap her head around. He'd destroyed a whole city of people on purpose. It just didn't make sense, not when she thought back to nights spent playing games at the kitchen table or at family book club or watching old westerns on the sofa, using the stationary floor bikes for exercise. How could that man, the one who'd gone on and on about Cooper Howard and cowboys and who had read her bedtime stories and tucked her into bed at night be the same man that had destroyed a whole city to punish his wife?

The words came back in full force as, later in the afternoon, the Ghoul led her through an alley made up of stacks of crushed cars piled up on either side. Like in Filly, there were people with carts and stalls lining the way to the settlement, holding out pieces of meat and makeshift weapons and vials they claimed contained various tonics and drugs and medicines, shouting their prices. These were the people her dad had been talking about. These desperate, irradiated people left behind by Vault Tec. Hell, the Ghoul! He was one too! Vault Tec had left all of them to die!

Her dad hadn't cared. As soon as her mom had refused to come back with him, he'd killed her.

And as soon as Lucy had refused to go back with him, he'd left her with an armed bounty hunter...a Ghoul that had just shot him. Had he known that the Ghoul wouldn't kill her? Had he cared? Was she no longer her daughter because she hadn't obeyed him like her mother had apparently stopped being her mother when she'd disagreed with him?

The idea was a knife in her chest, even as she told herself that it didn't matter...that he was no longer her father. That maybe she'd never even had a father. That was better than having a father who would do such horrible things.

"Look alive Vaultie," the Ghoul ordered, the words thrown over his shoulder right as she was about to bump into a man carrying what looked like a giant hatchet. The man gave her a nasty look, looking her up and down, and she murmured an apology and jogged a little to catch up to the Ghoul.

"What are we doing here? Is this where my father is?"

"If only it were so easy. No, if my hunch is correct, young Henry is going a little farther than this. But we're going to need supplies if we're going to cross the wasteland."

"Oh. Right." She nodded. That made sense. He'd been around for more than 200 years. The thought was almost comforting. He would know how to survive out in the wasteland, so she would watch him and she would learn and...

And then, when she got all of her answers...what then? Would she go back to her vault? She had to, right? Her brother was there! Her best friend too! Had Stephanie had her baby? Was there a new Overseer? Did the new Overseer know about Vault Tec? And what about Max? How would she ever find him again? Apparently the Brotherhood of Steel was 'complicated.' What did that mean? Would the Ghoul know? She didn't want to ask just yet...he was walking like he was in a hurry, and she trotted after him, Dogmeat keeping close.

The settlement was smaller than Filly, but there were still plenty of shops with doors propped open to let what little breeze there was in. A couple of women sat out on the porch of one shop, a toddler playing in the dirt at their feet, and a boy who looked to be about her brother's age stood nearby, glancing back at them every so often as he worked on what looked to be a pistol, screwing something into place. At another storefront, a man advertised haircuts right on the porch, and the shop next door had a sign out front that read "Dentist" and underneath, in a smaller font, "We buy teeth."

She'd been too focused on finding Moldaver to look around much when they'd been in Filly, but now, as she followed the Ghoul through the crowds of people, she allowed herself a moment to try and take it all in. There hadn't been stores in the vault, or currency really. There had just been enough for everyone to have an equal share...to each according to their merit. No one sold anything. No one carried money. But the currency of this world was caps, and Lucy didn't have any. She had a gun and a canteen that was only half full, and even she, who had only been on the surface for less than a month, knew that wasn't enough. She would need more water. More bullets. Maybe a knife? The Ghoul carried enough that surely he could spare one...then again, he'd once poured his own water onto the dirt rather than share with her, so she guessed she couldn't count on it.

He wasn't her friend. He was just a man walking in the same direction as her. She had to remember that.

The Ghoul strode several feet ahead of her, turning and walking into a shop seemingly at random. The sign had a drawing of a gun hanging over the window...a good drawing, like someone had worked on it for hours, getting the shading just right. Lucy admired it for a moment, just managing to catch the door before he let it close in her face. The space was small, almost cozy, and the back wall was covered in guns of varying sizes and shapes, some of which Lucy couldn't even begin to identify despite her time in the riflery club. The woman standing behind the counter was young with her hair shaved close to her head, and when she looked up at them, her neutral expression melted into a scowl. It took a second for Lucy to understand why she might be angry at them just for walking into her store.

"What the hell you want, Ghoul?" she snapped, hand shooting to her hip where a revolver sat in its holster.

"Now don't go getting your panties in a twist, sweetheart. Just here to trade," he told her, not seeming all that concerned with her tone.

"And why would I trade with the likes of you?"

That immediately rubbed Lucy the wrong way. Sure, he was a Ghoul, and *Lucy* knew that he was mean and willing to sell innocent people for their organs to keep himself alive, but this person didn't know that! "Why wouldn't you?" she asked, stepping around the Ghoul. "If he's got money...I mean, caps, then why wouldn't you sell to him?"

The woman raised her eyebrows.

"Is it because he's a Ghoul? Because that's wrong!" Lucy wasn't stupid. She knew that people were afraid of him, and that maybe they should be, but he still had to be able to buy

things! Like his medicine! And everyone needed to be able to defend themselves. If he wasn't hurting anyone, how could they justify refusing to serve him when all he'd done was walk into the store?

Now the woman gave her a disgusted look, lips curling. "Oh shit. Are you one of those?"

She cocked her head, about to ask what that meant, when a hand caught her by the back of her vault suit and pulled her out of the way. The movement was surprisingly not as rough as it could have been, and she blinked at the Ghoul as he stepped around her. "Just pretend she ain't here. Now," he said, pulling something out of the strange bag he carried on his shoulder. The caps inside jingled. "You want to make a trade or not?"

Reluctantly, she did.

The Ghoul didn't say anything to her as they left the store, him with more ammunition and her with nothing, but she couldn't help herself. "It isn't right."

He sighed, not slowing down. "You still on about your golden rule, Vaultie?"

"I'm just saying. It's not right to discriminate against people because of their..." here she hesitated, worried she might be crossing a line. It would be rude to comment on his appearance, so went with something more general. "Because of anything," she finished lamely.

"Well, you are welcome to go back and take it up with her, but I doubt you'll have any more luck this time and besides, I ain't waiting around for you. We've got places to be." He stopped in his tracks and turned, and she had to stop short to keep from running into him. He was staring down at her, considering, looking more irritated than anything as he reached into the bag on his shoulder and held out a fist. Dumbly, she let him grab her arm, opening her hand, then watching with open shock as he dropped a handful of caps into her open palm.

"We're gonna be walking for at least two days before we run into another settlement like this. Keep that in mind while you're spending my caps, would you darlin'?" he asked, voice dripping with sarcasm, but she just closed her fist around the caps. He was giving her money? For nothing? This was the same man that hadn't even given her a sip of water when she'd been dying of dehydration! Was it because of what she'd done? Because of the vials she'd dropped beside him when she could have killed him? Had the golden rule actually worked on him?

She didn't dare ask...not when he could so easily change his mind. Instead, she beamed at him, bringing a hand up to touch the one that still held her arm. "Thank you."

The Ghoul went still for a second before rolling his eyes and pulling away. "You've got an hour before I leave your ass here, Vaultie. Meet me by the entrance and make it quick."

"Yes sir!" She felt stupid as soon as she'd said it, almost wishing she'd saluted him like it was a joke, but he just shook his head and took off in the opposite direction.

Lucy spent the caps as carefully as she could, going from shop to shop for everything she could think of...and afford. She needed a pack to put her things in, and a second, larger canteen. She had to pay to use the water pump too, filling the canteens to the very top and then running some water into her open mouth, drinking her fill while she could. The rest she spent on a hunting knife and some bullets, since she didn't have enough caps for even the most basic first aid kit. She'd just have to hope that she didn't get injured anytime soon.

The pack wasn't nearly as good as the one she'd left her vault with, and she wished for the thousandth time that the gulper hadn't eaten it. She never could have known how valuable something as simple as a sleeping bag would be. Or just a blanket. How difficult it would be to find things she'd taken for granted her whole life, like clean water or a safe place to sit down and rest. People who wouldn't kill her just to take what little she had...or eat her. A bed. A shower. Running water. She remembered how Monty had turned her tap on...how he'd stared at the running water the night of their wedding like he'd never seen anything like it. Looking back, she realized he probably hadn't.

The Ghoul was exactly where he'd said he'd be a little less than an hour later, Dogmeat at his side, and she jogged up to them, careful not to bump into anyone. Everyone gave the Ghoul a wide berth, some eyeing her strangely as she came to a stop in front of him, but she paid them no mind. Surely they'd see that the two of them were traveling together, and maybe that would make them reconsider their prejudices.

"Hm. Guess you decided not to take the money and run."

She furrowed her brow. "What? Of course not. I wouldn't do that."

He huffed out what could almost be considered a laugh. "No....I don't suppose you would, Lucy MacLean." And with that, he turned around and started walking again.

Chapter 2

Lucy was pretty sure that she'd walked more over the last month than she'd walked in her entire life. She'd gotten plenty of physical activity in the vault...there was a prescribed weekly amount for everyone, and she had always enjoyed using the stationary pedal bikes while watching movies and taking walks with Norm or Steph. She'd been on the gymnastics team and the fencing club and phys ed. And her yearly physical exam had always been nearly perfect. But walking for hours on end in the unforgiving sunlight while rationing her water and trying not to remember the taste of jello cake lest she start to crave it was a totally different type of exercise.

The Ghoul seemed to have no such troubles, striding forward like a man on a mission, only pausing to pull out a cigarette or take a puff on the inhaler he loaded up with his mystery vials. She had no idea how many he went through or at what rate, or how many he had on him, but she knew that she sincerely hoped he didn't run out while they were traveling together lest he sell her again. Then again, he wasn't nearly as cruel as he'd been the first time they'd traveled together. There was no rope around her neck, for one. No using her as bait for monsters.

Of course, Lucy reminded herself as they walked away from the settlement, her new canteens reassuringly heavy on her shoulders, she wasn't his captive this time. She didn't have anything he was after...and he didn't need his chems. He wasn't trying to lure a gulper to the shore to get a severed head. She wasn't trying to protect a doctor with a bounty on his head.

Then again, he hadn't needed to pour that water on the ground. What would it have cost him to let her take a sip instead of pouring it in the dirt? He was going to sell her to organ harvesters anyway...but still. A sip of water. Instead, he'd made her drink from a disgusting puddle. She couldn't bring herself to justify that...couldn't trust that he wouldn't do the same thing again. She could just imagine it...imagine being so desperate that she'd beg *him* for water, and watching him smirk and dump it on the ground instead. Would she leave then? Scream at him?

Lick the water from the ground like Dogmeat?

That was the reason she was so glad to have two canteens full of water now. Two canteens and a gun. Even if he left her, she would have water. Even if he attacked her, she could fight back.

It was three hours after they left the settlement that Lucy heard growling. It was so blisteringly hot out and she was so tired and so hungry and so dazed by the heat that she barely noticed, but she got the distinct impression that her new companion wouldn't be stopping very often, and she didn't see a point in asking. So she kept her mouth shut, determined to prove that she was tough enough for this...that she wasn't some stupid, weak 'Vaultie' who couldn't keep up. The noise sounded like a dog growling and they were traveling with a dog...it all made sense to her addled brain. But then the Ghoul unholstered his gun as casually as Lucy would bring her canteen up to her lips and Dogmeat took off

through the sparse trees and that's when she saw it...a dog. But not like Dogmeat. This one had patchy, matted fur and was running full tilt towards them, teeth bared. Dogmeat met it in mid air, the two of them colliding and snarling and...

The Ghoul spun, aiming his gun right at her. Her heart stopped, mouth opening, and she felt her eyes widen in shock, blind panic ripping through her. Why? What had she done? But no...it didn't matter. He was turning on her, just like she'd worried he would, and she had to defend herself! She wouldn't let him do this to her...wouldn't let him shoot her and take her hostage, or just leave her for dead for wild dogs to eat. Not before she saw her brother and her friends again. Not before she got her answers!

Lucy fumbled for her gun, but she wasn't even able to pull it out of her holster before he fired, and she screamed, eyes slamming shut...only she wasn't hurt. He hadn't shot her? She glanced down at herself, confirming...but she would have known. That gun would have shot a hole through her. Spinning around, she found another one of the dogs splayed on on the ground right behind her, minus most of its head, and she would have thrown up what little water she had in her stomach if she hadn't seen another one of the dogs racing past where Dogmeat still grappled with the feral looking dog. Finally getting ahold of her gun, she held it up, breath catching as she tried to steady her hands enough to aim, but another gunshot echoed in her ears and the dog dropped, head exploding in a horrifying show of gore.

Spinning, she found the Ghoul casually surveying the area before turning to her. "We're going to have to work on that reaction time, Vaultie," he told her simply, holstering his gun and walking up to the closest dog and pulling out his knife. Based on his tone, it didn't sound like was holding out much hope that it would happen. Dogmeat was muzzle deep in the first dog, apparently relishing her lunch, and Lucy dropped to her knees, swallowing as hard as she could so as not to throw up the precious water she'd been sipping all morning.

Closing her eyes, she pressed her hands into the ground, the gun nestled in the grass next to her. Taking deep breaths, she kept swallowing, trying to remember everything she could about how to keep from throwing up. There hadn't been a lot of illness in the vault, and when there had been, it had been a big deal, complete with multiple checkups and quarantine. The last time she'd been sick, her dad had sat with her, holding a bowl of chicken broth for her to eat.

How many people had her father killed?

Including her mother?

The Ghoul's voice broke into that bittersweet memory less than a full minute later. "If you're about done over there, how about you get over here and start carving. I ain't doing all the work on this little trip."

"What?" she asked, wincing when he stabbed the knife into the carcass of the feral dog.

He glanced up at her, a smirk on his face. "They teach you how to get the meat off a dog in that Vault of yours?"

"No," she cried, incredulous. "Why would I ever have learned something like that?"

He gestured to her with the bloody knife, still smirking. “Well then, you’re in luck. Because it’s about time you learned, isn’t it?”

Apparently it was.

Lucy tried to hold her breath as she cut into the dog’s side, peeling back the layer of meat on its flank, then cutting it away from the mangled skin. If the Ghoul was bothered by the smell (or if he even could smell) he gave no indication, and not wanting to give him the satisfaction of knowing how truly disgusted she was, Lucy fought to keep her face neutral as she followed his curt directions. She certainly wouldn’t have called him patient...the third time she cut too deep, he grabbed her wrist, moving it to the right spot and pointing with his other hand. “Right there,” he ordered, poking the corpse with his leather covered finger. “Cut sideways, not straight down.” But he wasn’t as mean as she was expecting him to be. A few minutes later, when she continued to saw away at the dead dog, he nodded to himself. “There you go. Like a Thanksgiving turkey.”

With that, he stood and started gathering sticks. Lucy paused in her carving, watching him, but quickly went back to cutting when he looked her way. “Are we stopping?” she wondered.

“Looks like it.”

“For the night?” There was still plenty of daylight left, so she doubted it, but she could hope.

“For lunch.”

Lucy knew that he ate...he’d eaten those cherry tomatoes in Filly and pieces of Roger when they’d been traveling. So...was he just a normal human, she wondered as he began stacking the wood strategically, pulling out an old looking flip lighter and lighting the dry leaves he’d piled in the center. A regular man, albeit a ruthless one? He was a bounty hunter, she was pretty sure. A man who had no qualms about killing. A man who had been alive since before the war. A man who could easily withstand bullets and a dart full of sedatives and who, apparently, got hungry. She wasn’t sure why this surprised her...why it felt strange to think of him as a man instead of a monster.

The Ghoul carved the second dog a lot faster than her, leaving the third to Dogmeat. “We’ll leave some out to dry. Makes good jerky,” he told her, laying a few flat pieces out by the fire, then shot her a smirk. “Not as good as ass jerky, but it’ll do.”

“Ew.”

That made him huff out what could maybe be called a laugh as he pulled his knife out and started to whittle a stick to a sharp point, then stabbed a piece of meat with it, taking a seat on the far side of the little fire he’d constructed. Following his lead, Lucy did the same, holding her chunk of meat over the fire and trying very hard not to think about the fact that, just a few minutes ago, the food she was about to consume had been a living creature. A living creature hellbent on killing her, but still. Alive.

“There weren’t any animals in the Vault,” she told him absently watching the meat cook. “All of our food came from cans.”

He grunted.

Lucy wasn’t sure why she kept going...the Ghoul wasn’t her friend. She doubted he ever could be. But she never had been great at keeping quiet and she had a lot of process and besides, she wanted to at least be civil. “I’ve never eaten anything like this before.”

He turned the stick, cooking the meat on both sides, so she did the same. She’d done some cooking in the vault, learning from her dad, but not much.

“Vault 4 had caviar. Max really liked it. We didn’t have caviar...but we did have canned tuna. It was kind of the same. Do you think there are still tuna?”

“Sure. Probably’ve got two heads though.”

“Would it be safe to eat?”

“Hate to tell you this, sweetheart, but almost nothing up here is safe to eat, especially not for you.” He held up the meat that dripped into the fire. “Ain’t much up here that ain’t irradiated.”

“I know that...but I have to eat. Would fish be worse? Since it’s in the water?”

“No idea. There’s something you can take. RadAway. They came up with it to help with radiation sickness. And RadX is good for preventing it. Costs a pretty penny though.”

“Oh...I think that’s what Max gave me after I got sick.” Sick from the dirty puddle of what she really hoped had actually been water and not some kind of waste product that *he’d* made her drink, she thought bitterly.

“We’ll probably have to try and find some more unless you’re looking to end up like me,” he told her with a grin, biting into the meat and chewing, not looking all that concerned.

“Right. Okay.” That meant she’d need to figure out a way to earn caps. Fast. “Do you know where the next settlement is?”

“Not too far. A couple of days. We’re gonna be hitting the desert soon. Settlements out there are few and far between until you hit New Vegas.”

She nodded, letting her meat cook for another minute or two before taking a bite. It wasn’t horrible...it was kind of gamey, and more chewy than any meat she’d had in the Vault, but she was starving, so she just swallowed and speared another piece.

“So...that’s where we’re going? New Vegas?”

“That’s where we’re going.”

“Is it like Los Vegas? The old prewar city?”

“The very same.”

“Do you think my father is there?”

“I think there’s a good chance. Plenty of those Vault Tec assholes stay there.”

“Why?”

“Safety in numbers, darlin’. Speaking of, we’re gonna be passing through some pretty rough territory to get there, so you’re gonna need to be able to actually shoot that thing.” He gestured with his chin towards her gun. “Dogs ain’t the worst of what’s out in the wastes. Not by far.”

“I know.” Lucy dropped her eyes, nodding. She hated it...but he was right. There were the people who’d shot a tooth at Max and ghouls who had lost themselves and giant mutated monsters living in the water...only it felt wrong to think about gulpers as monsters now that she knew how they’d been created. Still. She would need to be able to defend herself. There was no guarantee that the Ghoul would always be willing to do it. “I can shoot.”

He grunted, not looking convinced.

“Do you know anything about the Brotherhood of Steel?” she asked between bites, hoping to change the subject. A civil conversation...they were having a civil conversation. It was something of a novelty, but he had insinuated that he’d give her some answers, so she was at least going to try and ask questions. “I know that they’re supposed to be the defenders of civilization, and Max was impersonating a knight...we learned a little about the history of the armor in the vault. But then his friend said they were a ‘complicated organization’ when I asked if they were the good guys?”

He huffed. “They’re a bunch of tin-can fascist shit heads.” He took another bite, talking while he chewed. “They want what everyone else wants: to control the wastes. And they do it by trying to keep any technology they can find all to themselves.”

“Oh...is it a religious organization? I thought it was a military organization, but then it seemed like maybe it was all based around a religion? Are the knights celibate?”

His eyes widened, brow raising as he swallowed. “What now?”

“I’ve read about old religious organizations that required their members to be celibate, and I was just wondering. Max said he couldn’t have sex with me because he was a knight, and knights aren’t supposed to have sex. We didn’t really observe any religions in my vault, so I don’t know much about it other than what I’ve read about pre-war religions.”

The look the Ghoul gave her was a new one...incredulity and amusement all mixed up into one wide-eyed stare.

“What?” she wondered, even though she couldn’t help being a little pleased. She’d never seen him look amused without looking mean, but here he was, looking like he could laugh. It made something in her chest release just a little, her shoulders relaxing as she bit into the

chunk of meat on her stick. If he was about to laugh, that probably meant he wouldn't be turning on her anytime soon.

"Are you telling me you asked your little knight boyfriend if he wanted to get laid and he said no?"

She tilted her head, truly confused at his tone. "Yes. He said that knights are not supposed to...although, I don't think I would classify him as my boyfriend, as we haven't really had time to discuss labels. And if he's a knight and unable to have intercourse, I don't know if our relationship would be feasible long term. It's something we would have to talk about. Why are you laughing?" She couldn't help her smile at the way his shoulders shook.

"Not laughing, Vaultie. You're just something else is all." He ate the cooked meat on his skewer and stabbed himself a third piece.

She wasn't sure what that meant, but he wasn't angry, so she counted it as a win.

Lucy was so relieved when they stopped again several hours later that she could have cried. She was pretty sure one of the blisters on her foot was bleeding, and she was so hot that sweat made her vault suit stick to every part of her skin it touched. Not to mention the pounding headache she had from squinting against the sun for hours while it beat down on them. The Ghoul looked just the same as always, of course, even with his leather jacket that went all the way down past his calves where it was mostly just tatters, and she wondered if it was because of the radiation and his...ghoulishness, or if he was tired too. Her certainly didn't seem it. But when they came upon a little shack in a copse of trees, he glanced back at her, then headed right for it. "This is as good a place as any," he told her simply, pulling out his gun.

For a terrible, heart-stopping second, she thought he meant to kill her, and her hand shot to her own hip.

But then he kicked the door open, gun pointed into the darkness. Nothing happened. So, waiting until he'd holstered his gun, she followed him into the little one room building. The roof had huge gaps in it, and the windows were all shattered, leaving piles of glass on the floor that she swept away with her boot, but otherwise it seemed structurally sound...or...as structurally sound as anything she'd encountered so far on the surface. There was a single bloodstained sleeping bag in one corner, and the Ghoul dropped his bag on it, which she assumed meant he was claiming it. That was just fine with her. The thought of sleeping in a bloodstained sleeping bag made her want to crawl out of her own skin.

"What is this place? Did someone live here?"

"Probably used to be a hunting shack. Then I'm guessing some poor asshole tried to use it as a shelter."

"Should we keep going? Try to find something better?"

"This place has got four walls and most of a roof, Vaultie. Doubt we're gonna find much better than this. Besides, it'll be dark soon, and there ain't much stupider than traveling the

wastes at night.”

“The doctor...doctor Wilzig, he told me never to light a fire at night.”

“Good advice. Now go ahead and build one now unless you want to eat your dinner raw.”

She did not, and so she got to gathering sticks for a fire while he walked around the area, Dogmeat at his side. Lucy managed a full five minutes of stacking sticks before she gave in and asked, “what are you doing?”

He sighed. “Darlin’ what does it look like I’m doing?”

“Walking in circles.”

“It’s called securing the perimeter.”

“Oh...like...making sure there’s nothing dangerous around?”

“Just like.”

“But something dangerous could come later.”

“Thus the four walls and most of a roof. Plus Dogmeat here will warn us if anything big shows up.”

When Lucy got the fire lit, she sat down with a couple of pieces of meat, following the same procedure as before and spearing them with a sharp stick. The moment she sat down by the fire, she realized she never wanted to get up. And that she desperately wanted a bath. Her whole body felt sticky with sweat, and her hair lay limp around her shoulders, making her neck hot even as the sun started to sink lower and lower on the horizon.

Searching for a distraction, Lucy found herself marveling at the way the light changed...how the sky tinged pink and purple as the sun started to disappear. Most of the Vault’s hallways and rooms were lit all day, up until the evening when the overhead lights shut off and the secondary wall lights, which were a bit dimmer, automatically turned on. It had never been like this.

It had never been beautiful.

“Sir?”

The Ghoul stared at the meat at the end of his stick, but she knew he’d heard her.

“Have you ever been inside a vault?”

He didn’t answer.

“I mean, I know you didn’t live in one.” Was that rude? She hoped not as she pressed on.

“But...did you ever see inside one?”

His eyes finally strayed up to her face, eyes locking with hers like he was searching for something. "I did."

She waited, then finally asked, "Which one?"

"Does it matter? They're all about the same as far as I can tell."

"Well...yes, I suppose they kind of are...at least the two I've been in." He grunted. "In 33, there's a projected image of cornfields and the sun in one of the rooms. It's so beautiful...I loved that room. But this..." she gestured to the sun as it set, slowly disappearing from view. "I never could have imagined something like this. It changes colors!"

Another grunt, but not a cruel one, or a dismissive one. Somehow, she was learning to distinguish his grunts. It was a weird thought.

"It was always the same video of the sun in the vault...it never went below the horizon. And it didn't really do it justice. Actually, I don't think anything could." The sunset seemed to bathe them in light and she turned to look at him, watching the colors dance across his skin. He was looking back at her, regarding her with something like curiosity, bringing the last piece of meat to his mouth and chewing. The sunset did something to his face...softened that hard expression he always seemed to wear. If it hadn't been for the missing nose, he would have looked like any other man.

She found herself smiling at him. "My mom took me out of the vault once. I was too young...I can barely remember. But I have this memory of the sun." She glanced back at the sunset, eyes growing hot. "I remember holding my hand up to block the light. It was so bright...for the longest time, I thought it was just the projected sun in the Vault, but I should have known. The projector could never be that bright. And she was smiling at me...she was..."

Lucy jumped when the Ghoul stood, tossing his stick into the fire and walking past her into the hunting cabin, Dogmeat watching him lazily from her spot curled up by the fire.

"Make sure to put the fire out when you're done yapping, would you darlin'?"

Her jaw dropped, but he was already closing the door behind him, ignoring her spluttering.

She did put the fire out, fuming the whole time. She'd been opening up to him! Trusting him with a treasured memory! And he'd just...walked off! How stupid could she get? He'd made it perfectly clear he wasn't her friend and she didn't want him to be! He was...he was an ass!

Stomping the last embers of the fire, Lucy opened the door to the cabin and let it shut behind her and Dogmeat, not caring if she woke the Ghoul as she settled into the opposite corner. Her anger dissipated just a bit as she lay stretched out on the floor. It wasn't the most comfortable, but she didn't know if anything had ever felt better than just laying down after walking the whole day. She wished she could take a bath or at least clean her clothes, but she was so tired that all she did was pull her boots off and drop back down to the floor, hoping that she hadn't bled through her socks.

The Ghoul was silent on his side of the room, Dogmeat standing between them. After a moment, she padded over to Lucy's side, curling up beside her and closing her eyes with a tired huff. Tentatively, Lucy put an arm around her, and the dog scooted closer with a happy whine.

"Sir," Lucy said into the darkness of the cabin, glaring at his still form and trying to keep her voice measured. Civil. Like she was talking to one of her more troublesome students. "Sometimes...sometimes you can be very rude."

He made a strange exhaling noise, and she could just make out his shoulders shaking in the dark. Huffing, she buried her face in Dogmeat's flank, closing her eyes and very determinedly not looking at him until she fell asleep.

Chapter 3

The Ghoul woke her that morning by nudging her in the ribs with his boot, and although he did it easy enough that it didn't hurt, it still wasn't her favorite way to be woken up. She shot him a glare, sitting up and pointedly scooting away from him. He just smirked, grabbing his weirdly shaped bag from the floor and throwing it over his shoulder. "Let's go, darlin'. We're burning daylight here."

The lack of light coming in through their 'part of a roof' told a different story, but she didn't argue, just gave him a mocking grunt of her own. It didn't quite measure up to his, and she felt stupid doing it, like she was in a childish fight with her brother instead of the man who'd, not that long ago, dragged her through the wastes with a rope around her neck. He certainly wasn't intimidated by her...just raised his brow, huffing out a little 'huh,' and turned and left her to get her boots on as he grabbed his weird looking bag.

She hissed in pain when she pulled her boot over her aching foot, and she wondered if she should have taken her socks off...but it wasn't like she had water or anything to clean herself with. Well, she had some in her canteen, but she didn't have soap or alcohol, and she didn't want to waste her drinking water. So she just pulled the boots on, hauling herself to her feet and freezing when she found the Ghoul considering her from his side of the room. Lucy fought the urge to snap at him, instead deciding to be the bigger person and just turned for the door, throwing her own pack over her shoulder.

She'd been stupid, she told herself as she reached down to pet Dogmeat, trying to share something personal with him. It was just because she missed having a community...a family. But he wasn't any of those things. He was a man walking in the same direction as her who could teach her how to survive if she could just watch him and keep her mouth shut. So she waited until he started walking and followed. Dogmeat hurried ahead of her, trotting along his side and thrusting her nose into his hand. He patted her a couple of times on the head, voice almost kind when he talked to her.

"Go on, girl. Make sure nothings gonna jump out at us."

Before, he'd insisted the dog wasn't his, but she sure followed him everywhere, and he didn't seem to mind at all. In fact, he seemed pretty fond of her, reaching down to pet her and smiling a little when she found a roach or some other critter to eat. Dogs used to be called man's best friend...and according to the movies she'd watched with her dad, they were good judges of character.

Did that mean...

No, she thought stubbornly. Of course not.

Once again, Lucy found herself lost in thought as she walked...thoughts about the last time she'd traveled with the Ghoul, his rope tied tight around her neck, hands tied together in front of her as she'd stumbled along after him. Thoughts about her father and Moldaver and how

they might have ended up on opposite sides. Whose side was the Ghoul on, that was the question. Then again, she was pretty sure she knew the answer.

His own.

He wanted his family back. He was ruthless and he could be callous...but Dogmeat made him smile. He'd invited her along, maybe because he wanted to use her for something later or maybe to save her from the Brotherhood or maybe just because he'd been bored. She knew he hadn't always been like this...that Ghouls had started as people. What kind of man had he been? 200 years was such a long time...could obviously change someone so much. How much had it changed him? Had he always been someone who would sell a woman he barely knew to organ harvesters? He'd had a family once...did men with families act that way?

Her father had. He'd done that and worse...he'd bombed an entire city. All because of one person.

She had so many questions, and over and over as they walked, the sun traveling from the horizon to the very top of the sky, she opened her mouth to ask one of them. But every time, she shut it, pressing her lips together like that would keep the questions trapped. He wasn't her friend. She was not going to find community or kindness from him. They were just walking in the same direction. And that was fine. He could still turn on her at any time, and she had to be ready.

The stream he stopped at when the sun was directly above them looked clean, the running water flowing gently over the pebbles and mud she could see below the surface. Of course, Lucy knew that didn't mean anything. If she pointed her PipBoy at the water, the rad levels would be just as high as any other unpurified water. So she wasn't sure why the Ghoul was stopping. There were plenty of rocks for them to use to cross...maybe he was filling his canteen? Irradiated water wouldn't bother him. But he didn't pull his canteen out. He just surveyed the area for a minute, hand resting on his pistol, and she took a step back before she'd consciously chosen to do so, her own hand drifting to her pistol. When he glanced back at her, he wasn't smirking like usual...didn't look amused at all. Just serious.

"You don't have to flinch every time I go for the gun, sweetheart. I ain't gonna shoot you. Not unless you draw on me first."

She hadn't thought he'd noticed. Hadn't thought he would care.

The surrounding area was quiet. Empty. And the Ghoul looked down at Dogmeat who'd padded up to the stream for a drink before turning to her.

"Alright. Looks clear enough," he told her, digging in his bag and pulling something out. "Here. Take this." The order was followed by an outstretched hand, a pill held between his fingers.

"What is it?"

"RadX. It's gonna keep you from getting radiation poisoning from this here water."

He had RadX? Why would he have RadX? He didn't need RadX. He'd said that it cost a lot...that and RadAway. Had he gotten it at the settlement? Or had he found it lying around somewhere. The questions flashed through her head, but in the end she settled for, "Why?"

"Vaultie, are you asking me why you would get radiation poisoning from irradiated water?"

"No, I'm asking why I'm going to be touching the water in the first place!" she snapped, taking a step back. He certainly hadn't offered her any RadX the last time he'd dunked her into irradiated water, but that didn't mean anything.

The Ghoul considered her for a minute, then huffed. "Because unless you want those blisters on your feet to get infected, you need to clean them. And if your feet fall off, I'm the one that's gonna have to deal with it."

She crossed her arms. "What, you wouldn't just make ass jerky out of me?"

He grunted, nodding to himself. "Actually, that's not a bad idea. So take the pill and get cleaned up, or I'll be having ass jerky for dinner in the near future."

On one hand, she would have to take a pill he was giving her. On the other...she could get clean. In the end, it was no contest. Giving in, she held out her palm, and he dropped the pill into it. Then, to her surprise, he placed a wad of gauze there too, then he strode a few feet away, taking a seat with his back against a tree and pulling out his gun. He wasn't looking at her, but she still felt frozen in place, eyes wide, until he spoke again.

"You'd better hurry up, darlin. You've got about an hour before I'm moving on, whether you're dry or not."

An hour. An hour to get clean.

She would take it.

Swallowing the pill, she pulled her boots off first, then her socks, hissing a little as she walked over the little rocks to the edge of the water, dunking her socks into the stream and scrubbing as best she could without soap. Then she laid them out on a rock to dry in the sun, stepping into the stream with her bare feet and gasping at how good it felt.

When she glanced back at the Ghoul, he still wasn't looking, so she put her PipBoy on the shore, then unzipped her vault suit and hurried to step out of it, giving it a quick dunk. She draped it out in the sun, hoping it would dry before the Ghoul told her it was time to move on. Finally, still in her undershirt and underwear, she waded out to the deepest part of the stream, which was only up to her calves, and sat down. Giving into temptation, she lay back and dunked her head under, closing her eyes and listening to the white noise of the water rushing around her, one hand pinching her nose shut, the other holding on to the rocks underneath her.

She kept her head under until she couldn't anymore, sitting up and gasping for air, hair falling in her face. Lucy couldn't help the delighted laugh that bubbled up in her, spilling over as Dogmeat jumped into the water with her, tail wagging as she licked her face. For just a

second, she could forget where she was...who she was traveling with. What she was doing here. She was in a real stream! The real sun was beating down on her! A real dog was licking her face with her rough tongue, and sure, it was kind of gross since Lucy knew what Dogmeat ate, but she didn't care. She threw her arms around the dog who jumped on top of her, wiggling with happiness as Lucy laughed, getting wet dog fur on her hands that clung to her in clumps, then flowed away down the stream when she put her hands back in the water.

Once she'd scrubbed herself down as best she could, she tentatively stood, picking her way through the rocks at the bottom of the stream and back onto the shore, glancing at the Ghoul as she did. He still wasn't looking at her...just gazed off the way they'd come. So, taking a chance, she looked around the clearing, then peeled off her underclothes, dunking them once more in the water before wringing them out, and set them out to dry too. Then, checking to make sure the Ghoul wasn't looking one last time, she took a seat on a large, flat rock, laying down and closing her eyes for just a second, luxuriating in the feeling of the sun's rays soaking into her bare skin. She'd never felt anything like it...could never have imagined the feeling of bathing in the light of the sun, even if she felt unbelievably vulnerable, lying naked outside where anyone could come by. Dogmeat was keeping a lookout though, and the Ghoul was too, so she tried to relax.

She'd only been laying there for a few minutes before the Ghoul spoke up. "So. There's you, Lucy MacLean. And your mamma. Your daddy. That it?"

Lucy's jaw dropped and she sat straight up, an arm coming up to cover her chest, but he hadn't moved any closer, nor had he turned around. He just sat there, his back to her as he stared off into the woods, gun on his lap like he was...guarding her?

No. Absolutely not. He was not guarding her. That line of thinking would only get her in trouble. But...he'd asked her a question. And it would only be polite of her to answer.

"I have a younger brother," she told him carefully, laying back down and closing her eyes, allowing herself to picture him. Her brother. The person she'd been closest to, apart from her father. She wondered if he would believe her if she told him everything she'd been through...how he'd react to the Ghoul and their father's betrayal.

He would believe her. He'd always had his suspicions about things in the Vault. Hadn't been so quick to believe the things that she did.

"His name is Norman."

She was going to leave it at that. Surely the Ghoul didn't care about her family. But, to her surprise, he answered. "Norman, huh? And what is young Norman like?"

This, she could talk about. And surely it wasn't too personal...not like the memory of her mother. If he decided he didn't care halfway through her explanation, it wouldn't matter as much. "He's really smart...really good with computers. He's always getting reassigned to new jobs in the vault because they say he lacks enthusiasm, and I think...I think that made my dad upset. It looked kind of bad, you know? We're all supposed to be happy to do our jobs because we have to work together so our community can thrive. But Norman didn't seem to care."

He grunted, his 'I understand' grunt, and she almost asked a reciprocal question. What about you? Who is your family? Do you have a wife? Children? Are they like you? Who were you? Do you have a real name? It was polite to ask questions of other people. That's how you made friends. It had been drilled into her from the time she was a child...it was important for everyone in the Vault to get along and to be friendly with one another.

But the Ghoul wasn't her friend...didn't want to *be* her friend.

Lucy closed her eyes again, laying on the rock until she was dry, and in the bright, overhead light from the sun, it didn't take long for her clothes to dry. She wrapped her feet, thinking that a little longer than an hour must have passed, but the Ghoul didn't make a move to stand or turn around until she had zipped up her vault suit. Dogmeat too had been laying in the sun, taking a nap, but she hopped up when Lucy did.

"You about done?" he asked, pulling himself to his feet and turning to face her, eyes scanning her up and down from her wet hair to her boots which she'd run some water over to clean them up a little.

She nodded, grabbing her pack, unable to help from smiling. She hadn't felt this clean since she'd left Vault 4, and she knew that he hadn't gotten the RadX for himself...so it had to have been for her. She didn't understand this man. One minute he was being a jerk, the next he was doing something...considerate! Still, she couldn't help her smile when she looked up at him. It had been kind of him to let her get cleaned up. And she appreciated it more than she knew how to convey. "Thank you," she told him softly, peering up from behind her bangs. Her hair was a mess...she'd done her best to tie it back, but she was still thinking about getting it cut off.

The Ghoul's eyes refused to stay locked onto hers for more than a few seconds, and a grunt was her only answer as he stepped past her. "Come on, Vaultie. Let's keep moving," he called over his shoulder, and, with a sigh, she followed.

He didn't speak again until they stopped an hour or so later to eat. She felt a lot better with mostly clean hair and clothes, and wrapping her feet had helped, but her stomach had started growling not long after they'd left the stream. She refused to ask him if they could stop...refused to show any more weakness. In the end though, she didn't have to. When they came to a formation of boulders, he took a seat without a word, holding out some jerky for her to take.

"That it? You, your brother, your daddy?" he asked, chewing and pulling out a flask. She was pretty sure the flask was alcohol. He seemed to drink that just as often as he drank the water.

"Of my family? Mostly. My mom's parents died in the famine when I was young. I mean...I think they did." She frowned. "My dad said that my mom died in the famine and that was obviously a lie but...I think I remember the famine." Now as she watched Dogmeat chew parts of a radroach she'd found, she wasn't so sure. "Oh, and I've got a cousin too," she told him. "His name is Chet. He's the one that opened the outer door for me so I could leave the Vault and find my dad. I had to tranq him...otherwise I was afraid he'd come after me. He's

very sweet...I think he might be in love with me though. I finally had to tell him that cousin stuff was not a sustainable sexual practice and he was really disappointed..”

The Ghoul had been mid drink from his flask, but the liquid sprayed out of his mouth as he choked, making her jump back as he hacked out a cough. Reaching for his inhaler, her took a puff, then demanded, “What the hell did you just say?”

For a second, she was afraid she’d accidentally made him mad, but he looked more incredulous than anything, lips turning up at the corners, mouth wide open.

“You know...cousin stuff?”

“No, Vaultie, I most certainly do not know. Why don’t you enlighten me?”

She shrugged, confused as to why someone who had been around for so long wouldn’t know but not wanting to embarrass him by pointing out his ignorance. “Well...it’s a very common practice to...well...practice different types of intercourse with your cousins before you get married.”

“No the fuck it is not,” he half laughed, shaking his head.

She frowned in confusion. “Of course it is. It allows everyone to have an outlet for sexual release and since we use protection, there’s no risk of genetic defects due to inbreeding.”

“Ya’ll are fucking your cousins down in them vaults,” he murmured as if to himself, incredulous, as he took another long drink.

Lucy shook her head, her tone the one she used when the kids in her class were being silly. “Sex is a natural part of life.”

“Not arguing that, sweetheart,” he told her with a grin. “Sex with your cousins, though? Ain’t nothing natural about that.”

She liked it when he smiled. The thought came out of nowhere, striking her with the force of a fist to her sternum. She liked it, and she wanted him to do it again...wanted to see what he was like when he wasn’t angry or irritated. Wanted to meet the man under all that pain he carried around, because it had to be pain. 200 years roaming the wastes, turning into a ghoul...looking for his family...it wasn’t an excuse for how he’d treated her. There *was* no excuse for what he’d done. But still...she could almost understand, just a little, how desperation would drive someone to do something horrible.

So, because she wanted him to smile again, Lucy went on, risking a comment that would have made Steph laugh even if it was personal. “He’s actually pretty good...well, he wasn’t at first, but I like to think I helped him get better,” she boasted.

The Ghoul barked out an actual laugh then, and suddenly Lucy wanted nothing more than for him to do it again. Laughing was even better than smiling! He was different when he was laughing, head thrown back, eyes softer as they searched the heavens like he could find an answer to a question she didn’t know. “Good goddam, you are something else, Vaultie.”

She took a bite of the jerky, jaw aching from how tough it was, and had to smile.

He was still grinning to himself as they moved on, making their way steadily east, and that made Lucy feel safe enough to ask a question. Nothing too personal...she didn't know if she'd ever feel safe asking him personal questions, even if she didn't mind too much when he asked them of her. "Sir?"

He grunted, his 'yeah?' grunt.

"You're a bounty hunter, right?"

"I am."

"How long have you been a bounty hunter?" This was safe, right? Professions weren't very personal.

"Long time. It's good money."

And he needed money, she knew that much. Without caps, he couldn't buy his little vials, and without his little vials...well, she'd seen first hand what would happen. Maybe, she thought, he didn't kill everyone he captured. Maybe he just took them back to the person looking for them. Wasn't that what a bounty hunter did? Find people? If she thought about it, he was kind of like a detective from an old movie, searching the wasteland for people. Still, one question had been pressing her for a while now, and she finally gave in and asked it. "Before...were you a cowboy?" It burst out of her, and she found she was desperate to know. It all added up...the outfit and the accent and the lasso...all he needed was a horse!

He glanced over his shoulder to her, brow raised. "And what makes you think that, Vaultie?"

She felt her cheeks heat up a little but she bravely pressed on. He didn't slow down, so she hurried a few steps forward to catch up. "It's just...you know how to use a lasso. I've never seen anyone do that outside of a movie." She didn't mention that it had been *her* he'd been lassoing, and that she hadn't particularly appreciated the skill just then, or that she hadn't exactly been on the surface for that long and thus didn't have a very large sample size. "Ever since I was little, my..." She swallowed, eyes dropping as the poison her father had injected into her life seeped into another perfect memory. "My family, we used to watch these old westerns. There was this actor, Cooper Howard...he was my favorite. He was always the hero. He could use a lasso like you, and he fought bad guys and he always won." She bit her lip and looked away, feeling dumb for once again trying to connect with him. "Anyway...you kind of remind me of him. He talked kind of like you...your accent. And he could use a lasso...oh, and there was this one movie he did where he traveled with a dog! Just like Dogmeat!" Lucy pointed at the dog who was trotting a few feet ahead. "I mean, his dog was a different kind, but still. And my...my father told me that the dog in the movie was his real dog!"

When she met the Ghoul's eyes again, his jaw was tight, and for a second she thought he was mad. That question was more personal than any other she'd asked him so far, and she'd seen firsthand how he acted when he was angry...how dangerous he could be. She almost stepped back...almost put more space between them. But his eyes...they were so unfathomably sad

and tired...he looked like he'd just remembered something so painful he could hardly stand it. And she wanted to apologize. Maybe he didn't talk about his past because it hurt. Maybe like her memories of her father, the pain of the loss of his own family had seeped into every other memory in his past and poisoned it.

She was still bitter about the whole 'selling her' thing, but for some reason, she wanted to reach out and touch his hand. Apologize. Tell him it was fine...that she shouldn't have asked. She hated to see someone sad, even if that someone wasn't someone she necessarily liked.

He didn't give her the chance, that pain disappearing behind something like amusement. "You're a Cooper Howard fan, huh?"

Lucy blushed a little brighter. "I mean...yes. He was a very good actor." Handsome too, she thought, but didn't say.. She was sure it was plain on her face though.

"I've seen some of his movies. A Man and His Dog, a couple of others too."

"Really?" Lucy perked up a little, unable to help her excited smile. They'd seen the same movies? That was something they could talk about. "Aren't they great?"

He shrugged. "I've seen better."

Lucy's jaw dropped. She was almost offended...those movies were important to her! She'd spent her whole life watching them over and over! But then she saw how his eyes danced a little, a glint of mischief sparkling there, and rolled her eyes, fighting her own smile. He was trying to get a rise out of her. Why? Did he think it was fun? Was he...playing with her? "Well," she said primly, "there's certainly no accounting for poor taste."

That made him chuckle, a wheezy, broken sound that made her lose her fight with a smile.

"So...were you?" she asked again, hopeful that he'd actually answer and that she wasn't pushing too much. "A cowboy?"

He cocked his head to one side, then the other. "Of a sort," he allowed, and she turned to him, bouncing a little on her toes.

"Really? Did you ride a horse?"

"I did."

"Did you have cows?"

"For a while." He answered her with a patience she hadn't known he possessed, seeming more resigned than irritated.

"Will...will you tell me about it? Please?"

The Ghoul glanced her way, sighing softly and turning back to the road ahead when she met his gaze. Then, after taking a puff on his inhaler, he started to talk, his drawl soft and

thoughtful. “There ain’t nothing like riding a horse, Vaultie. Nothing even comes close.”

He told her about a horse named Sugarfoot, and how gentle and smart she was. He told her about a youth spent working with cattle, and how dangerous it could be if you weren’t careful. He told her about afternoons spent building fences and drinking cold spring water because, back then, water was safe. He told her about ranch dogs and barn cats and how insects used to be, mosquitoes that would suck your blood and leave you covered in little red welts that itched like crazy, and horseflies that buzzed around and hurt like hell when they bit you. He told her about ticks, and how they’d bury themselves in your skin and were a bitch to pull out. But none of the insects, he told her, were bigger than your thumb. None of them could straight up kill you unless you caught a disease from them. All the big ones came from radiation.

Lucy wanted to close her eyes while he talked...wanted to soak in the stories like she’d soaked in the westerns she’d loved as a child. He had that same kind of accent as Cooper Howard...that same drawl, where his words smoothed out at the edges and ran together sometimes. And when he talked about life as a cowboy, he sounded like a normal person. Not a killer. Not a cruel man who’d hurt her or use her as bait for a monster or sell her to people that would tear her apart and sell the pieces of her. Just a man who’d had a horse and worked on a cattle ranch once a long time ago.

“What about you, Vaultie?” he finally asked, taking a long drink of water. “You said your brother was always being reassigned to different jobs. I’m guessing you had one too?”

“Oh...yes. I was a teacher,” she told him. “Nothing as interesting as you.”

“A teacher...yeah, that makes sense,” he told her with a nod and a little smirk.

Lucy didn’t rise to the bait or ask what that was supposed to mean. “I taught the younger kids. I...” She dropped her gaze to her boots. “I lied to them. I didn’t know it but...”

“You didn’t lie to those kids,” he scolded, shaking his head. “You just told them what your teachers had told you. You sure as hell didn’t know any better.”

“Still. I never questioned it. Not once,” she told him, feeling like such an idiot. “I never thought that my father might be lying to me, or that things out here were...well...anything like this. That there was civilization and...and that Vault Tec would...would do the things that they did.”

“Well, when you go back, you can tell them the truth,” he told her with an easy shrug. “Think they’ll hold that teaching job for you?”

Lucy swallowed hard, closing her eyes for just a second, the question seeming to burrow into her as horribly as the ticks he’d been telling her about. Because, before seeing her father, she’d been so sure that if she could just get through this, she could go back home...back to her Vault. Maybe find another husband. Have babies that would grow up to repopulate the earth...babies that would be friends with Steph’s babies. Their children were supposed to grow up together. She was supposed to be a mother and a teacher and eventually she might even live long enough to see the return of civilization on the surface.

Except it had all been a lie. "I...I don't know if I can ever really go back," she admitted, shaking her head. He hesitated beside her, stopping when she did, and she could feel his eyes on her but she didn't look up. It felt like a betrayal, this horrible truth...a betrayal of her friends and family...of the community she'd known her entire life. But she couldn't help it. "I want to see my brother again, and my friends, but I don't think I can ever live in a vault again. Not while people on the surface have to...to struggle so much, just to survive. It's not right." She turned to him, finally meeting his eyes with her own wide ones. She didn't know why she was telling him this, or why she was trying to convince him. "It's not right to live safely down there or to keep our doors locked. That's what Vault Tec did. They kept people out and let them die. And it was wrong. I don't think I can ever do that again."

It felt strange to look into his eyes. They were eyes just like any other person might have, a normal feature in the middle of his ravaged face. Sometimes when he looked at her, he seemed frustrated or put out, and other times, resigned to something she was doing that was getting on his nerves. She'd seen him incredulous and amused and angry and spiteful too...but now, his eyes were almost soft. Almost understanding. And that look made something inside of her want to break open.

Then he turned away. "Well, you'd better find you another place to live then, because you're sure as hell not following me around forever. Bad enough I got the dog to take care of...at least she catches her own food."

Lucy rolled her eyes, figuring she'd imagined that softening...seen what she wished to see instead of what was right in front of her. "Right," she muttered. "Of course not."

But she didn't fall behind him again that day, instead walking beside him as they made their way east.

Chapter 4

The further east they went, the hotter it got. Lucy unzipped her vault suit before noon the next day, tying the sleeves around her waist and leaving her shoulders and arms exposed to the hot, dry wind. They were getting closer to the next settlement, and when they stopped again, she was determined to earn some caps and get her own supplies. And ammunition. If they were going to be hunting for their food, then she needed to pull her weight. She wasn't going to rely on the Ghoul for everything. Sure, he'd been nicer during this trip than their last one, but she couldn't help remembering how he'd dumped his water out...how he'd grinned down at her as she'd drank from that puddle.

That wasn't going to happen again.

The Ghoul kept a sharp lookout while he walked, hand always ready to reach for his gun. Lucy tended to walk a few steps behind most of the time, partially because he walked faster than her, and partially because she felt better when she could see him. If he was calm, if he felt like she could be calm. If he was anxious about something and went for his gun, she wanted to do the same. He seemed to follow Dogmeat's lead a lot of the time, using her as a barometer to see if there was trouble around.

They'd only been walking a couple of hours that morning when Dogmeat growled, taking off towards a bush, and both she and the Ghoul grabbed for their guns, him several seconds ahead of her. It wasn't more dogs though, or fiends or raiders either. Instead, a group of bloatflies appeared, one going down when Dogmeat leapt and clamped her jaws around it. The next dropped when the Ghoul blew a hole through it, and Lucy took aim, just managing to shoot a third one through its head. They moved so fast, it was hard to aim, but the Ghoul didn't seem to have any problem with that, nor did Dogmeat who took another one down, and by the time Lucy had managed to aim at the final one, the Ghoul fired his gun and the giant insect exploded, landing like confetti in the dust.

"How serendipitous," the Ghoul remarked, crouching down by the one she'd shot. "Looks like lunch has been served. Come on, Vaultie. I'll show you how to make baked bloatfly."

Lucy tried to suppress her grimace as she joined him, crouching on the ground and watching him pull out his knife. It didn't scare her anymore when he was holding a weapon. He'd told her he wouldn't shoot her unless she tried to shoot him first, and so far, the Ghoul had been pretty honest with her. So she started to sit back and watch, but he shook his head.

"Oh no. Get your knife out, sweetie. I ain't doing all the work. He was grinning at her, looking like he was on the verge of laughing at her disgust, so, not wanting to give him the satisfaction, she schooled her face, pulling out her own hunting knife.

"Okie dokie. What do I do?"

He snorted, apparently seeing right through her. "Well first, you want to pull off the legs."

She nodded easily, swallowing against her disgust. "No problem."

The Ghoul sat back, arms crossed as she followed his directions to a t, and when she'd managed to get all of the meat off the first one, he had her move on to the second, then the third. When she'd finished that one, her hands covered in a substance she was afraid to even try to identify lest she lose the jerky she'd eaten for breakfast, he finally gave in, seeming reluctantly impressed.

"Not bad, Vaultie. We might make a wasteland survivor of you yet."

Despite the goop on her hands, she had to smile.

The Ghoul made the fire, cooking the meat until it was crispy, and there was enough for both of them that, for the first time since she'd left Vault 4, Lucy was actually full after a meal. If that was the payoff for cooking bloatflies, she thought it might be worth it.

They didn't stop for long, making their way along what had been a road for a while, then cutting across land mostly made up of dead trees and boulders. Lucy wished they could find another stream or even a lake, but she was pretty sure the RadX had worn off, and she didn't want to ask the Ghoul for more. For all she knew, he'd only had one. The less she owed him, she thought as they approached a road lined with rusted out cars, the better. He may never like her or consider her a friend, but she at least wanted him to respect her. And if she didn't complain, and if she could shoot straight and keep herself safe, maybe he would.

The Ghoul slowed down a little as they reached the road, turning to follow it and glancing back at her like he was making sure she was still there. She walked a little faster, almost catching up. "What was it like?" she wondered, gesturing towards the car they were passing. "Driving one?"

"Could be fun. Could be boring. Depended on how fast you were going," he told her with a shrug. "I had a pretty fast one...long as you didn't get caught speeding, you could have some fun on the back roads."

"What happened if you got caught speeding?"

"You usually just had to pay a fine. Or if you were going real fast, they'd lock you up."

"Oh," she murmured, looking at the long line of cars that were little more than scrap now.

He pointed at one, naming what he called the make and model, then another. "Those were cheap. Didn't go real fast, broke down a lot. But that one," he told her, pointing to one on the other side of the road. "That one would cost you, but they handled like a dream." He went on, telling her about a car he'd owned once, and then about the maintenance required to keep them up. A lot of it went over Lucy's head...prewar tech wasn't her strong suit, but she liked hearing him talk...liked it when he was happy. So she just nodded along, trying to grasp as much as she could just in case she ever got the opportunity to ride in one that hadn't been destroyed.

The street they were walking along was empty apart from the cars and piles of rubble along the sides of the road until they reached a cluster of houses. The Ghoul hesitated as they approached, leaning against the rusty remains of a car and pulling out his inhaler. She

pointedly didn't watch, not wanting to be rude, instead petting Dogmeat who nudged her hand, crouching down and taking her fingers through the soft fur around her neck. It looked like it had been a nice street once, but only about four of the houses looked livable now, and livable was stretching it a little. The roofs of most of the houses had caved in, leaving piles of rubble behind, but those last four still standing just had some holes in them.

The Ghoul was quiet, holding up a hand to her to do the same as he pocketed his inhaler and pulled out his gun. She pulled hers out too, walking quietly behind him as he stepped up to the crumbling fence of the closest yard. "Places like these make popular raider bases," he told her quietly. "They like to set up shop on major roads...pick off travelers."

"Are there raiders here now?" she wondered, matching his tone.

"That's the question."

Raiders had been the ones that had broken into her vault. They'd been the ones to kill so many members of her community. Gripping her pistol, she set her jaw and followed him past the first house, Dogmeat prancing easily behind them. She didn't seem bothered, just wagged her tail and stared up at them, and after a minute, he relaxed.

"Alright, Vaultie, seems like its clear. Let's do some looting."

"Looting?" she asked, still looking around at the quiet houses.

He just nodded, starting towards the first viable house on the left.

"What do you mean?"

The Ghoul glanced back at her, forehead wrinkling as he raised his brow.

"I know what the word means!" she snapped, recognizing the look even without him saying anything. "I just mean...we can't take things from other people!"

"We aren't. We're taking things other people left lying around."

"But why would they leave things lying around."

"Probably because they're dead."

"How do you know they're dead?"

He just sighed, patting Dogmeat on the flank. "Stick with her," he ordered the dog, then to Lucy, "we're gonna split up. Check the houses on the right. Keep anything that looks valuable. We can sell anything we don't need at the next settlement. If you run into anyone, shoot them before they shoot you."

Without giving her time to argue, he took off down the road towards the furthest house. As commanded, Dogmeat stayed at her side, and Lucy ran a hand over her face, debating. She needed caps. And food. Supplies. And as much as she hated the thought of going through

dead people's things...she was on the surface now. And she would do what it took to survive...to find her father and demand her answers. To help the Ghoul get his.

So she headed for the first house on the right.

It was a two story house like the others that were still standing, the only light coming from the open places in the wall where windows had once been. There was sand on the floor along with the glass, muffling her steps as she walked through what must have been a living room once, then to the kitchen. There didn't seem to be much left behind...a couple of mugs had been left in one of the cabinets, and in another one, she found a teaspoon. She snagged the spoon, just in case the metal would be worth something.

Lucy took the stairs carefully, Dogmeat hurrying up ahead of her, and found a sleeping bag in the bedroom that she rolled up tight and put in her pack. In the dresser, which had been mostly destroyed either by the blast from the bombs or just time, she found a bag with ten caps inside. So, she thought as she made her way to the bathroom, people had lived here after the war. Had raiders hidden out here like the Ghoul had said? Or just families looking for a place to live? What had happened to them while she'd been tucked safely away in her vault.

There was a tube half full of toothpaste in the cabinet over the sink, which Lucy didn't even hesitate to grab, and a mostly whole bar of soap that she looked forward to using. She was about to go back downstairs when something made her look behind the busted toilet, crouching between the cabinet and the wall. Figuring if she'd wanted to hide something, she'd do it where less people would think to look, she grinned when her fingers closed around a pistol and a bottle of what the faded label said was whiskey. After that, she was a lot more thorough, looking behind doors and furniture and on the highest shelves she could reach.

In the second house, she stared upstairs and found a first aid kit that had a bottle of pills without a label, a roll of bandages, and a needle and thread, along with a tea kettle she left on the countertop. It might be valuable, but she didn't want to carry it. Under the bed there were more caps, bringing her net worth up to sixteen caps, which wasn't too bad if she did say so herself, and in the bedroom closet upstairs, propped up against the wall on the top shelf, she found someone else's pack. She had to tiptoe to reach it, but inside were a pair of socks that she grabbed as a backup, a hairbrush, and more pills.

She was about to go outside and find the Ghoul when she opened the last door at the end of the downstairs hallway, assuming it was a closet, when instead she found a set of stairs. Dogmeat went before her, trotting down them with her tail wagging, so Lucy figured it was safe and followed after her, using the light of her PipBoy to see by in the dark basement. The walls were lined with shelves that were mostly full of boxes, and when she looked inside, all she found were papers. Old family records. Photo albums. A couple of books (she took two that looked interesting...they were paperbacks so they wouldn't be too heavy). And then, on the bottom shelf in the very back, she pushed aside a box and found two full bottles of Nuka Cola. She couldn't help gasping a little, grabbing them like someone might take them. When was the last time she'd had a bottle of soda? She nestled them carefully inside her pack, not caring about the weight as she settled it onto her back, and scratched Dogmeat on the head.

“Anything else?” she wondered, not sure how much the dog could understand but knowing she was smart, but she gave no sign that Lucy had missed anything. Before she could give the place another once over, there were footsteps above her, and she froze in place, hand stilling on Dogmeat’s head.

“Vaultie?” The Ghoul called.

She relaxed, smiling down at Dogmeat who wagged her tail. “Here!” she called, hurrying up the stairs and finding him in the kitchen. The gun he’d been holding out dropped, pointing at the floor away from her.

“Look!” she cried, putting her bag on the countertop and holding up the two bottles of lukewarm cola triumphantly.

“Huh.”

“Here! There’s one for each of us!” She held out one bottle, and his eyes went from the bottle to her hand, lingering for a second on her pointer finger that was still a shade darker than the rest of her skin, then up to her face, his expression unreadable as he glanced away. And suddenly she felt stupid. How could she have forgotten so quickly? He wasn’t her friend!

But the two bottles, hidden away...they’d seemed like fate.

Before she could pull the bottle back and tell him she’d just sell it, he took it, his fingers brushing hers just slightly, the contact igniting the nerves of her fingers and zinging up her arm. Without a word, he used his knife to pop the cap. Then, before she could pull out her own knife, he held the bottle back out to her.

“Here.”

Confused, she took it, but then he took the other one, this time with a nod, opening that one up too.

“Don’t need you cutting your hand off trying to open a bottle of all things.”

Lucy rolled her eyes but didn’t argue, gently clanking her bottle against his. “Cheers.”

He snorted, taking a sip when she did. She had to close her eyes, the bubbles burning her throat pleasant on the way down. It wasn’t cold, but the sugar shot through her like a drug, coating her tongue and teeth and making her smile.

“You ever have alcohol in that vault of yours, darlin’?”

“Yes, but only on special occasions.” She was finding that she liked it when he asked her questions. It made conversation easier, especially since she wasn’t sure which questions he wouldn’t object to. “I’ve only had it a few times. My twenty-first birthday... my best friend’s wedding...” she thought for a second, taking another sip. “Oh, and I had two glasses of champagne at mine.”

He froze beside her, then turned slowly to stare, his drink apparently forgotten. “At your what?”

“At my wedding.”

He put the bottle down. “You’re married?”

“Um...I was. Only for one night.” She grimaced at the memory and his eyes widened.

“One night was enough to divorce the sorry son of a bitch, huh? Guess he wasn’t as good a lay as your cousin.”

Lucy shook her head, vaguely disapproving. “Why are you so fixated on cousin stuff?”

He snorted. Then “alright. So what made you leave him after one night? Or is that how you Vaulties do things?”

“No...not usually.” He was quiet, which made her think he actually did want to hear the story, so she gave it to him. “Well...Vaults 31, 32, and 33 are connected. And sometimes we trade for things...well...32 and 33 do. Anyway, I applied for a marriage since there was no one eligible in my vault for me to marry. So my father, the council of 33, and the overseer of 32 all approved, and the overseer of 32 chose my husband.”

“You didn’t get to pick someone?” he asked, brow raised.

She shook her head. “No. I didn’t meet him until the day of my wedding. They all came to our vault...the overseer and the people of 32 and...and Monty. He was the man I married.”

The Ghoul took a long drink of his cola, looking like he had more comments, but he didn’t give them. Not yet.

“Anyway, after the wedding and after we went back to my room for intercourse...”

He did snort at that, shaking his head to himself, but she just went on. People on the surface were strange about sex for some reason.

“...I heard people screaming and I checked his rad levels and...they were raiders. They got in somehow and killed everyone in Vault 32 and pretended to be them. Moldaver was leading them. That’s how she kidnapped my dad.”

“So your husband is still around somewhere? I suppose you two lovebirds could still work things out,” he drawled.

“He stabbed me. When I figured it out.” Her hand came up to touch the place on her stomach where the scar was, and she wished, suddenly, that she’d never spoken. This was too personal. He wouldn’t care. Maybe she was interesting to keep around, but he didn’t care about personal things.

His eyes widened some though, and when he spoke again he sounded genuinely interested. “Huh. And what did you do, little killer?”

She remembered the desperation she'd felt...and the fury. "I grabbed a piece of glass from my blender that he'd broken and cut his face open. I thought he was dead, so I left and I found my brother and helped him hide. But Monty came after me. He..." she rested one hand on her throat. "He was choking me. Then my...my dad, he drowned him in a pickle barrel."

The Ghoul's eyes were still wide. "That's a hell of a wedding night," he murmured, taking a drink.

"Yeah. So...I don't think we'll be able to make it work."

The Ghoul barked out a laugh at that that made her heart squeeze in her chest. "I'm sure your cast iron skillet boyfriend will be glad to hear it."

"Oh...he's not...I mean, I asked him to come find me at my Vault before...before I knew everything. I thought...well, he was happy in Vault 4. I thought he'd be happy in mine too. And he's been very kind..."

"I'm sure he has," the Ghoul muttered.

She rolled her eyes. "But he's not my boyfriend. He's my friend." Her friend that she'd kissed...her friend that she very much missed and had confusing feelings for. But this wasn't the time to figure any of that out.

Surprisingly, the Ghoul didn't argue anymore, just finished his drink, and Lucy did too.

"Find anything else?" he asked, looking around the empty kitchen.

"Yep," she told him proudly, putting the bottle down and digging in her bag to show him. "A couple of things I can use...toothpaste, soap...oh, these pills." She put the unidentified pills on the counter.

"Best you don't take those. You can sell 'em though."

She nodded. "I found a gun too. Some caps. And..." here she held up the bottle of whiskey, grinning. "This."

He whistled. "Not bad, Vaultie."

"I found a first aid kit too...no stimpack, but there was a sewing kit and some bandages."

"Good. Hang onto that," he ordered, still eyeing the alcohol.

"A couple of other things too..." she started to rattle them off, then hesitated, following his eyes, back to the bottle, and felt herself smiling. He wanted it...so it must be good. "What'll you give me for it?" she asked, mostly joking, wiggling the bottle a little.

He huffed, rolling his eyes. "If you had any sense, you'd sell that."

Lucy hesitated. He was right. She would need the caps. And they weren't friends. But she liked it when he smiled, so she held it out to him. "Here. I owe you anyway." He just looked at her, not seeming to comprehend. "For the caps. Back at the settlement," she clarified.

"Darlin', that bottle's worth more than the handful of caps I gave you. Besides, you don't owe me shit."

She wanted to say that of course she did...that if he hadn't let her come with him, the Brotherhood might have killed her. Instead she placed it on the counter in front of him. "Take it. I'll find more. I'm good at looting," she boasted, making his lips twitch.

"Oh, are you now?"

Dogmeat chose that moment to run back into the room, a stuffed toy in her mouth, whining happily. Lucy hadn't even noticed her running off.

"Hey! What did you find?" For some reason, she had found herself using the soft, sweet voice she used with the youngest children in the vault when she talked to Dogmeat. It felt kind of silly, but the dog loved it, tail wagging as she hopped around Lucy in circles, the little bear in her mouth. Lucy went to touch it, but Dogmeat jumped back, then edged closer, tail whipping back and forth.

"She wants you to take it away and throw it," the Ghoul informed her simply.

Lucy stared at him. "Throw it?"

"It's a game. Throw it. She'll bring it back."

Hesitantly, she reached out and started to take the bear, but Dogmeat gave a playful growl, crouching and wagging her tail. Lucy laughed, leaning towards Dogmeat who froze apart from her wagging tail. Then Lucy snatched the toy, jumping back when the dog rushed towards her.

"Throw it?" she confirmed as Dogmeat hopped, whining.

He nodded, jerking his head towards the doorway. So, deciding to trust him, she threw it as hard as she could, and Dogmeat barked, spinning on the wood floor and taking off towards the toy. And, lo and behold, she came right back, toy in her mouth once again.

The Ghoul let them play for a while, sitting on the moldy sofa in the living room and making a show of cleaning his guns while Lucy threw the toy over and over, then chased her around the room trying to take it back when Dogmeat decided to play keepaway instead. Finally, Lucy gave up, dropping onto the sofa beside the Ghoul, and Dogmeat climbed up on her other side, her head resting on Lucy's lap.

"I like dogs," she told the Ghoul softly, gently stroking the fur on Dogmeat's head. The dog sighed, closing her eyes and relaxing into the touch. "I wish we could have had them in the vault."

He grunted, hand hesitating on the gun before he continued to clean it.

“How much further to the settlement?”

“We’ll probably reach it tomorrow. You can sell anything you don’t need. We’ll need plenty of water. RadX too, so you can drink any you come across. Stimpacks too. Not nearly as many settlements in the desert.”

She wanted to ask if he needed more vials, but that felt too personal, so she just nodded, leaning her head back against the sofa and closing her eyes, intending to open them after a minute. She was tired, even though she’d slept through most of the night, and the couch was surprisingly comfortable despite the pieces of fabric that had been ripped away and the stains on one cushion.

The Ghoul was quiet, even though she kept expecting him to shake her awake...to insist it was time to get going. She was learning that he never liked staying in one place for too long. Instead of telling her to get up, though, he focused on his gun, cleaning each piece and laying them out on the table in front of him. Lucy listened for what felt like a long time, her breathing evening out to match Dogmeat’s, until she slipped into dreams about the vault and Steph and Norm...dreams about a room filled with crops and a flower arch where she was supposed to be married, only the man standing underneath waiting for her wasn’t Monty.

When Lucy opened her eyes what felt like just a few minutes later, her head had fallen to the side, and her heart almost stopped when she realized she was laying on the Ghoul’s shoulder. Not a second after that realization, she Jumped upright, afraid of what he would do. He certainly didn’t seem like the touchy feely type, and she was lucky he hadn’t shoved her off already. But when she met his eyes with her own wide ones, he didn’t seem angry...just regarded her curiously as he took a sip of the whiskey straight from the bottle. “Sorry...I...I didn’t mean to fall asleep.”

He didn’t answer, hauling himself to his feet and putting the gun back in its holster. “Let’s get a move on, Vaultie. We haven’t got all day.”

And then he headed out the door without so much as a glance back at her, Dogmeat already trotting at his heels.

Chapter 5

The last settlement before the dirt gave way to mostly sand was larger than the last one they'd stopped in, and larger than Filly too. She could see the smoke from the cookfires almost an hour before they reached it, and the Ghoul shifted his coat to the side, hand hovering close to his gun. Lucy walked a little closer, looking around as she jogged to catch up, but Dogmeat seemed perfectly calm, just trotting alongside them like she was having a great time.

"Keep an eye out," he told her when she got closer. "Raiders like to pick people off around settlements, especially the big ones."

"Can they get in?"

"Not one this size, not unless they get a small army together. There's guards posted to keep the riff raff out." That last part was said with a wry smile thrown over his shoulder. "Make sure you don't cause any trouble...don't start any fights. Those guards will come after us, and I don't feel like shooting my way out of here."

"I never cause trouble," she grumbled. "You were the one shooting people in Filly."

"That was different. I was doing a job," he told her like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

"Well...it's not a very nice job," she told him, the words feeling lame even as they came out of her mouth.

"No, darlin'. It sure ain't."

He relaxed a little when they got inside, hat pulled down over his eyes. Lucy stayed right on his heels with Dogmeat, the three of them walking past storefronts and what might have been apartments too...some doors were shut and others stood open, people sitting on overturned milk crates or in rocking chairs. The further they walked, the more people there were, and Lucy was tempted to grip the back of his jacket so she didn't lose him in the crowd. Most people seemed to focus only on themselves, eyes trained on the ground or right in front of them, but a couple of people spotted him and gave him a wide berth, sometimes leaning in to their companions to whisper.

One of the bigger buildings they passed had two stories and a tall steeple that stretched up into the sky, and someone had patched the holes in the roof with shingles that almost matched the original ones. There were lots of places where windows had probably been once, but they were mostly all boarded up. Out front was a big cross that leaned off to the side, and on the double doors someone had painted 'Rooms for Rent.' It looked familiar...she'd probably seen a picture of a similar place in a textbook.

"Is that a..." she turned, but the Ghoul had already left her behind. Sighing, she trotted after him, starting to grab his arm but hesitating at the last second. He'd been friendlier with her,

but that sure didn't make them friends, and she wasn't sure if he'd mind her touching him. "Is that a church?" she asked, pointing to the building they'd passed.

Lazily, he followed her finger but didn't stop walking. "Used to be. Looks like its a hotel now."

"Have you ever been to a church?"

"Once or twice."

"What was it like?"

"Like a big room with lots of benches."

"Our textbook said that there were a lot of religions before the war, and that different people fought over them."

"Sometimes," he agreed absently, pausing when the path they'd been following ended at what must have been the town center. In the middle of the big open circle were a few stalls where people were selling food...they were too far away for her to see exactly what, but it smelled good. Other storefronts lined the open circle, including one that said 'Doctor' out front. The door was open, and inside a youngish looking man glanced up and met her eye as she walked by, and she smiled on impulse, then hurried to follow the Ghoul before he left her. There was a sign in front of one store that just had the word 'junk' on it, that was the one he picked, walking right in and ignoring the looks they were getting.

It was a little cooler inside the store, and she had to blink a few times to adjust to the lack of light. Off to the side of the store was a robot like the one at the Super Duper Mart and her heart leapt into her throat, hand shooting to the holster at her hip. The Ghoul seemed to sense the movement because he stopped too, glancing back at her, then followed her gaze to the robot.

"Good afternoon sir. Madam," the robot greeted, and he grimaced before looking back at her.

"Come on, Vaultie. You got junk, they buy junk."

The irrational thought that he'd brought her all the way here just to sell her again did occur to her...but she'd read that these robots were common before the war. Surely they weren't all murderous organ harvesters. Still, she moved to his other side, putting the Ghoul in between herself and the robot. Dogmeat eyed it too, but didn't seem worried, just plopped down on the cool tile floor and wagged her tail.

The woman behind the counter didn't look too pleased to have a ghoul in her shop, but she didn't tell him that he wasn't welcome or kick them out, just pointed to the sign behind her head that said 'no haggling.' Lucy hadn't planned on it.

"Hello," she greeted, smiling and pulling her pack off her shoulder.

The woman lifted an eyebrow. "Vault dweller, huh? And a ghoul. Don't you two make a strange picture?"

Not sure what that was supposed to mean, she glanced back at the Ghoul, but his blank expression didn't give her any clues.

"Um...well, we have some things to sell."

"Well then show 'em to me, Vault dweller. Haven't got all day."

"Okay...right." One by one, she pulled everything she had to sell out of the bag and placed each item on the counter. The woman's expression didn't change. She just picked up a few things, biting down on one of the spoons Lucy had brought, the noise of her teeth hitting the metal making her skin crawl.

"Thirty caps," the woman told her, and, fighting the urge to glance at the Ghoul, she nodded.

He went through the same process, handing the things he'd gathered over and taking the eighty caps she gave him.

"Thought you were good at looting," he murmured as they made their way out of the store.

Lucy rolled her eyes, ignoring him, but she couldn't help her little smile when he chuckled.

At the storefront that passed as a pharmacy, Lucy bought a StimPack to go in her first aid kit, along with some bandages and a couple of RadX pills just in case they found another lake or stream for her to take a bath...or she needed to drink water from the ground. She filled up both of her canteens at the pump too, and bought a couple of bottles of purified water that she stuck in her pack. They made it heavy, but the extra water was worth it. The Ghoul bought some supplies too, including two StimPacks which brought their total up to 3. It didn't feel like enough...not when they'd be traveling for so long.

She was just thinking about sparing some caps for a meal when the Ghoul led her into another building, tossing a piece of jerky to Dogmeat. "Wait here," he ordered, and the dog plopped down with her treat right on the front porch in the shade. The smell of smoke that hit her when they stepped through the front doors almost made her cough, but the Ghoul didn't seem affected, just leading her to a table and pointing. "And you, wait here," he told her, pointing to a chair like she was Dogmeat.

"Why? Where are you going?"

He raised his brows, continuing to point, and with a sigh, she dropped into the chair, crossing her arms like she had when she'd been a child and upset with her father for making her stop running around with Norman in the apartment. He huffed, shaking his head a little. "I swear that dog listens better than you."

He was gone before she could answer, heading over to one of the bartenders who took one look at him before gesturing for him to follow her to the back. "Mary, watch the bar, would you?" she asked, leading the Ghoul through a door that clicked behind them when it shut.

Lucy watched them go, then cast her eyes around the room. A few people, all armed, drank around the bar, and a few at the tables had bowls of food. So this was a bar, she thought,

considering buying a drink and then deciding against it. She preferred spending her caps on a meal, and those food stalls were right outside.

To her credit, Lucy did wait a full five minutes before glancing at the door where the Ghoul had disappeared to one last time, then hopping up and moving over to the bar. The woman working there lifted an eyebrow. “Vault Dweller?” she greeted dryly.

Lucy started to inform her that she had a name but decided against it. “Yes. Hello. Mary, right?”

No response.

“The man I came here with...”

“The Ghoul?”

“Yes. Can you inform him that I’ve just stepped out for a moment?”

Mary huffed, “Of course, ma’am. Any other messages I can jot down for you.”

Lucy narrowed her eyes.

“I’m not your secretary, Vault dweller. Tell him yourself.”

“Okie dokie,” she muttered, giving her a tight smile, and then pushing through the front door and back into fresh air. Dogmeat was still gnawing on her jerky and didn’t bother getting up when Lucy passed, stopping only to pat the dog on her head before heading straight to the nearest food stall. One had bundles of carrots for sale, and another sold cherry tomatoes by the handful. Lucy got some of both, mouth watering at the thought of eating something other than meat, or maybe even making a whole meal while they were traveling.

A third stall had a cookfire going, a big metal pot filled with some kind of vegetable stew that made her mouth water even though it was so hot outside her bangs were plastered to her head with sweat. She was pretty sure she hadn’t eaten a vegetable since Vault 4.

“You’re the Vault dweller that came here with that Ghoul, right?” the gray haired man mending the fire asked, stirring the soup. He wore a shirt that looked like it had once been five different shirts and had all been sewn together at some point, and his jeans were so worn at the knees, she could almost see his skin.

“Yes...we are currently traveling together.”

“Hm...didn’t know those types traveled with anyone.”

“Bounty hunters?” she asked, making the old man bark out a laugh.

“Ghouls.”

“Oh...well, I’m sure they’re all different,” she told him, trying to keep her tone polite. No one she ran into seemed to care much for ghouls, but apart from the way he looked, the

Ghoul didn't seem that much different than any other surface dweller she'd met.

"I ain't too sure about that, sweetheart."

The Ghoul called her that sometimes. She found she didn't like it when this stranger did it.

"Do you know any ghouls?"

"Can't say I do. Don't want to either."

"Well, then there's no way you could know what they're like." She gave him a tight smile.

"Can I get two bowls please?"

"I'll tell you one thing, yours doesn't look too happy right now," he told her, taking her caps and handing over the first bowl.

She frowned, confused, then turned to find the Ghoul storming out of the bar, looking none too happy as he stood at the edge of the porch and looked around the market center. People skittered out of his way, ducking into buildings or turning and heading down side streets, but he just kept glaring until their eyes locked. He deflated some then, shaking his head and stomping over to her, spurs jingling the whole way.

"Thought I told you to stay."

"Well, I was hungry and I'm not a dog."

He eyed the bowl in her hand. "Jerky ain't good enough for you?"

"It's fine, but if I only eat jerky, I'm going to get scurvy. Here," she told him, thrusting out the second bowl the shopkeeper handed her. He just stared at her, and when she glanced at the man who'd sold her the soup, he was staring between them too, eyes wide.

"I think scurvy is the least of my problems, sweetheart," the Ghoul told her dryly. "And I believe you're thinking of citrus fruit."

"There are red peppers in here, and those are full of vitamin C. So is broccoli. We did an entire course on nutrition in my Vault, and we all learned the importance of eating a balanced diet. That means eating more than just jerky and roaches."

He was quiet for a moment, taking her in. Then, "what the hell kind of soup has broccoli in it?"

"If you don't want it, I'll give it to Dogmeat," she warned, tired of holding it out, and he sighed and took the bowl, freeing up her hand to take a bite.

"Fine. Now would you mind?" he asked sarcastically, gesturing the bar. "I've got some business to finish up before we go."

Lucy supposed she didn't mind now that she had something to eat, although she wasn't sure why she needed to be in the building while he did said business. "I'm bringing the soup."

“I wouldn’t dream of parting the two of you.”

As it turned out, his business was drinking. The minute she’d hopped up onto a barstool and started in on her lunch, he lifted a hand and the bartender he’d been talking to before slid him a shot glass that he drank in one gulp. The whole routine was repeated not two seconds later, and he pushed some caps her way before she went to serve another customer.

Mary, the woman Lucy had asked to tell the Ghoul that she was stepping out, and who had obviously ignored that request, stood at the other side of the bar, eyeing them with something like disgust as she swept the floor with an old fashioned straw broom. Lucy glanced at the Ghoul, wondering if he might be doing something to earn said disgust, but he was just taking a bite of his soup, so she decided to ignore her...lots of people from the surface had turned out to be unfriendly despite Lucy’s best efforts. She still believed in the golden rule, but she didn’t have the energy to try and make friends with everyone she met, especially if they were looking at her like that.

“So...business?” she asked the Ghoul, glancing at his empty shot glass.

“It’s always a good idea to keep your dealer happy,” he told her simply.

“Oh.” Dealer...the woman he’d been talking to must have had those vials. She wondered what exactly those were, but decided to ask later. “So...you won’t be able to get more until we get to New Vegas?” she wondered instead.

“Or another town on the way. Don’t worry. I’ve got plenty, thanks to you,” he acknowledged, tipping his head towards her. “But it’s good to have backups, just in case.”

That made sense. She took another bite, scraping the bottom of the bowl to finish her soup. “I got some food for the trip.”

“Can’t have you getting scurvy.”

She ignored the sarcasm, a little surprised that it sounded playful. “I need more caps...is there any way to make money here?”

“You could take up bounty hunting,” he suggested with a smirk, gesturing with his chin to a wall with what looked like drawings of peoples faces plastered to it. “Might want to work on your reaction time first, though.”

“I’m serious. If this is going to be an equal partnership, then I am going to have to contribute.”

“Who the hell said anything about an equal partnership, Vaultie?”

“I’m just saying that it’s only fair that I find a way to pull my weight. Are there any jobs around here that *I* could do to earn money?”

“I’ve got something you can do for money, sweetheart.” The man walking up on her other side grinned, looking her up and down in a way that made her skin crawl a little, one hand on the front of his pants. Before she could ask exactly what he was thinking, even if she had a

pretty good idea and doubted she'd be interested, the Ghoul's gun was out and pointing straight at the guy. Suddenly, the air seemed to go out of the building, all the other patrons going silent. The woman who'd sold him the vials sighed, rolling her eyes up to the ceiling.

"Beat it before I put a fucking hole in your head," he barked, sounding meaner than she'd heard him in a long time. In fact, she wasn't sure if she'd ever seen him mad like that. Even when she'd bitten his finger off, he'd looked more intrigued than anything.

Wide-eyed, the guy put his hands in the air and backed away.

"Was he going to ask me to have sex with him for money?" she asked when he was gone, and the Ghoul looked up at the ceiling for a moment as though begging a higher power for patience. Maybe he was religious after all...she made a mental note to revisit the church thing later.

"Yeah. He was."

"Oh...is that a common practice on the surface?"

"Common enough." He gestured and his dealer slid him another glass, catching the cap he slid right back.

Lucy thought for a moment...she really did need caps. And he hadn't been terrible looking. Grimacing, she sighed. "Well...it's not ideal, but if he used protection, it might be..."

"Don't even think about it, Vaultie," he snapped, shaking his head. "Aboslutley the fuck not."

Lucy cocked her head. "Why not? It would be a fairly easy way to earn more caps."

"Jesus Christ," he whispered, more like a swear than any kind of religious statement, but still...she would keep that question on the back burner until she decided it wasn't too personal.

"Ghoul-fucking whore."

The mumbled words startled Lucy, and she and the Ghoul both turned to find Mary staring right at her, lips curled in disgust.

"Excuse me?" she asked, incredulous.

It had been a really, really long month since she'd left her Vault. Her whole world had turned upside down. Her father had turned out to be a murderous traitor. She was traveling across the wasteland with a man who'd once sold her to organ harvesters, and she was pretty sure he was the person she trusted the most right now, apart from maybe Max...although, Max *had* lied to her. She understood *why* he'd lied to her. She forgave him for lying to her.

But thinking back, she didn't think the Ghoul had lied to her once.

So despite the delicious vegetable soup and the relative comfort of sitting down for a while, she possibly wasn't in the best headspace to deal with a rude bartender.

"I said, I can't believe we're letting Ghoul-fucking whores in this place now. This town's really going downhill."

Lucy tilted her head, then pushed herself off of her barstool, knowing that the gun on her hip was visible and hating the part of her that liked the way the woman across from her stiffened when she spotted it. The Lucy she'd been in the vault would never have wanted to threaten another person. She never would have decided to solve an interpersonal dispute with threats. She would have explained that what she'd just said was offensive. That it was hurtful. And that Lucy didn't think she deserved to be spoken to that way.

But she wasn't in the vault. Not anymore.

Once again, the other patrons were silent as Lucy came to a stop in front of Mary. "Do I know you?" she asked, not putting her hand on her gun but letting her hand hover close enough it made the other woman hesitate for just a second.

"I don't think I've had the pleasure," the woman spat, knuckles white around her broomhandle.

Lucy leaned in then, one hand on the bar, one hovering close to her gun, and the smile she gave the woman felt like it was made of steel and razor wire. "Well, then, I'm not sure how it's any of your business who I'm fucking." The swear came out cold and sharp in the silence of the bar, and she knew she was scaring her...knew that the woman hadn't expected her insult to do anything more than make her feel ashamed, but she sure as hell wasn't ashamed of who she traveled with, nor did she think it was anyone's business who she had sex with.

A stool behind her scratched against the scarred wood floor as it was pushed back, and the familiar clinking of spurs approaching told her who exactly was dropping a hand on her shoulder. Still, she didn't break eye contact until Mary did, her eyes shooting to the Ghoul, then to his hand on Lucy's shoulder, and then back down to the floor she'd been sweeping.

"Alright, little killer. We'd best be on our way before we wear out our welcome. Jack, a pleasure as always."

The woman he'd been trading with lifted a glass full of amber liquid as if in salute with a wry smile, then threw it back.

Lucy let him lead her away from the bar, his hand staying right there on her shoulder until they were outside, and she was pretty sure she saw him smiling as they stepped into the bright afternoon sunlight.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much to everyone who is taking the time to read and review! It means the world to me, especially since I'm totally new to this fandom! I hope you enjoy!

“Sweetheart, you do realize that now everyone in that settlement is going to think you’re a ghoul-fucker, right?”

Lucy shot him an incredulous look as they left the settlement, passing rusty cars that the Ghoul kept a sharp eye on and that Dogmeat seemed eager to investigate. “So? Like I said, even if we were having sex, that’s no one’s business!”

His eyes widened, head tilting a little as his mouth opened like he was going to say something, but she went on before he could, the injustice of it all making her angry.

“And why is there a word for that? Ghouls are just people. It’s no different than having sex with someone who was in a fire or has asthma...it’s not like ghouls are a different species!”

“It’s a little different.”

“Why? Everyone up here is exposed to radiation, right? So if they live long enough, lots of people eventually turn into ghouls?”

“Some do. Depends on the amount of radiation and how fast they get it.” Then, just loud enough for her to hear, “I guess ghoul-fucker might not be as bad as cousin-fucker.”

She wished she had something to throw at him, but settled for kicking sand in his general direction, which made him chuckle. Reluctantly, she smiled down at the ground and hoped he didn’t catch her.

The sun bore down on them as they walked, and although Lucy tried to be sparing with how much water she drank, she had a feeling it was going to be hard as they made their way through the desert. The road they were following had huge cracks running through it, and in places, sand had covered it almost completely, so she had to be careful where she put her feet so she didn’t turn her ankle. “Are we following the road the whole way?” she wondered, wiping a hand over her face.

“For a lot of it. It’s safer than cutting straight through the desert. There’s more likely to be a couple of settlements close to the roads, and we’ll need to stop. Ain’t much water out here.”

“But you said there were raiders on the roads sometimes.”

“Raiders or dehydration, darlin’. Gotta weigh your options.”

She remembered water pouring out onto the dirt and shuddered. She’d take the raiders. At least they could shoot them. There was nothing she’d be able to do if she ran out of water. Her hand drifted to her canteen, then dropped. She had to be careful. Had to ration it. He seemed nice enough now, but she couldn’t risk finding herself in that position again. So she focused on one step in front of the other and cataloged the questions she wanted to ask him one day.

Who is your family?

Why did you say that Cooper Howard line to my dad?

Why wouldn’t you just give me a drink...no. Not that one.

What’s your name?

That last one was so simple, and yet it was the hardest to ask...felt too strange at this point to bring up the fact that she didn’t know. They’d been traveling together for days and she still didn’t know what to call him, other than ‘sir.’ She’d never gone this long without knowing someone’s name! In the vault, she’d known everyone. Then again, no one seemed to refer to him by name. He was just ‘ghoul’ and he didn’t seem to mind it. Maybe his name was a sore spot? Maybe he’d get angry if she asked. Maybe he didn’t use a name anymore?

Lucy felt like she was on the verge of collapsing when they stopped for the night, and she finally gave in and took a long drink of water while he started a fire with a couple of pieces of crumpled paper and a chunk of wood he must have been carrying for that purpose. She pulled out the carrots, using her knife to chop a couple of them into pieces, and he poured a splash of water into two tin bowls, dropping pieces of meat and the carrots inside. When that had cooked, they had something like soup for dinner. It could have used seasoning, and maybe more vegetables, but Lucy wanted to save some for the next day.

“When do you think we’ll find another settlement?”

“Not sure. Might be a few days.”

“What if we run out of water?” she demanded, fear curling up in her stomach at just the thought. “What if we don’t find another settlement? What if...”

“What ifs never did no one any good, darlin’,” he told her simply, holding the bowl up to his mouth and taking a drink of the hot broth. “We’ll take it as it comes.”

We. *We’ll* take it. That thought was comforting for some reason, and Lucy nodded. He’d been surviving in the wastes all this time. Maybe...maybe if she was with him, she’d be safe.

She wasn’t so sure an hour or so later when they’d set up camp for the night. There were no buildings around...no trees either. Or boulders. Nothing to use as shelter. The wind blew steadily as the temperature dropped, and Lucy soon found herself wishing that she had her

Vault Tec sleeping bag...it was so much warmer than the one she'd found at that house they'd looted. Curling up as tight as she could, she tried to cover her face with the material, but there was a hole in the side that let cold air in. She wished it were big enough for Dogmeat to slip inside...that would surely warm her up. But the dog was curled up a few feet away, breathing steady, face pointed out towards the desert like she was keeping watch.

The Ghoul lay flat on his back on the other side of the remains of their fire, hands clasped on his chest, guns and ammo all laid out beside him along with his bag like always. She was pretty sure he could find his gun and aim it in his sleep. That, at least, was comforting.

She closed her eyes, trying again to tuck her face into the sleeping bag, but her feet pressed against the bottom of the fabric and when she shifted, she heard the fabric ripping and froze. "Fudge!" she hissed under her breath, shifting again to try and move the place in the sleeping bag that was ripped so that it lay underneath her. At least then so much air wouldn't get in. But it was hard to manage it without getting out of the sleeping bag and she was afraid that if she did that, she'd never get anywhere even close to warm again. "Darn it," she whispered, trying to lift her hips and turn the material around her, and that's when the Ghoul sighed.

"Sweetheart, some of us are trying to sleep over here."

"Well if Dogmeat has complaints, she's welcome to air them," Lucy snapped, trying again to lift her hips and rotate the bag, but the hole snagged on her foot. "Damn it!"

"What the hell are you doing?" he demanded, sitting upright on one elbow.

"I'm freezing and exhausted but there's a hole in my sleeping bag and I can't sleep because I'm too cold!" To her horror, her voice broke a little, tears filling her eyes. He didn't care, she reminded herself sharply. He didn't get personal and he wasn't her friend but she was so tired and so cold and...

"Come here," he ordered tiredly, and she froze.

"What?"

"Come here." He said it a little louder, like she might not have heard him, the strain of patience in his voice.

"Why?"

"So I can start cutting strips off of you for jerky, Vaultie. Why do you think?"

She huffed but crawled out of her sleeping bag, padding over in her socks to stand over him. In the light from the moon, she could see the hand he gestured with.

"Give me that and lay down."

Hesitantly, she handed the sleeping bag over and sat down beside him, not sure exactly what he was getting at until he unzipped it and turned it into a blanket just big enough to cover the two of them. And immediately she understood...he was warm. Almost without realizing she was doing it, Lucy scooted closer, curling up on her side facing him and pressing her nose to

his arm, her knees bumping his hip. He was keeping her warm. He was letting her lay under a blanket with him...touch him.

They were quiet for a long time, him stiff beside her, her wishing she could just fall asleep now that she was a little warmer. But in the darkness, with him so close, the question that had been bothering her for so long finally couldn't be held back any more. "Why did you pour the water out?" she asked his shoulder in a whisper, hoping this wasn't overstepping...hoping that this wasn't the thing that made him push her away to freeze alone in the desert.

He didn't move, though. Didn't even seem to breathe.

"You were going to sell me anyway. And...and I can understand that, I guess. You needed the caps and I'd broken those vials." She swallowed hard, scooting just a little closer without even meaning to...he was just so warm. "And I understand why you used me as bait. And why you cut off my finger. But...I don't understand why you couldn't just give me a drink of water."

He was quiet for a moment, breathing soft and steady with the occasional wheeze. He would need another puff of that medicine soon...maybe that night.

In the Vault, there had been a rule that conflicts and grievances needed to be aired so they didn't fester. Everyone had to live together and work together for their entire lives. The Vault was big, but not so big that you could avoid someone forever. So it was common practice to approach someone, take them aside, and explain calmly how something they had done had hurt you. And then that person was supposed to reflect on that and come back with an apology and an explanation of how they would avoid doing harm in the future. Not everyone took it as seriously as Lucy, of course. Steph, for example, always followed the ritual with just a little snark, lips perpetually fighting a smirk as she promised to go forth and do no harm.

But this was the Ghoul. This wasn't a friend of hers in the Vault. They were traveling together. Sometimes he was kind to her. Sometimes he didn't seem to care about her at all. Tonight he was letting her press up against him for warmth, sharing a blanket like lovers. Earlier he'd pointed a gun at a man who'd tried asking her for sex. And not that long ago, he'd smirked down at her as he'd poured water on the ground rather than letting her have a sip.

"I've lived a long life, Lucy MacLean. And I've done a lot of awful things," he finally said. "That don't even make the top five."

A sharp pang of disappointment snuffed out something inside her...some hope she hadn't even felt growing.

But then he went on. "I don't feel much shame anymore, not over doing what it takes to survive. I'll never regret killing someone that wanted to kill me first or doing a job to make money. That, though...in the face of what you did for me after..." He sighed, shifting and lifting his arm out of the way, then moving slowly, almost tentatively, like he was giving her plenty of time to stop him. She didn't...instead, she scooted closer, meeting him halfway and

resting her head against his chest, his delicious warmth enveloping her like the rays of the sun as his arm came to rest on her back. “That day I regret.”

Unexpectedly, her eyes filled, and she pressed her face to his chest, doing her best to keep her breathing even. She would not cry. Not here. Not in front of him. She was just cold and tired and overwhelmed and the darkness made it all feel so much bigger than it was. Slowly, his hand came to press against her back, thumb moving back and forth over the fabric of her vault suit, and the steady, gentle motion, along with the heat from his skin, lulled her into sleep.

When Lucy woke, she hadn’t moved, and neither had the Ghoul. Dogmeat had, though, curling up right against her back, sandwiching her between her warm companions. She could tell just from his breathing that the Ghoul was awake, but he didn’t shove her off of him or tell her to get up...that it was time to move. He was still holding her, his hand still resting on her back, and unlike the time she’d woken from a nap, her head resting on his shoulder, she didn’t jump up. Didn’t want to. She liked it when he smiled and when he laughed...and apparently when he held her. The thought made her chest ache strangely as she nuzzled her face against his chest to try and get even more comfortable, ear coming to rest above his heart where she could hear it beating.

The sun was just peering over the horizon, soft pink light washing over them, and it was so beautiful, and she was so comfortable, that she wanted to stay here forever. But this was the Ghoul, she reminded herself. He may have almost apologized for what he’d done and he may have been kind to her the night before, but the longer she stayed, the better the chance that she would wear out her welcome, so with a soft sigh, she made herself speak. “Do we have to get up now?”

The arm around her tightened just a fraction, then relaxed. “Unless you’re planning on cutting off circulation to my arm entirely, we’d probably better.”

Lucy sat straight up, jaw dropping. “You’re the one that...” He was smirking, eyes dancing with amusement, and she clamped her mouth shut, pulling herself to her feet and heading for her boots. The gauze had helped the blisters, but she wished she could take another bath... use soap to get cleaned up. Behind her, the Ghoul chuckled, wheezing a little, then took a puff of his inhaler.

He poured a little water into one of their bowls for Dogmeat, letting her lap it up before they started walking again. Once more, the questions flooded in. What if they ran out of water? What if they didn’t find another settlement? But she tried not to dwell on them, just took a drink of her own water, gathered her pack, and got ready to go.

She was getting used to walking all day without too many breaks, although she was still pretty sure the Ghoul was slowing down for her sake. He didn’t complain, just walked like he had a built in compass. Her PipBoy told her that they were following an old highway that skirted the edge of the desert, but although it could show her where cities had been before the war, it didn’t say anything about the settlements that had popped up since.

Lucy was staring at her PipBoy when Dogmeat snarled, and the Ghoul had his gun out before she even saw him reach for it. Her head snapped up, fumbling for her gun just as a bullet hit

the sand by her feet making her cry out in surprise and stumble backwards. Before whoever it was could shoot again, the Ghoul had her arm in an iron grip and was dragging her towards a car rusting away on the side of the road. Without having to be told, she ducked behind it, landing on one knee and holding her gun with strangely steady hands.

“Raiders?” she asked.

“Looks like it,” he mumbled as another gunshot hit the car.

They were the primary aggressors. She had to defend herself. She was surprised that the thought didn’t even make her feel guilty.

Pushing her head up just above what had been the hood of the car once, Lucy took aim and scanned the area. Another bullet lodged itself into the metal by her shoulder but she didn’t flinch, just took a deep breath and pulled the trigger, smiling a little to herself when someone yelled and the Ghoul whistled.

“Not bad, Vaultie.” He stood up straight, and for a second as the raiders must have caught sight of him and the giant gun on his back, they were silent. “Alright now. How about you let us pass and we let y’all live?” he called with a wry smile, not sounding like he had any faith his words would do anything.

He was right.

There was another gunshot, this one hitting him...he flinched, shoulder jerking back as he took a step, and she gasped, taking aim and firing before anyone else could shoot at him. The Ghoul sighed, lifting his gun and doing the same.

For a minute, Lucy stayed right where she was, but the raiders were moving and the Ghoul was making his way towards them, and soon she had to move. She shot forward, hurrying between cars and wincing when bullets made the sand around her feet fly. Her heart felt like it was going a thousand miles and hour and her fingers were sweaty on her gun and her side ached and she figured she must have run into a sharp piece of metal or something...she’d have to check that later. For the moment, all she focused on was ducking down behind the car and shooting at anyone she saw as the Ghoul made his lazy way towards the raiders who were hiding behind their own cars...only they weren’t doing so well. His gun could tear through the metal, and he seemed more amused than anything as the occasional bullet lodged in his skin.

“Take that fucking ghoul down!” one of the raiders screamed, and Lucy put a bullet through his throat, jaw tight. They wouldn’t be taking the Ghoul down...not if she had anything to say about it. She didn’t know how much ammo she had, exactly, so she did her best not to waste a single shot, taking her time and aiming every time. Finally Dogmeat managed to make her way to them, and the Ghoul too, and then it was over.

Lucy didn’t feel it at first...not really. She was all adrenaline and shaking hands as she made herself take a deep breath and lower her gun, watching as Dogmeat dug into one of the raiders...possibly one of the ones she’d shot. She leaned against the car she’d been hiding behind, watching the Ghoul start to go through her bags. That made her smile for some

reason. Of course he was already going through their bags, kicking the corpses of the raiders out of his way so he could grab what looked like an alcohol bottle. She wondered how he'd feel about never being allowed a drink like in the vault and almost laughed.

He'd probably break into the storeroom and drink whatever he wanted.

"Don't just sit there, Vaultie. If I have to do all the work, I sure as shit ain't sharing any of this food."

Lucy nodded, starting to push herself off of the car, but found she couldn't do it. Glancing down at her side, it took her several seconds of staring at the ragged hole in the side of her suit, the edges covered in a spreading, dark stain, before she understood.

"Fuck," she whispered, voice not quite loud enough to carry. Beside her, Dogmeat seemed to sense something was wrong and stopped tearing into the open chest wound of the Raider, whining softly and looking up at her with huge, soulful brown eyes.

"You ever had snack cakes in those vaults? They're so full of rads you'll have to take some of that RadX first but it might be worth it if you've never had 'em. We can wait until we find another lake...might as well kill two birds with one stone."

His chatter was a nice sound in the background and she felt her eyes closing. She needed to move...needed to fix this. Needed to pull her first aid kit out. But she couldn't figure out how to do any of that.

"Come on, sweetheart. Get off your ass and..." He stopped then, words cutting off, and then she was on the ground, barely feeling it when her head made contact with the dirt. From far away, Dogmeat was whimpering and pawing at her, wet tongue licking her cheek, but the Ghoul just stood there, staring down at her...not like he didn't care...not like when he'd told her to go into the Super Duper Mart. No, she thought as her eyes drifted shut...he looked like he couldn't move.

"Hey! Lucy! Wake the fuck up!" someone snapped, and she did, opening her eyes that she hadn't even known she'd closed. The Ghoul was closer now, on his knees and looking mad, and it occurred to her that he almost never called her Lucy. It was always Vaultie or sweetheart or darlin...a seemingly never ending list of nicknames whose purpose she didn't understand. "Stay awake, you hear me?"

"Okie dokie," she breathed, trying to smile and feeling something hot drip down the side of her face. His eyes met hers for a split second before he jerked them away as if burned.

"Bite down on this," he ordered, pressing something to her mouth, and for a second she thought he was gagging her, but hazily realized it was his glove. Opening her mouth, she let him put it inside, wondering what he was doing and why she trusted him to do it right before there was a horrible, burning, ripping pain in her side. She bit down hard on the leather, a strangled scream escaping as her eyes slammed shut and she arched her back. A hand in the middle of her chest shoved her back down, pinning her in place.

“Tell me about it, darlin,” he mumbled, nodding like he was agreeing with her. “Hurts like a bitch, don’t I know it.”

She sucked in a desperate breath when the pain didn’t stop, sobbing and gasping and screaming again because something was making the wound in her side bigger...digging around in her raw flesh.

“But if I don’t get this bullet out of you, you’re gonna be having an even worse time of it, trust me,” he continued in that same soft voice.

The glove fell out of her mouth right as she rediscovered the use of her hands, bringing one up to grab at his arm, the other fisted in the sand. “Please...stop...sir please...please!” she begged, voice ragged, and he froze, taking a ragged breath of his own, then gripped her hand with the one that had been holding her down, his jaw so tight it looked like he might break a tooth.

“Can’t do that, Vaultie. Not unless you want to be ass-jerky.” And then he was back to digging and pulling something out of her and she threw her head back and screamed one last time, squeezing the hand whose fingers were intertwined with hers so hard she worried they might break. They didn’t though...just squeezed hers gently back.

She couldn’t stop the sobs as she relaxed into the ground, or the startled scream when he stabbed her with a needle. StimPack, she realized after a moment. Only two left.

“There. That ought to fix you up good as new.” His hands moved to her neck, grabbing her zipper. “I’m gonna unzip this so I can wrap you up. We’ll see how it looks later, make sure it don’t get infected.” He spoke in a monotone, and she felt him pull her zipper down past her undershirt, far enough that he could reach the bullet hole in her side, then press gauze to it. “Come on. Sit up so I can wrap this,” he ordered, taking her by the shoulders and pulling her upright. She hissed, and the pain made stars like the night sky dance in her vision.

He leaned her against that same car and started wrapping a bandage around the gauze to keep it in place. The whole world was spinning, the sunlight making her dizzy, and she had to fight to keep her eyes open. “Alright, little killer,” he murmured when he was done, tying her sleeves around her waist. “Let’s find a place to make camp.”

“It’s...day,” she murmured, feeling her arm go around his shoulders as he lifted her to her feet, but not doing anything to help. She felt so strange...the pain in her side radiated out until it was consuming her, but he was moving and she had to put one foot in front of the other or else she’d fall. Would he leave her if she fell? She was suddenly afraid he would.

“You ain’t getting much further today, Vaultie. We’re gonna let that StimPack do its work and then we can keep going.”

Then they were stopping. Lucy didn’t know how long they’d been walking, her mostly just leaning on him with her eyes closed as she tried not to think about the pain, but suddenly it was darker and when she looked around, they were in...something. A building? Lucy didn’t argue when he helped her remove the vault suit, leaving her in her underwear and white tank top, just followed his orders with a dizzy nod and let him help her sit on the floor of a shack

that was only three real walls and the remains of a roof. The sun was already heading for the horizon as he pulled the dressing off her side and maybe changed it...she couldn't tell... didn't know how much time had passed.

Then she was laying on that sleeping bag, head resting on something soft he'd balled up... maybe her vault suit.

"Would you really make jerky out of me?" she wondered, forcing her eyes open again as he hovered over her. His hands tucked something around her, and she realized it was his long leather jacket, the tatters doing little to cover her bare legs, but it was so hot she didn't care. He glanced up at her, meeting her eyes, and gave her shoulder a reassuring pat, lips tilting up into a smirk.

"Of course I would, sweetheart."

She couldn't help smiling, a short, painful huff of laughter escaping. Because for the first time, she didn't believe him.

Lucy dreamed that the air was broken in the vault. She lay in bed, or maybe on the floor, and she wanted to take her vault suit off but she couldn't make her hands work.

Norm pressed his hand to her forehead, his hand so hot it felt like he was burning her, and she groaned, swatting him away. "Quit Norman," she snapped, using the voice she only used with him. No one could annoy her like her brother.

"Not quite, darlin'," her brother murmured, only it wasn't her brother because her brother didn't sound like that and her brother didn't call her that.

"Norman?" She asked, confused, head tossing to one side and then the other. Who else would be in her room? It wasn't her father...she didn't think. She was upset with her father, but she couldn't remember why. "It's hot," she told the person who she thought was her brother but wasn't.

"Yeah, that's the fever," the man told her. A man. A man in her room. Her husband?

"He stabbed me," she mumbled, because he had. Her husband had stabbed her. He was dead, right?

"Your brother?"

"Monty."

"Ah, the husband," the person agreed, not sounding like he was paying much attention. She couldn't make out his face or any features...it was too dark. But he held something to her mouth that turned out to be a bottle and she drank the water desperately until it was pulled away.

"Who are you?" she wondered when she'd caught her breath, trying to make out his face in the darkness of her bedroom. Her and Norman both had their own rooms, but he was the only person besides her father who should be here...maybe Chet? No, it wasn't Chet's voice

either. She was so hot that it was hard to think, and she wished they would fix the air... wished she could make herself get up and turn on the cold tap and stand under the cool spray of the shower until she didn't feel so hot.

The man was looking right at her, but she couldn't make out his face.

"Who are you?" she asked again, fighting to keep from slurring her words. She'd had two glasses of champagne at her wedding...was she drunk? She wasn't supposed to get drunk. It was frowned upon in the vault. Except...hadn't she left? Didn't she remember something about the sun and a stream and a dog curled up at her side. There were no dogs in the vault.

It was that thought that made her pry her eyes open, realizing for the first time that they'd been closed. This wasn't her room...she was on the ground inside of a sleeping bag, something balled up under her head. There was sand and dirt on the floor all around her... they were still in the shack from before.

The Ghoul was hovering over her, and she felt her face break out into a relieved smile. "Oh...it's you," she murmured, reaching out and touching his arm just to make sure he was real. Everything felt oddly fuzzy, like she'd taken sleeping medicine. "What's going on? It's really hot...why aren't you smiling?"

The furrow in his brow deepened at that. "Well, sweetheart, there ain't much to smile about right now. You're not getting up any time soon, it looks like we're gonna have to use another StimPack and we can't really afford to do that seeing as that'll leave us with just one."

"I like it when you smile," she murmured, squeezing his arm. "I thought you were my brother."

"Not your brother," he told her, skipping over that first part, his eyes staring off to the side, but she was already closing her eyes again. If the Ghoul was here, he'd take care of whatever was wrong. So, ignoring him when he urged her to stay awake, she squeezed his arm one more time and let herself drift back into sleep.

The Doctor's Interlude

Elliot didn't deal much with ghouls. They didn't come to his settlement often, and when they did pass through, they mostly kept to themselves. He did the same. He didn't trust they wouldn't turn feral on him, and besides, they rarely needed a doctor...the radiation and their chems did most of the healing for them. He did deal with people, though, and after most of a childhood watching his father work in one settlement or another patching people up as best he could, and an adulthood of doing it himself, he prided himself on being pretty good at reading them. He knew when someone was afraid of needles but trying not to show it. He could tell when someone was feeling worse off than they wanted to admit. And he always could tell when people traveling together were just working together and when there was something else going on. Something more.

He'd heard all about the Vault Dweller and the ghoul who'd visited their settlement...knew they were just passing through, and that the girl had defended the Ghoul when Liam had said something about ghouls being dangerous. She'd bought two bowls of his soup, holding one out to that glaring ghoul until he'd softened and taken it from her. That, Elliot had seen for himself. Gossip had spread fast about her in particular...how she seemed friendly with the ghoul rumored to be one of the deadliest bounty hunters alive, and how the ghoul had pulled his gun on old Fred when he'd tried to solicit the girl in Jack's bar. In his defense, the girl *had* been asking for ways she could make money.

That night, when he'd been drinking at the end of the bar, he'd heard someone ask Jack about a little confrontation that had happened earlier, and she'd shrugged, unconcerned. "Mary called her a ghoul-fucking whore and she didn't take too kindly to it. Told Mary it wasn't none of her business who she was fucking. And it ain't," Jack had said, shooting her partner a sharp look.

As far as Elliot was concerned, it wasn't none of his either, but he'd still been nursing his beer, so he'd heard the rest.

"She sure didn't deny it," Mary had grumbled, rolling her eyes. That one didn't trust ghouls...hell, she hated them. Feral ones had ripped her brother apart, so he couldn't much blame her, although he didn't think it was a good idea to go provoking them.

"That's *the* Ghoul though, right? Been around forever? Deadliest bounty hunter this side of the wastes?" someone else had asked.

Jack had thrown back a shot. "He's only dangerous if you've got a bounty on you, or if you piss him off. Don't get in his way and you'll be fine. He's actually pretty funny. Always pays his tab." This time, the pointed look had been for old Fred who'd grumbled while he'd slid some caps her way.

When that same ghoul stepped into his shop before midmorning the next day, his Vault dweller unconscious in his arms like a bride from the old stories, a dog at his heels, he sure didn't look like he was in the mood to be funny. He looked like he was about ready to start

shooting. The woman looked a whole hell of a lot worse than she had the last time Elliot had seen her...she was too pale, cheeks a harsh red, either from sunburn or fever, head limp against the ghoul's chest. And Elliot didn't care much for ghouls...didn't trust them and didn't deal with them unless he had to, but he wasn't about to let a woman die just for being associated with one. He dropped the bandages he'd been rolling onto the counter he'd been standing behind and pointed at the bed in the corner. There were four of them, all with curtains he could close for privacy, and he closed it as the ghoul laid her down, his lips a thin white line in his ravaged face.

The ghoul was scared, no matter how much he didn't want to show it. His eyes were stuck to that woman like a magnet, and even as Elliot cut through the bandages, he just shifted towards her head, not moving more than a foot away from her but also not standing in Elliot's way, hands opening and closing like he didn't know what to do with them.

"How long ago," he asked, pulling the bloody gauze away and trying to keep his face blank as he mentally cataloged the problem, just like his dad had taught him. No one appreciated a doctor that wore their emotions on their face. Best to deal with all that behind closed doors. So he examined the woman, writing up the diagnosis in his head. Gunshot. Infected. Bad.

"We got ambushed by raiders yesterday...just past noon. I used whiskey to disinfect my knife. My hands too. Got the bullet out. Gave her a StimPack. Wrapped it up and got us to shelter."

Not enough whiskey. Or the bullet had been dirty. Or both. Still, Elliot had to admit, he was surprised the ghoul hadn't just left her based on what he'd heard about him. He didn't dare say that, though...didn't want to find himself looking down the barrel of that wicked looking gun the ghoul carried. Instead, he took the woman's wrist, fingers pressed to her pulse point, then grabbed his stethoscope and pressed it to her chest. Pulse was weak. Rapid. Breathing the same. Her skin was too hot and too dry. Dehydrated. Infection. Bad.

"She started running a fever around midnight. I gave her another StimPack. When she didn't get any better, I brought her here."

He'd carried her all the way back, cradled in his arms. He'd used two StimPacks, which were valuable commodities. They were presumably on their way somewhere and he'd given up time rather than...

He wasn't diagnosing the ghoul, he reminded himself as he grabbed a can of purified water, bringing it to her lips. She drank when the water touched her mouth, swallowing instinctively. That was a good sign at least. "Susana!" he called.

His assistant poked her head out from the back from where she'd been mixing up a salve out of some plants she'd managed to find out in the wasteland early that morning...her specialty. To her credit, her eyes only briefly flashed to the ghoul whose eyes hadn't yet left his Vault dweller.

"I need more water. Purified. Go to the pump, get a bucket full. Hell...maybe two." He handed her the caps and she took them on her way out the door at a run. They'd probably be waiting for her in the town square. Gossip spread faster than wildfire in this town, and

everyone would be talking about the ghoul carrying his Vault dweller to the doctor. But Elliot didn't let himself dwell on that, just started a drip with MedX and some RadAway just in case, hoping to help with the pain he knew she'd be feeling when she woke up and get ahead of any radiation poisoning.

"She needs antibiotics." The 'they're expensive' went without saying, and it was hard to make himself meet the ghoul's eyes, even if he was a little embarrassed to admit that even to himself.

"I'll have to owe you," the ghoul told him simply, eyes going right back to the Vault Dweller's face.

Elliot sure as hell wasn't about to let this girl die because her companion didn't have caps on him, nor did he have any doubts the ghoul would just kill him and take the antibiotics if he said no. "Not a problem." He didn't exactly have any bounties for the notorious bounty hunter, but he could think of a raider's base nearby that the town would be a whole lot safer without. Maybe this would be a blessing in disguise. "She got a name?"

He asked more to make conversation than anything as he opened the old cooler, one of the very few appliances he spared the precious generator-provided electricity for, and counted his bags of antibiotics. Not a lot. Not as many as he liked to have on hand.

"Lucy."

"I'm gonna drain the fluid and disinfect again...hopefully that MedX will keep her from waking up, then I'll start the antibiotics," he told him, picturing his father's sure hands in place of his own. His father hadn't been afraid of ghouls...or much else. So Elliot pretended he wasn't either as he doused a knife in rubbing alcohol and, without hesitation, opened the red, inflamed wound.

Yellow pus and blood poured from the wound in the woman's side, and she tensed, brow furrowing, a noise like a kicked dog escaping even in her sleep. She didn't open her eyes though. Elliot couldn't help how his eyes flashed to the ghoul whose hands closed into fists the second the noise left the woman's mouth. He didn't reach for that gun, though.

"Brace her," Elliot ordered, pouring more alcohol into a little cup. He hated this part...hated what it did to his patients and hated what it did to the people that loved them. His father had always told him that keeping his face blank was best. 'Don't burden those people with your feelings.' That's what he'd said. 'You're their doctor. You've gotta be the strong one.'

Without hesitation, the ghoul moved to stand behind her, his glove covered hands on her shoulders. Elliot poured the water in first, cleaning the wound, and the girl whimpered again but just a little, face twisting in her sleep. Then Elliot poured the alcohol. He didn't let himself flinch when she arched her back or when she screamed, just put a hand on her stomach far enough away from the open wound and the old scar that he wouldn't hurt her any more than he had to. The ghoul closed his eyes for just a second, but his hands stayed on her shoulders, pressing her into the bed until she was still, her breathing still shaky. When Elliot took her wrist again, her pulse was faster.

“That’s the worst of it.” Elliot wasn’t sure who he was telling...himself or Lucy or even the ghoul. He didn’t think any of them were comforted.

Stitches were next. He scrubbed his hands with the harshest soap he had, dropping the curved needle into water that boiled on the woodstove, and, once it had cooled, he took a seat on a milk crate he kicked over to her side and got started. Stitches were easy when the patient was unconscious. He’d been practicing suturing wounds since he was nine, and he could practically do this part with his eyes closed. When he glanced up, though, the ghoul wasn’t watching him. He was still watching Lucy, hands resting on her shoulders, staring at her lax face like he was looking for signs of life.

Susana came back with the two buckets of water, barely struggling with the weight as she placed them on the ground by the unconscious woman’s bed.

“I’m going to start the antibiotics,” he told the ghoul once the stitches were done and clean gauze and bandages were in place. “Then we’ll get her cleaned up...bathe her as best we can. Change her clothes.” Here, the ghoul’s jaw ticked just a little, but he didn’t say anything. “Mariana over at the old church, she rents rooms out if you want to take her there once she’s feeling better. They’ve got better beds. More privacy. A place for you both to bathe and food too.”

“Does she run tabs?” the ghoul asked, sounding tired as he stepped back out of the way of Susana who was carefully removing the Vault suit Lucy was wearing. They’d spent plenty of caps the day before, he knew thanks to town gossip, mostly on water and supplies for a long trip. And the chems for the Ghoul. His eyes strayed to the woman’s bare legs, then back to Elliot as he stepped further away, moving to the other side of the curtain. Outside, through the front window, Elliot could see a few people slow down to try to get a look at him.

“I do,” Elliot told him. “Tell her I’ll take care of it for a few days. It’ll take that at least for Lucy to be ready to travel again.” At that, the ghoul grimaced, seeming to weigh his options. Elliot removed the RadAway bag and hooked the antibiotics up to the port in the back of her wrist while Susana dipped the clean washrag in the water and started at the woman’s feet. “Susana, when you’re done, get her some of that salve for her feet. I’m going to push more fluids too...then we can move her to a room in the back.” Then to the ghoul, “If you’d rather leave her and move on, I can...”

The look the ghoul shot him was pure poison, and it took everything Elliot had in him not to flinch back, his mouth shutting with a click of his teeth. But before the ghoul could say anything, Lucy stirred, blinking slowly up at the ceiling and pulling her foot away. She still had a fever, even though he hoped the antibiotics would kick in and lower it soon. They would put a cold cloth on her head too...he needed to put a cup of water in the cooler for later. But for now, he approached her slowly, not wanting to startle her.

“Lucy?” Elliot asked, and from the other side of the room, just past the edge of the curtain, the ghoul’s head shot up. He stayed where he was, though, like he was rooted to the spot. “Lucy, I’m a doctor,” he told her, moving to her head so she could see him better. “Do you remember what happened?”

The young woman's brow wrinkled, hazy brown eyes shooting from him to Susana who was wringing her washcloth out over a spare bucket, trying to keep the dirty water separate from the clean, her face open and friendly. He wished for the fifth time just that day for reliable running water like they had in the nicest settlements...the ones only those rich in caps could afford to live in.

"Lucy?" he asked again when she didn't answer. "You're in my clinic. You have an infection. Do you remember getting shot?"

And then the girl's face crumbled, lips trembling as she tried to sit up, then gasped when that must have hurt too much even with the MedX. His hand shot out, landing on her shoulder to keep her from trying that again, but she flinched away. "Where...where..."

"You're in my..." he started to explain again, voice slow and patient, but Lucy shook her head, tears running down her bright red cheeks.

"Did he leave? Where is he? Where's..." she begged as if in a blind panic, then paused, dropping her head back onto the pillow, her whole body shaking from sobs she didn't seem able to contain. "I don't know his name!"

He thought that if the ghoul could have paled, he would have. Instead, he finally managed to move, going right to her side, sidestepping the bucket and Susana and grabbing Lucy's hand in his own, surprisingly careful of the IV in the back of it. "Right here, Vaultie," he told her, leaning in so she could see him. "I haven't left you yet, have I? Haven't made you into jerky either."

Elliot's eyes shot to Susana who swallowed hard, then to Lucy, expecting the same fear, but to his surprise, she just smiled, relaxing into the pillow and releasing a breath. Was that supposed to be a joke?

"I was scared you left...I...I dreamed you left me," the girl rasped.

"Yeah, well, earlier you were dreaming I was your brother so I wouldn't put too much stock in those."

"I don't know your name. I don't know who to ask for..."

The ghoul sighed, and Elliot watched his thumb run over the back of the girl's hand, the ghoul's eyes following the movement too. She was still crying, watching him with heavy lidded eyes, and after a moment, he met her gaze again.

"It's Cooper, sweetheart. Now calm the hell down, would you? This here doctor worked real hard on those stitches, and I'd hate for him to have to do it all over again. This is costing me a pretty penny as it is."

"Cooper," she repeated, lips twitching into a calm smile, eyes closing. "Like...like the actor."

He nodded, tapping his thumb twice on the back of her hand. "Just like."

And then she was out again.

The ghoul, whose name was apparently Cooper, stayed right there while Susana got back to work cleaning the dirt off the young woman while Elliot got a second bag of cold fluids started. Get her clean, maybe more antibiotics, check her temperature in an hour, move her to a room, cold cloth. His to-do list hovered there in the back of his mind as he worked, grabbing a cupful of clean water for the cooler, then dipping a second washrag into the bucket to clean the dirt and tear stains from her face. When she was feeling better, she could take a real bath over at the church if the Ghoul wanted to fork over the caps for it. Mariana would even heat the water for them and lug it up to their rooms.

When Lucy was finally cleaned up, Elliot turned to the ghoul, trying to pretend he was just another normal family member of any normal patient. “We’re going to get her into some clean clothes and get her settled in the back. There’s a chair in there too if you don’t mind sleeping in it tonight.”

“I’ve slept in worse places.”

“Give us an hour to get her settled? Then you can sit with her.”

The ghoul seemed like he might argue, then nodded instead, pushing himself to his feet. He’d put his weirdly shaped bag in the corner, and now he threw it over his shoulder. The pack the girl had been wearing was there too, and he picked it up. “How much?” he asked.

“I’ll add it up and get back to you with a price once she’s feeling better.”

The ghoul accepted that with a nod, turning and heading out the door, that dog he’d come with jumping up. He held a hand out though. “Stay with her,” he ordered, and the dog lay right back down, head on its paws.

Lucy didn’t wake up when Susana changed her clothes, or when they transferred her to a bed in one of the three actual patient rooms they had. There was a chair in the corner for the ghoul, as promised, although it was an old wooden rocker and not that comfortable for sitting, much less sleeping.

“How much will you charge him?” Susana asked quietly, covering Lucy up with a thin blanket and then dipping a washcloth in the cold water from the cooler, wringing it out and placing it on her forehead. Lucy sighed in her sleep, fingers twitching a little. For the first time, he noticed that one of her fingers was a little darker than the others, but it moved just like the rest and didn’t seem infected, so he left it.

“Those antibiotics are fifty caps on their own,” he told her. “The water. The bed. The fluids. The MedX...”

“How’s he gonna pay?”

“You know that old raider camp in the General Atomics store?”

Her eyes went wide, understanding immediately. “By himself?”

“The whole settlement will sleep better. Travel won’t be so dangerous. And you know they’ve stocked up on chems. StimPacks. Hell, maybe even antibiotics.”

“Think he’ll do it?”

Elliot didn’t tell her that for this girl, he had a feeling the ghoul would do almost anything. It wasn’t something the ghoul seemed to want to advertise, and besides, it wasn’t any of his business. “I don’t think he’ll be moving on without her,” he told her instead. “Besides, Jack said he always pays his tab. Doubt he’d change now.”

His wife came home before the ghoul returned, making a dinner of mole rat chunks and whatever vegetables she’d been able to get from the market. The two of them lived in an apartment upstairs, mostly because he didn’t want to be too far from his patients on the semi-frequent occasion anyone from their settlement was sick enough or hurt badly enough to need to stay overnight, and partly because it took a lot of caps to build a separate house. Jenette never seemed to mind, hunting for their food when she could get away from the schoolhouse for long enough, sometimes taking the older kids with her.

Like his father, she wasn’t afraid of ghouls or much else, and when the ghoul returned to sit in that chair beside his Vault dweller, dropping his bags in the corner without a word of complaint, she brought him a plate of dinner that he only hesitated a second before taking. “Much obliged,” he said, strange words in a strange accent from a strange man.

Elliot was grateful to her. It couldn’t hurt, he figured, to be on the ghoul’s good side.

“This going on my tab?” the ghoul asked him once she’d returned upstairs, and Elliot couldn’t help snorting.

“She’d shoot me if I tried. That right there is just hospitality. Plain and simple.”

“And the rest? You done those calculations yet?”

“I have,” Elliot admitted. The ghoul had been put off once, but he didn’t want to try it again. He didn’t seem like a particularly patient man. “I was thinking a favor might be enough to make us square. Your Vault dweller won’t be on her feet for a few days at least. The antibiotics work fast, and the MedX will help with the pain, but it still won’t be safe for her to start walking across the desert just yet. And if you’re staying with her, I might have a job for you.”

“A bounty?” he wondered, taking a bite, seeming all too affable. If only his eyes hadn’t cut over to Lucy every few seconds, Elliot might have believed that he was just as calm as he looked.

“Raiders. They’ve got a base set up in an old ghost town a few miles south. A General Atomics store. They might have sent out the band that shot your girl.”

Slowly, the ghoul nodded. “I think I could do that.”

“They’ve got to have some chems stocked. Weapons too...plenty of caps in it for you. But if you can bring me any medicine they have...StimPacks, MedX, RadX, bandages, alcohol... antibiotics if they’ve got them, then we’ll be square for the medical care and the room at the church too.”

“Huh,” he muttered to himself, taking another bite. “Well, I suppose you’ve got yourself a deal.” He glanced at the girl, lips curling up. “Hear that Vaultie? There’s that golden rule at work again.”

Elliot realized then that the girl’s eyes were open, bleary and barely focused, but open nonetheless.

“Mine or yours?” she rasped, and the ghoul held a canteen of water to her lips, putting a hand under her head and helping her drink. Her cheeks were still flushed with fever, but she seemed a little more aware than before. When she was done drinking, he wiped his thumb under her lips in a gesture so surprisingly intimate that Elliot almost wanted to look away.

“Mine,” he told her with a fond smile.

Elliot lifted an eyebrow, looking between the two of them. “Sorry?” he asked, not sure he was understanding, and Lucy gave him a tired smile, sinking back into the pillow.

“Thou shalt get sidetracked by bullshit every goddamn time,” she recited, eyes already closing again, and the ghoul chuckled.

“That’s the one, darlin’.”

Chapter 8

Lucy dreamed of the Vault.

She dreamed she was in someone's arms as they carried her through the halls, her skin so hot it felt like she was boiling. She dreamed of her apartment and turning on her cold tap, staring down at the water and wishing more than anything that she could put her lips to the faucet and drink it. She dreamed of Monty and the way he'd looked underneath her, and how it had felt to climb on top of him still in her wedding dress that was too tight...how he'd pressed deep inside her, making her gasp in pleasure, only when she opened her eyes, it wasn't Monty underneath her, and that confused her, because she should have been afraid but she wasn't. It wasn't Chet in her bed either. It was...

The dream changed and she was in her father's arms, just a little girl, as he carried her back into the Vault. She wasn't sure why...wasn't sure why her mom wasn't with them or where her mom's friend was. She'd been so nice and the sun had been so bright and the Ghoul had sat guard while she'd splashed in a stream under the hot sunlight while Dogmeat had licked her face. No dogs in the Vault...they weren't a source of food and they required sustenance that couldn't be spared to live. She knew the rules and she understood them and she taught them, but Dogmeat had brought her a toy, tail wagging, huge brown eyes begging for her to join in the game.

"It's a game. Throw it. She'll bring it back."

Lucy was thirsty. It was hot and bright and her hands were tied and the Ghoul smirked down at her as he poured the rest of his water onto the dirt at his feet, but then he held the canteen to her lips, his hand supporting the back of her head, and she could *feel* it...she was drinking it.

"There, sweetheart. Try not to drown yourself. I'd hate to be doing all this for nothing."

A hand cupped her face, a rough finger gently wiping under her mouth when the water was pulled away. Her whole body hurt but the lukewarm water was the best thing she'd ever tasted.

She was lying beside the remnants of a campfire, and the Ghoul had his arm around her, her head resting on his chest, and Max was staring down at her as she tried to explain.

"I thought it would be good for us to live in the Vault together and repopulate America and we could be safe, but I can't be safe when no one else is! It's not right! And I don't think you really want that either! You don't want to be a knight and you don't want to be my husband! We don't even know each other! You want to be safe! You deserve to be safe! Everyone does! But the Vaults are bad."

She was in someone's arms, their footsteps pressing steadily forward, the soft clink of metal reminding her of a Cooper Howard movie. Spurs. They'd used them on horses in the movies.

“Don’t you do this, Vaultie? You hear me? Don’t you fucking do this. Not like this. Goddamn it!” More words, a constant stream of them, and then wheezing and the puff of an inhaler. Then, “You don’t get to do this. You don’t get to make me...” Silence. A harsh breath. Her head against a too-warm chest. Pain so ever-present that she hadn’t noticed so much until now because it hurt every time he took a step and every time he shifted her in his arms and then it was too much and she was crying, whining like Dogmeat as cold tears ran down her cheeks. “I know, sweetheart,” he murmured, and the nickname was familiar but his tone wasn’t. “I know. I’m working on it. If those assholes weren’t already dead I’d kill them again.”

More walking and more pain and more heat than she thought she could stand. Everything hurt. Breathing hurt. She wanted it to stop. All of it. But those arms wouldn’t let her go.

“Just a little further, Vaultie. Hang on, alright? You’re not going down like this...not from a goddamn bullet. Not after everything. I won’t let you.”

The voice was with her and she was in the Vault. Steph was sitting beside her by the cornfield, a baby in her arms. She’d had her baby. Lucy wanted to see! But when Lucy looked down, she realized she was holding a baby too. A perfect little girl with dark curls and a fist clamped around Lucy’s Vault suit even in her sleep, and Lucy knew that her name was Rose and she knew that she hadn’t chosen this...hadn’t wanted it.

“Our kids will grow up together.” Steph smiled, a black eyepatch covering part of her face. Something about that smile scared her.

More water in her mouth, and another rough finger swiping across her chin, then brushing sweaty bangs from her face. A hot, rough hand cupping her face. She liked it when he smiled and when he laughed and when he held her, head limp against his hand.

“Come on, Lucy. Please. Please, darlin’.”

But he was walking away. He was setting her down on the ground and leaving her. Only she wasn’t on the ground. She was in a bed. A cool washcloth was wiping dirt off of her feet and a familiar stranger was looking down at her and he wasn’t there! He’d left her. The tears wouldn’t stop, not until he was there again, looking down at her so solemnly. So gently. Something about jerky and something about stitches...a golden rule and a name. Cooper.

His name was Cooper.

That was her first thought when she opened her eyes again.

She wasn’t dreaming anymore. She knew from the distant ache in her side, not as horrible or as all-encompassing as before, but still very much there, and from the way she was just a little too cool, a thin blanket pulled up to her waist, sweat making her bangs stick to her forehead. She was wearing what looked like a hospital gown, an IV in the back of her hand. She brought her other hand up to her eyes, rubbing carefully. Too much movement would hurt. She could tell that right off.

Lucy didn't have to look far to find him. The Ghoul sat in a rocking chair a few feet away, hat pulled down over his face, slumped over like he was asleep. There was a window just past him, curtains drawn, but she didn't see any light around them. Her PipBoy wasn't on her wrist, so she had no idea what time it was, but she had the vague idea that she was in a clinic, and that she'd been here for a little while. She quickly spotted her PipBoy sitting on top of her pack, both tucked into the corner behind him.

It felt strange to not have it on...but kind of nice. Light. Flexing her fingers and wrist, she stared at her bare arm for a moment, then looked back at the Ghoul, not sure if he'd want her to wake him. She thought she remembered him talking to her, his voice so soft...so gentle. She remembered reciting his golden rule and his soft laughter. She remembered a doctor and strange dreams. But she wasn't sure which parts had been real.

Lucy closed her eyes, relaxing into the bed for a while. It was soft and comfortable, and even though it didn't feel like her old one in the Vault, she was still excited to be sleeping anywhere but the ground. At the thought, the memory of the night the Ghoul had held her, her head on his chest, came back, making her cheeks flush a little. He'd just been keeping her warm, of course. It had been kind of him.

She hoped he would do it again.

As if he'd heard her thoughts, the Ghoul shifted, and she opened her eyes to watch him as he sighed, back cracking as he sat upright, pushing his hat up and looking at her first thing. As soon as their eyes met, he froze. Then, "it's about damn time, Vaultie. Thought you were gonna sleep all day and all night."

"Your name...it's Cooper? Did I dream that?"

He blinked at her for a second, taken aback, then nodded. "Probably. It's true though," he told her, grabbing a glass of water and holding it out to her. She tried not to drink the whole thing in one gulp...but it was cool, and she was so thirsty. When was the last time she'd had cold water? Vault 4? "You were doing a lot of dreaming. Kept thinking I was your brother."

"I dreamed that I had a baby." She wasn't sure why she was telling him this, the words spilling out before she could really think them through. "My best friend, Steph...she was pregnant when I left. She's probably had her baby by now. She always told me we'd raise our kids together." She swallowed hard, looking up at him and trying not to think about the fact that her best friend was from Vault 31. Just like her dad. "I don't think I want that."

He huffed. "Well unless your raider husband knocked you up in one night, I think you're safe on that front, Vaultie." He took the glass from her hand, putting it back on the table beside her so she didn't have to reach for it.

She shook her head, closing her eyes and resting her head against the lumpy pillow. "He was probably sterile...high rads. And he wouldn't tell me his sperm count. Or maybe he didn't know it."

The Ghoul...Cooper, barked out a laugh, and when she opened her eyes again, he was shaking his head, his smile making her own lips turn up.

“You Vaulties discuss sperm count often?”

“It came up more than you’d think,” she admitted, something warm spreading through her chest at the sound of his teasing.

“I’m sure it did.”

Lucy hesitated, but she felt tired and strange and she wanted to talk her thoughts out with someone. “I don’t know what the experiment is in Vault 33 but...I think...we were all supposed to have babies. All of us. It wasn’t really a choice. I mean, they acted like it was, but people who didn’t have children weren’t seen as normal. And from the time I was really little, my teachers and my dad both told me that I’d grow up and help repopulate the world.”

“So you were breeding stock.”

The words made her flinch, eyes dropping to the blanket. That made it sound like they were animals, and she remembered the experiments of Vault 4. She didn’t think he was wrong, though. “I think...it was something like that. Something about Vault 31. Where my dad was from. We never went there or had group events or trades with them. They only ever came to our Vault for marriages.”

He grunted, nodding a little, looking like he was deep in thought. Then he put the back of his hand on her forehead, his skin rough and hot against hers. The feeling was almost familiar now. “Seems like your fever is gone. You had a hell of an infection.. Wasn’t looking good there for a while.”

Lucy almost made a joke about ass jerky, but the look on his face stopped her. She remembered bits and pieces...remembered how he’d talked to her. Carried her. Begged her to be okay. He’d been scared. He would care if she died.

He’d told her his name.

“So...Cooper?” she asked, trying to change the subject to something lighter.

He nodded, pulling the rocking chair closer to her bed and sitting back.

“Can I call you that?”

“We’ll, it’s my name...”

“Cooper,” she said again with a smile, feeling it out. He just watched her, and if she didn’t know better, she’d have said his expression was fond. “Does anyone else know?”

“No one’s asked in a long time, sweetheart.”

That made her inexplicably sad, and she didn’t want to admit that she hadn’t asked because she’d been scared...because she hadn’t known that he cared. Because they hadn’t been friends, not really. But surely they were friends now. “Cooper,” she said again, thoughtful. “Just like the actor.”

It was something about the smile. Something about the little laugh and the look in his eyes that had her starting to sit up, then freezing when it hurt too much, making that smile of his disappear. “Hey...what the hell do you...”

“Just like the actor,” she said again, quieter this time. He’d said that line. He’d been a cowboy ‘of a sort.’ He’d teased her about liking Cooper Howard movies. He had a similar accent. He was prewar.

“Yeah, like the actor, Vaultie. But if you tear those stitches...”

“Cooper Howard.”

He paused, hand outstretched, his eyes reading something in hers before his expression turned wry. “Now I’m pretty sure I only gave you the first name.”

“You know my last name. It’s only fair.”

He seemed to think for a second, dark eyes locked on hers, and she liked it when he looked at her. She liked it when he gazed into her eyes like he was looking for something. She liked having a chance to study him.

“Am I right?” she asked, unable to keep the eagerness out of her voice.

“If I tell you, will you lay the fuck back down?”

“Yes.”

“Then yes.”

Lucy couldn’t help her excited smile...the thrill that went through her. She was right! This was Cooper Howard! Her favorite actor! “Will you tell me about it?”

He sighed in resignation. “If you promise to lay down and stay there. I’m already in debt to this doctor, sweetheart. I don’t really want to owe him another favor for sewing you back up.”

She did lay back down, head resting on the pillow once more. “Wait...in debt?”

“Medicine costs caps, Vaultie. So does a stay in a clinic. Water. Fluids. The room we’re going to have to rent until you can travel again. Caps I didn’t have.”

We. The room ‘we’re’ going to have to rent. He was going to stay with her. “But...what are we going to do?” She had a couple of caps left, but she didn’t think that would be nearly enough, and he’d already turned down her sex for caps idea. She supposed she could get some kind of job, but it would be hard when she was still healing.

“I’m going to do the doctor a favor and we’ll be square,” he told her, sounding unconcerned.

“What kind of favor?”

He smirked. “Thought you wanted to hear all about my acting career.”

“I do! But....is it dangerous?”

“It’s just a job. Same kind of job I’ve been doing for a long time.”

“Can I come?”

“Absolutely the hell not,” he told her with a snort. “You ain’t leaving that bed, except maybe to move to a different bed. Looks like you’re going to get to see that church after all.”

She blinked at him, struggling to keep up. “What?”

“Just be quiet and listen, Vaultie, and I’ll catch you up.”

So she did.

Cooper told her the very basics about what had happened...she’d been shot, she’d gotten an infection, he’d brought her back here. She knew there was more...knew he’d been talking to her and holding her closer and begging her to be okay. She knew he’d put himself in debt with this doctor to make sure she got the medicine she needed. The doctor had given her antibiotics and him and his assistant had cleaned her up. That had been earlier that day. According to Cooper, it was almost three in the morning.

“That doctor is going to rent a room at the church we passed. We can stay there for a couple of days so you can heal up, then it’s back to the road.”

She couldn’t help being a little excited. They were going to stay in a hotel! A real one! She’d only read about them in books before. But she also knew it had to cost caps, which neither of them had many of. “So...the doctor asked you to do him a favor?”

“Apparently there’s a raider’s hideout not too far away. They’ve been picking off travelers. He asked me to clear it out. Grab what I can find. It’ll clear our debt here and I’ll have enough caps left over to keep us going for a while. And you won’t even have to fuck anyone for them.”

Lucy rolled her eyes at his tone. “I doubt the offer still stands anyway after you pointed a gun at him. When are you leaving?” She hated the idea of him going on his own and leaving her here, even though she knew that he was really good at stuff like that, and that he’d been doing it for longer than she’d been alive. Still...what if something happened? What if he left and didn’t come back?

“Not for a couple of days. Now you ought to get some sleep. That doctor’s going to check on you in the morning, then we’re heading to the church.”

“But I thought you were going to tell me about your movies,” she murmured, eyes already closing. She didn’t think she should still be tired after so much sleep, but he just pulled her blanket up around her shoulders.

“Plenty of time for that later, Vaultie. Sleep. You need it.” His voice was oddly soft, his hands gentle as he all but tucked her in, and she caught his hand before he pulled it back.

”Will you stay?”

”I guess I don’t have much of a choice.”

”You want to lay down?”

”There's no room in that bed for me, Vaultie. Just sleep.” He let her keep his hand, squeezing gently, thumb rubbing against the back of hers. It was oddly comforting, the repetitive motion lulling her back to sleep, and this time, she didn't have any bad dreams, although she thought she felt a hand resting on her hair, and the pressure of someone's head against her shoulder. The sound of a shuddering breath. But she was asleep before she could think about it.

When she woke again, he’d taken his hand back, and someone else was talking...a voice she only sort of recognized. Opening her eyes, she shifted a little, surprised at how much less her side hurt. The IV was gone too, and she looked at her wrist on instinct, but her PipBoy still wasn’t there. Glancing at the window instead, she found daylight seeping in around the curtains. In the doorway were the man she’d seen before...the man who must have been the doctor, and the Ghoul...Cooper. There was a soft whining, and when she looked down, she found Dogmeat lying on the floor on the other side of her bed.

“Hi,” she said softly, smiling when the dog put her front legs on the bed and gave her face an enthusiastic lick. Bringing up her arm, she gingerly wrapped it around her neck, pressing a kiss to her fuzzy head. “Good girl.”

“Good,” the Ghoul huffed, turning to her and crossing his arms. “She’s not even supposed to be in here.”

“Well I’m glad she is. Because she’s a good girl. The very best girl,” Lucy cooed, kissing her again, and Dogmeat was so happy her whole body wiggled.

He snorted, rolling his eyes, but his lips were twitching like he was fighting a smile.

“Lucy? I’m Elliot,” the doctor greeted. “It’s good to see you awake. How are you feeling?”

“I feel much better!” Dogmeat hopped down, getting out of his way and trotting back over to Cooper who patted her on the head. His face said he didn’t believe her, but he stayed where he was, hand resting on Dogmeat's head as the doctor pulled the blanket down to her lap and lifted her gown. When she glanced over at him, his face had gone stony, eyes glued to the wall as the doctor pressed gently around the stitches. He didn’t look at her again until Elliot had pulled her gown back down, and she’d pulled the blankets up to her chest again, waiting until the doctor moved away to return to his spot by her bed.

“You’re not safe to start traveling again just yet, but your fever is gone, and the antibiotics are working. You’ll need to rest for a few more days, but you’re clear to leave. Your...” Here the doctor hesitated, glancing at Cooper whose face gave him nothing. “...companion,” he

decided, “has already spoken to Mariana over at the old church. She has a room available for you that should be more comfortable than this one. Try not to get those stitches wet for 24 hours and rest as much as you can.”

She nodded. “I can do that. Thank you.”

“I’ll leave you to get dressed.” With that, Elliot left the room, shutting the door behind him, and the Ghoul crouched in the corner, picking something up and tossing it on the bed along with her pack.

She sat up, moving slowly, but the place in her side only twinged, so she picked the bundle up and smiled. Her suit. It was clean, the only sign that she’d been shot a slightly darker area around a patch of almost matching blue fabric. “You fixed it!”

“Had a lot of time to kill,” he told her simply.

“Thank you,” she beamed at him, clutching the familiar suit. She was more than ready to be wearing real clothes again.

He grunted. “Get dressed, Vaultie. Time to get going.”

She nodded, throwing her legs over the side of the bed, and his head jerked to the side like he’d been slapped.

“Will you slow down? The last thing we need is you tearing those stitches. You’ll never heal at this rate.”

“It’s not fair that you heal so fast,” she mumbled. “You got shot too.”

“Trust me sweetheart, you don’t want the tradeoff.” He turned the chair to the wall, taking a seat and pointedly not looking at her as she pulled underclothes out of her pack, Dogmeat laying down at his feet. Her underwear and bra were clean, which made her cheeks flush a little, although she wasn’t sure why. Laundry was a communal chore in the Vault, everyone taking turns, and men had seen her underclothes plenty of times. Not much in the Vault had been private. But the thought of the Ghoul...of Cooper, washing her dirty underclothes... well, it was strange. Hoping to distract herself, she carefully placed her feet on the floor and pulled her underwear on.

“So. Cooper Howard.”

He sighed, dropping his head against the back of the chair, foot flexing as he rocked slowly back and forth. “Yes, Lucy MacLean?”

She liked the way that sounded in his voice, his accent stretching out her last name. “What was it like? Filming movies?”

“Like a job.”

“Come on!” she cried, carefully snapping her bra shut, then pulling her tank top on. “Was it fun?”

He shrugged. “Sometimes.”

“Did you like the other actors?”

“Sometimes.”

“Were you really rich? We were always taught that famous movie stars before the war were rich and lived in mansions and had private planes.”

He huffed out a laugh. “I did fine. No private plane. The house was nice but I wouldn’t call it a mansion.”

Lucy stepped into the vault suit, trying to bend over as little as possible. He didn’t seem upset at her questions, but she didn’t want to ask too many...didn’t want to risk the camaraderie they had by getting too personal too fast. She had his name. That would have to be enough for now. So she just pulled her suit up, zipping it just over her tank top. At the sound he turned back around, looking her over as she snapped her PipBoy onto her arm. Pulling out an elastic band from her pack, she started to tie her hair back, but lifting her arm above her head made her flinch, dropping the arm quickly and holding it close to her side.

“Here,” he ordered, standing and holding out a hand.

Confused, she handed him the hair tie. Then he moved behind her, carefully gathering her hair back, combing through it with his fingers, then expertly tying it into a ponytail. How, she wondered, did he know how to do that? Why did the warmth of his body right behind her make her want to lean against him? Why did she love the feeling of his hands in her hair? Why did she want him to wrap his arms around her? “Thank you,” she murmured, hoping he didn’t move...that she could enjoy this feeling for just a little while longer.

He’d carried her through the desert and given up miles of progress to get her help. He’d held her and begged her to be okay. He’d put himself in debt to save her. He’d patched her suit and given her water and they were maybe friends now and...

He stepped away, shouldering her pack before she could so much as reach for it, then threw his bag over his other shoulder. “Alright, Vaultie. You ready to stay in your first hotel?”

Lucy grinned, nodding and trying not to think about missing his warmth. “Ready.”

“Let’s go then.”

Chapter 9

It was, thankfully, not a long walk to the church, although Lucy was very much aware of the eyes on them the whole way there. Dogmeat walked on one side of her, the Ghoul on the other, both of them seeming to guard her...but that was a silly thought because there was no danger here. Just the three of them making their way across the town square, although Lucy was walking slower than normal. The Ghoul didn't seem to mind, simply slowing his pace to match hers.

Cooper, she reminded herself. Cooper Howard. It still felt too strange to be real. Cooper Howard, the actor she'd been watching her whole life, was now traveling the wasteland with her. And a dog. Sometimes she couldn't wait to see Norman again and tell him everything. Just the thought of his expression made her smile. He hadn't liked the westerns as much as her and their dad, but he'd watched all of them over the years.

He'd most certainly tease her about the crush she'd had on him.

And Steph? How would she feel?

Steph had been from Vault 31. Had her best friend lied to her the whole time they'd known each other?

The woman in the front room of the building that had once been a church and was now a hotel glanced up at them when they walked through the front doors. She was short, with dark hair in tight coils, a gun on a holster on her hip. She nodded to Cooper, glanced at Lucy, and then her eyes lingered on Dogmeat. "You mentioned the girl. No one said anything about a dog."

"The dog's less trouble than the girl," Cooper told her dryly, and Lucy rolled her eyes. The woman who she assumed was Mariana, laughed.

"Room 6. Here." She tossed a key that Cooper snatched out of the air. "Jack vouched for you. Don't shoot any of my guests."

"Just as long as they don't shoot me first," he agreed with a smirk.

He led her down a long hallway and past a big open room, Dogmeat sniffing everything she could get her nose on. "That's the room where the benches would have been," he told her idly, and she paused, peering into the room. It seemed to serve as a cafeteria now, with long rows of mismatched tables, and a couple of people were sitting at them and eating together.

"Do they serve food here?"

"They might."

"Did you stay at hotels a lot? Before?"

“Sometimes. When I had to film out of town.”

“What was it like?”

“Like sleeping in a different room than your own.”

Lucy huffed. The smirk in his voice told her that he was playing with her, trying to frustrate her with his short, useless answers, but she refused to be baited, so she just kept her mouth shut and her face placid when he glanced over at her. Lucy from the Vault did her best to never get frustrated with her friends or the people she worked with. She was friendly and patient and helpful and everything a person was supposed to be.

So why was it so hard to be those things with the Ghoul? It was almost how she’d felt with Norman...a familiar kind of irritation built in her with her brother sometimes when he teased her or otherwise got on her nerves, and she found it happening with Cooper too. No one could get under her skin like her little brother. And possibly Cooper Howard. But she was finding she didn’t mind it so much with him.

Room 6 had a tile floor and a single window, the off-white curtains pulled back to show a view of the courtyard behind the church. There were a couple of flower bushes and a stone bench that had been chipped along the edges, the legs carved into the shape of lions. The faces were worn away, but she could see their manes, and the tails curved around their legs. Inside the room was a single bed with tables on either side, and two armchairs facing each other in the corner with a coffee table between them. A door off to the side led to what Lucy assumed was an indoor bathroom, which would be a nice change.

“Of course there’s only one goddamned bed,” she heard the Ghoul mutter, dropping his bag onto the rickety wooden table beside the double bed and hers onto the quilt. “It’s like I’m trapped in a fucking dimestore novel.”

Lucy wasn’t sure what exactly a dimestore novel was and decided not to ask, just perching on the other side of the bed and then dropping back onto the pillows while Dogmeat headed for one of the chairs in the corner, hopping up and curling into a ball to take a nap. It was so nice to lay down...so nice to rest her head on a pillow, a soft quilt under her hands, and not have to worry about radroaches or feral dogs or raiders showing up at their camp. She inhaled deeply, smiling. “Can you still smell?” she wondered, asking before thinking it through, then tensing a little and opening one eye just a little. That was personal. And possibly rude.

Cooper didn’t seem to take offense though, just pulled his leather coat off and hung it on a hook by the door. “Some. Not much.”

“It smells like lemons,” she told him, closing her eyes again. “I think they use lemons in their cleaning supplies. We had this cleaner down in the Vault, and you could get it in an orange scent or lemon. I always liked the lemon best.”

He grunted. The ‘I’m listening’ one.

“The quilt is clean...they must hang them out to dry. We always used dryers. But they smell like fresh air. And soap.” She took a deep breath and blurted out, “Did you ever know

anyone named Stephanie Harper?"

He was quiet, and when she opened her eyes again, he was staring down at the floor, brow furrowed in thought. Finally, he shook his head. "Name doesn't ring a bell, but maybe. Why?"

Lucy lay back on the pillow, knowing she needed to take her boots off and maybe clean her clothes but not wanting to move just yet. "She's my best friend," she told the ceiling. "We've been friends for years...she's from Vault 31. Like my dad."

Another grunt. Interested. Understanding.

"If my dad is from before the war, and he's from Vault 31...and we've never gone into 31...no one has ever moved there. Sometimes someone moves to 32. But people from 31 only ever came to our Vaults. Do you think...do you think they're all from before the war? And they've just been...kept alive? Somehow?"

"Maybe," he murmured.

"Do you think your family could be in there?"

He was silent, but she knew he was thinking she might be right. Maybe he'd already figured that out. Maybe that was why he wanted her with him...her PipBoy. It could get them back into the Vault. Maybe she was just his ticket to finding his family.

She realized she didn't mind. If he needed to get into Vault 31 to find his family, she'd get him in.

The knock on the door startled both of them enough that Cooper's hand shot to his hip, resting on the holster there, and Dogmeat's head snapped up but when he answered it, it was Mariana, two buckets in hand, a young man behind her with two more buckets. "Elliot said you needed a bath," she told them frankly, and Lucy wasn't sure which one of them she was talking to, but she certainly wasn't wrong either way. They carried the buckets through a door off to the side, and Lucy heard water splash into what she assumed was a tub, then they left them alone again, and Cooper locked the door behind them.

"You first, Vaultie."

"Are you sure?"

"Just don't get the stitches wet."

Reluctantly, she sat up, watching as he started to pull the belts full of ammo off his shoulder and place them on the coffee table, then went into the bathroom and shut the door behind her.

The bathroom was almost as nice as the one she'd had in her apartment in the Vault...well, after traveling so long, maybe it just felt that way. There were folded towels on the countertop, and two robes hung from hooks on the wall. The bathtub was huge, and although the four buckets of water hadn't even filled it halfway, she still wanted to lay down in it and

soak until her skin wrinkled. Maybe if they stayed another day. For now, she would do the best she could with a washcloth.

Lucy couldn't believe how much she'd missed hot water...how had she ever taken it for granted? Now if only she could experience a hot shower again. Dismissing that thought and vowing to be grateful for what she got, she dunked her hair in the water, scrubbing her scalp with soap and rinsing it, not caring that it made her side ache, then wrapped her hair in a towel, which felt like an insane luxury. Then she cleaned the rest of her, starting with her face and ending with her toes, scrubbing until she felt like she'd finally rid herself of the layer of dirt on her skin. They'd cleaned her up at the clinic, but she still wished she could soak in that tub. Instead, she stood up and used a cup to rinse herself off, then used another towel to dry off.

The robe she wrapped herself in wasn't as soft as the one she'd had at home, or the one from Vault 4, but it was still so nice she wanted to melt into it. A robe, a bath, and a real bed...it all felt so luxurious when just two months ago, it would have felt like the most normal thing in the world. It didn't feel real...two months ago, she'd been excited for her wedding day. She'd been hoping to meet Steph's baby soon, and to have her own, hopefully within the year, so she could help repopulate the world.

Now she was traveling across the wastes with a dog and a ghoul who was quickly becoming her friend and who also planned on killing her father.

Said ghoul was sitting in the second armchair when she stepped out of the bathroom, boots up on the chair Dogmeat had claimed, his guns and ammo and inhaler all laid out on the coffee table. He glanced up when she entered the room, then turned back to the sleeping dog.

"Water's still hot," she told him, sitting down on her side of the bed, bare feet cold on the tile. The salve the doctor had used on her had almost healed her blisters so walking wasn't as painful, and she planned on getting more before they left again. "I can wash my clothes after you're finished." She stretched out on the bed, head nestled in the soft pillow. "Do you think we can keep this pillow?" she wondered, eyes closed.

"That's not really how hotels work, Vaultie."

"Hm...do you think I could steal this pillow?"

She smiled when he chuckled, something cracking as he stood and made his way to the bathroom. "Only if you want to get us banned."

"There are other hotels, right?"

"That there are."

She fell asleep in her robe, Dogmeat jumping up on the bed beside her and stretching out, her paws pressed against Lucy's uninjured side as they napped. It wasn't until a foot kicked the bed that she jolted awake, looking around and finding Cooper standing over her, dressed in

the other robe, skin cleaner than she'd ever seen it. "You're wearing a robe," she murmured, wiping a hand over her face. His eyes narrowed.

"So are you, Vaultie, in case you forgot."

"I thought you only wore the..." she waved a hand at him and he snorted.

"Darlin, this ain't a Vault. People do occasionally wash their clothes in the wasteland, and sometimes, we even wear different things."

That made sense. Her brain felt hazy from all the sleep...she hadn't rested this much since she'd been in the Vault. Her Vault. She hadn't felt safe enough since that first night with her capfire when she'd met the doctor. And even in the Vault there had been wedding preparations and her job and family book club and helping with communal chores and...

"All I have is the Vault suit," she admitted. "I've never worn anything else."

"Well, I suppose we can fix that. We ought to have plenty of caps when I finish up this next job."

We. like she was included. Like he would share what he had with her. Lucy scooted up in the bed, leaning against the pillow. "But you're not leaving yet, right?" She would be okay without him, of course. She'd spent most of her time on the surface without him. But she also knew that she might just miss him when he was gone.

"Not just yet." He sat on the other side of the bed, Dogmeat grumbling and trying to find a new comfortable spot, then hopped down and climbed back up on the chair instead. "So," he said after a moment, leaning his head back against the wall and glancing over at her, "what exactly did you do all day in that Vault of yours? Besides cousin stuff, of course."

Lucy rolled her eyes. "I taught American history. I went on walks with Steph. I was on the riflery team, and I was a member of the Young Pipefitter's Association."

He snorted. "What the hell is that?"

"We learned how to maintain things like the water purification systems. It's like a maintenance team. We taught the children too. And I was on the gymnastics team, in the fencing club, and I did intermediate phys ed," she listed her activities on her fingers, thought about throwing 'practicing sex with Chet' in, then decided he'd had enough fun at her expense over that for the moment. "I liked gardening. Reading. Watching movies." She gestured to him for that last one. She wasn't going to ask...didn't want to pry. But then he surprised her.

"You ever see The Man from Deadhorse?"

Lucy's head turned so fast her neck cracked. "Yes...it was my dad's favorite. That's what the line was from, right? The one you said...the Mexican eulogy."

He nodded. "That was one of the last big movies I made before everything went to shit. Jorge was the name of the guy that played Joey Toro."

“The villain? The one you shot at the end?”

He nodded, staring at the wall for a long time. She waited, hands clasped in her lap. “Yeah. He was a good guy. I tried to get the director to change the ending. Didn’t want to shoot him.”

“Really?” Lucy couldn’t keep the incredulity out of her voice.

He huffed, smiling a little. “Really. Didn’t think it fit with the character. But one of the script guys I’d been working with got fired. They said he was a communist. That’s who everyone was on the lookout for back then. If the higher ups got wind that you were even suspected of being a communist, you’d lose your job. So the new guy...guess he wanted to send a message. Put in that last line.”

"Were you a communist?"

"People thought I was by the end. I'd associated with too many for their taste. Even went to a meeting once or twice, just to see what they were saying. Lots of them were against Vault Tec."

“Was that why The Man from Deadhorse was one of the last movies you made?” she wondered, voice soft, hoping he didn’t take it as prying.

“Lots of actors were starting to sell products at that point. Moving to commercials and ads. Me included. A friend of mine, Sebastian...we called him Seabass, he sold the rights to his voice to General Atomics for that robot everybody had. Mr. Handy.”

Lucy shuddered and he seemed to notice.

“You know, now that I think about it, I seem to recall one of those Mr. Handys at the Super Duper Mart. Wasn’t in too good a shape when I found it.”

They didn’t talk about him selling her for caps...it wasn’t something Lucy wanted to remember. Besides, now that she was starting to consider him a friend, it hurt even more than it had then, even if she understood why he’d done it. So she just nodded, focusing on her hands in her lap. Beside them in her chair, Dogmeat’s breathing had evened out as she drifted into sleep, paws twitching.

“He was a nice guy. Seabass. Ladies man, through and through. My wife...”. He hesitated. Then, “Ex-wife, she threw a big Vault Tec party there towards the end. Seabass was the only one I invited that showed up.”

Ex-wife? Not that it mattered, of course. But was it too personal to ask? Where was the line? Lucy decided to take a chance. “You mean...you aren’t still married?”

“Nope.” He glanced over, regarding her for a moment. Then, “She asked me to do her a favor...be in some commercials for Vault Tec. And...I did it. I was their poster boy for a while. Lost a lot of jobs because of it. Lots of other actors wouldn’t work with me anymore. Then I found out who they were and the shit she was capable of...” He shook his head.

“The marriage didn’t last long after that. She moved up in the company...there was a movement against Vault Tec but it didn’t get anywhere. And I ended up doing fucking birthday party acts for kids to pay the alimony.” He laughed a little to himself, not sounding all that amused.

Hesitantly, she placed a hand on his. He wasn’t wearing his gloves, which was rare, and his skin felt rough under her own, but not in a bad way. She wanted to tell him she was sorry, but she doubted he’d take pity well, even if pity wasn’t the right word for how she felt. Vault Tec had taken so much from him...his whole life. Just like her. He went still beside her at the contact, like he was holding his breath, and when she glanced up at him, he was staring fixedly at the wall. Lucy dropped her eyes back down to his hand...the dirt from his skin had all been washed away, and...

And his index finger...it was different than the rest of his hand.

It...

Lucy gasped, grabbing his wrist without thinking and bringing it up to her face for a closer look. He jerked his head around to stare at her, and from the corner of her eye she saw his face crease in confusion, but then he smirked and her blood felt like it was going to boil over. “You,” she hissed, staring down at his finger...at *her* finger. “You!” she repeated, starting to spin around to face him but the pain in her side was immediate and nearly made her drop back down onto the pillow, a whine escaping through her clenched teeth.

Without a word, he grabbed her shoulder with his other hand, bracing her as she caught her breath. For a moment, they were both quiet, and when she opened her eyes, she saw the concern there. But she wasn’t done with this.

“You,” she whispered again through clenched teeth.

“Yes?” he asked, that stupid, charming smirk back on his face.

“That is *mine* . You stole it!”

“What, pray tell, is yours?”

“That. Is. My. Finger,” she hissed, holding up his wrist. He let her, looking so lazily amused that, had he been her brother and had she been younger, she would have shoved him off the bed. But this was the Ghoul and she knew he cared about her at least a little, but she wasn’t sure she wanted to go that far. He might just shoot her on instinct. Still, she shook his wrist like she’d seen Dogmeat shake a radroach. “You stole my finger!”

“If I recall correctly, we had an honest exchange.”

“That is not honest! You cut my finger off! And took it!”

“I seem to remember you biting mine off first.”

“Because you were holding me captive!” she exploded, not caring who heard them or that yelling hurt. It was too much...she didn’t know how to reconcile the man who’d done those

things and the one who'd carried her through the desert, giving her water from his canteen and taking on debt to save her life. "I was trying to get away!"

"Sorry, darlin'," he told her simply. "Them's wasteland rules."

"I hate wasteland rules," she cried, shaking her head and clenching her jaw so her eyes didn't fill with tears. It wasn't fair. None of this was fair and none of it made sense! Her voice dropped to a whisper then. "I...sometimes, I hate it up here."

The smirk dropped, and for a moment, he looked almost sympathetic.

"But I can't go back."

"No...I suppose you're too good for that." The words surprised her. Too good. He wasn't being sarcastic...his gaze was sincere as he looked at her, eyes lingering on her finger...the one that was a little darker than the rest. "A whole lot of people signed up to go into those Vaults. They paid whatever they had to to keep themselves and their families safe, knowing full well that there'd be people left to die if those bombs dropped. Vault Tec's the worst, don't get me wrong, but there were plenty of people who were just fine living the rest of their lives in a cushy Vault underground while their neighbors burned. But you're not like that."

"You didn't do that."

"No. I didn't."

"But you could have. You had the money."

"I did," he allowed with a nod.

Lucy swallowed hard. "So you were good too."

"Not many people would agree with you there, Vaultie."

"I don't care. I think you're good. Mostly." It was true. She hated that it was true...didn't understand it. He'd done horrible things to her and he'd been kind to her and he was a ruthless bounty hunter and he was a man who'd refused to save himself and let everyone else die. She didn't know how all of those things could be true...how one person could be so contradictory. But he was.

Cooper hummed, the corner of his mouth twitching a little as he regarded her.

"I'm still mad about my finger though," she told him softly, her remaining fingers and the imposter still wrapped around his wrist. "And about you selling me. That was horrible, even if you did need caps. I would have helped you replace the vials I broke...I didn't mean to break them. If you'd just told me they were important I would have helped you get the money."

"You know what, Vaultie? I think you really would have," he told her with no small amount of amusement. "Even if you'd had to fuck someone to get them."

She sighed. "People on the surface are so strange about sex."

"Sweetheart, I think you'll find that you're the strange one in this particular case."

Lucy squeezed his wrist. "Will you promise me that you won't do it again?" she asked in a near whisper, unable to meet his eyes when she felt so vulnerable. It was silly, she thought, because he currently needed caps and hadn't yet turned her over to organ harvesters, and he really could have because she couldn't even fight back right now. But she needed to hear him say it. Even if she understood and even if she knew that wasteland rules were different. She needed to know for sure that this partnership was real.

Cooper pulled his wrist out of her grasp and held out his hand for a handshake. She took it without hesitation, her right hand in his, their fingers which weren't theirs pressed against one another, and she finally met his eyes again. He looked solemn and maybe a little sad when he squeezed her hand, shaking it up and down. "I won't do it again, Lucy. I promise."

Chapter 10

For lunch, the two of them ate jerky and cherry tomatoes in their room, and Lucy counted out her meager supply of caps as the two of them sat in the chairs across from one another, still in their robes. It didn't take long, as emptying out her pack entirely revealed that she only had three. He chuckled when she dropped them on the table between them, popping a tomato in his mouth and going back to cleaning his guns. "I doubt even raiders would be interested in that, Vaultie."

"I know," she sighed, pulling out her gun and removing the clip. "Do you think they need anything repaired? I'm good at fixing things. I was a pipefitter!"

"Definitely put that on your resume."

"On my what?"

He huffed, running a cloth through the barrel of his gun. She'd thought that was what he was doing when she was in the bathroom, but guessed he knew how to take care of his own weapons. She grabbed another cloth sitting on the table, glancing at him to make sure it was okay, but other than lifting brow a little, he didn't react. The pistol was a little different than the rifles she was used to, but she'd quickly figured out how to take it apart and clean every piece.

She felt his eyes following her but didn't look up until she'd put everything back together, installing the clip and clicking the safety on.

"Huh..."

"What?"

He just shook his head. "Not bad, Vaultie."

"I told you I was on the riflery team. Taking proper care of your weapon is very important."

"Maybe you should be carrying a rifle."

Lucy glanced down at the pistol. "Maybe. I found this one at the Super Duper Mart."

"Well maybe you can do some pipe fitting and buy one." He grinned when she rolled her eyes. "There's usually a board up in settlements like these...bounties and jobs that need doing. We can check it out. Maybe you can make some extra caps while I'm gone."

That, at least, was promising.

With her stomach mostly full and her gun clean, Lucy went to the bathroom and scrubbed her clothes as best she could with her precious soap. She needed another set of underclothes at least, but every time she got caps, other things always took precedence. Water, mostly.

Ammo. Vegetables. Her vault suit was designed to be comfortable for all day wear, and her underclothes were standard issue in the Vault, breathable and perfectly fitted...although she was pretty sure she'd lost some weight in the last month, and her body felt different as her muscles strengthened, so nothing fit quite the same as before.

Lucy grimaced as she pushed herself to her feet, gripping the edge of the tub for support and then draping her clothes around it so they dripped mostly into the tub. Cooper had had no such consideration, and his clothes hung from the hooks their robes had hung from, dripping mostly clean water onto the floor. She was just thinking about how much she missed her dryer in her apartment when she stepped out into the main room where, after a quick glance around, Cooper was nowhere to be found. His shotgun was propped up in the corner by what she'd started to think of as 'his side' of the bed, alongside his pack, but his pistol was gone, along with the three caps she'd left on the table. Scowling a little, she grabbed one of the pills the doctor had sent with her, swallowing it with a splash of water from her canteen. They weren't as strong as MedX, but they still helped with the pain.

Dogmeat was gnawing on some jerky in the corner, tail wagging, so, figuring he'd be back sooner or later, Lucy strapped her PipBoy on and fiddled with the radio until she found a station playing what sounded like bad recordings of classical music and closed her eyes, laying back against her new favorite pillow. It was the first time she'd been alone in a while. She was used to his constant presence, never more than a few feet away, and even in the Vault, she'd rarely been alone. With her eyes closed she could just imagine that she was in her own room, laying back and listening to music after a long day of teaching. Maybe she'd had riflery practice after work, or maybe she'd gone for a walk with Steph, the two of them speculating about the man Lucy would someday marry, and the children they'd raise together.

Briefly, she wondered what Steph would make of the Ghoul and smiled a little.

Or maybe Chet would have just left, leaving her comfortable and tired after an orgasm she'd had to do most of the work for. She hadn't been lying to Cooper when she'd told him that Chet was pretty good, but there was something about him...something in the way he loved her and wanted her to love him...it made him harder and harder to practice with as the years passed. He knew that their relationship could never be anything more than it was, but he still stared after her with puppy dog eyes and sulked when she couldn't spend time with him. Still, it was always nice to feel that release, his weight on top of her, her whole body going boneless after, and just the thought made her hand drift to where her robe was layered over itself in the front.

She pulled her hand back quickly, shaking her head at herself. She was sharing this bed, and Cooper could come back at any second, and it wasn't appropriate to masturbate when the party sharing a bed with you could walk in and didn't consent to it. It had been a while...since Monty, which had been fun but rushed. Then again, she'd had other things on her mind...hadn't stopped for long enough or felt safe enough until Max had turned her down in Vault 4. Maybe later, she thought. She could go to the bathroom. Close the door. Bite down on the robe to keep quiet...sharing an apartment with her father and brother had ensured she was good at keeping quiet...

The door opened and she jumped, clenching her thighs together as she sat up, snapping her radio off, but it was just Cooper, still in his robe, two cloth sacks in hand.

“You know,” he told her without preamble, shutting the door behind him. “Back in my day, hotels used to have a thing called a ‘concierge.’” His accent stretched the strange word, and she searched her memory for it, coming up empty.

“Oh? What was that?”

He placed a bag on the bed in front of her. “They mostly just helped with restaurant reservations. The best restaurants made you sign up in advance just to come in. They could recommend things for you to do if you weren’t from the city. But in the most expensive hotels, you could ask them for just about anything.”

Lucy reached for the bag, peering inside, and her eyes widened. “Are these...?”

“Some new clothes,” he agreed, looking kind of smug as he took a seat beside her on the bed.

“Is that why you stole my caps?”

He chuckled. “That was just for the tip, sweetheart. They’re not actually new, but they’re clean, and they’re better than these robes while our clothes dry.”

Lucy hopped up, glad for the medicine she’d just taken as she hurried to the bathroom to change. The robes were comfortable, but she preferred something a little more substantial. The clothes turned out to be a pair of long pants made out of soft, worn gray cloth, a comfortably loose white top whose long sleeves would protect her from the sun, and underwear that fit surprisingly well.

“How did you afford these?” she asked once she was changed, finding Cooper lounging on the bed in blue denim pants and a white undershirt covered by a blue button up that had a faint bloodstain along the side.

“Just added it to our tab. Marina has an assistant, and I asked him to find us the cheapest clothes he could get. If the doctor was right about that raider base, I’m about to have plenty of caps.”

“And if he’s not?”

“Then I’ll take another bounty,” he told her carelessly, watching as she took a seat on the bed beside him. “And maybe find you some pipes to fix.”

He was grinning, the sight making her chest ache pleasantly for reasons she still didn’t quite understand. Still, she took a seat on the bed beside him, head resting against the wall as she smiled at him. “Thank you. I love them. I’ll pay you back as soon as I can.”

He turned, their gazes locking, and it felt like he must be able to see her chest aching through her eyes...must be able to see the strange happiness radiating off of her. They were resting and he’d bought her clothes and he’d actually opened up some to her, telling her stories about

his past and...and he'd carried her here! He'd backtracked, losing progress towards finding her father, all because she'd needed him to.

And the things he'd said to her while she'd been sick...

It felt like one second, Cooper was leaning towards her, shoulders shifting forward in a way that made her heart flutter oddly...and then she blinked and he was on his feet, moving towards the door, gun holster resting on his thigh once more. "Might as well check that job board," he called over his shoulder, whistling. "Come on, Dogmeat. You stay, Vaultie. I'll see if they need any pipefitters."

Jaw dropping, Lucy watched him go, Dogmeat trotting along after him as he closed the door behind him.

Hadn't...hadn't they just been having a conversation?

"You're so strange," Lucy whispered, shaking her head at the door. But, for some reason, that ache between her thighs was still there, and with a sigh, she got up and went into the bathroom, shutting the door behind her. Throwing the robe down onto a dry spot, she sat with her back against the door and slipped her hand into the front of her pants, taking a deep, shuddering breath the second her fingers made contact.

Touching one's self had been a topic of their sexual health class in the Vault, which she'd taken at the age of eleven or twelve with all the other students in her class. Discussions of sex had been frank and instructive, and she'd learned to give herself pleasure through masturbation the same way she'd learned to take care of hunger by eating and thirst by drinking and boredom by participating in group activities or reading or taking in media. Later, when she and Chet had been watching a movie alone in her apartment at 16 and his hand had landed hesitantly on her thigh, that had felt like a natural progression. They'd practiced with one another, always using protection, and she'd enjoyed the pleasure it always brought without ever feeling anything but fondness for her cousin.

So when she touched herself on the bathroom floor of a hotel that used to be a church, she didn't think of Chet, or the way he'd touched her, all clumsy and eager and hopeful. She tried to think about Max...how sweet their kiss had been, and how hopeful she'd felt when she'd asked if he wanted to have sex. He sort of reminded her of Chet, if she thought about it. Sweet and eager...the right choice. The kind of man she had hoped for when she'd applied for a marriage. A man who would treat her kindly and get her pregnant and be a good father to their children. He would pick out Christmas presents their children would love at the holiday swap and he would play with them while she made cookies in the apartment that was only theirs. He would kiss her before they left for work and hold her hand while they walked down the hallway. Over time, the two of them would fall in love. They would have enjoyable sex and she and Steph would trade stories while they watched their children play together. And maybe their children might get married and fall in love and help repopulate the surface.

Those were the things she had wanted.

Those were the things she couldn't want anymore.

Max wanted safety and stability. He was a good person. And she knew that if the two of them had met before, or if they'd gone back to her Vault before she'd ever learned the truth about her father, then they could have had a happy life together.

But she knew the truth. She knew what Vault Tec had done...what her father had done. And she couldn't go back. Not ever. The surface was horrible and cruel and confusing at times, but it was real. It was humanity. It was the future. And she didn't want to live in sterile safety and have children. She wanted to help Cooper Howard take Vault Tec down, starting with her father. Her whole life had been lived by a list of rules that she'd relished following. They'd given her life order...taught her to interact correctly with others. But this was the wasteland and there were different rules here. And while she didn't like all of them, the freedom that came along with it was almost intoxicating.

That's where her mind went as her body tightened, tension making her stomach ache. Terrible, wonderful freedom and a man who wrapped an arm around her in the desert, his strong chest the perfect pillow. A charming smirk and rough hands with a mismatched finger. A deep voice in a strong accent calling her 'sweetheart'. What those smirking lips would feel like...taste like.

She bit down on the fabric of the robe, head thrown back as she moaned, the tension inside of her exploding, hips jerking and inner walls contracting until she was spent, her body dropping gracelessly onto the floor, hand slipping out of her pants and resting against the cold tile floor. Lips curving up into a satisfied smile, Lucy closed her eyes and focused on her breathing...

Then her eyes shot open.

Had she just fantasized about Cooper while masturbating?

No...well...maybe. But...only because he'd been kind. That's what she told herself with a firm nod, wiping her hand over her face. He was her traveling companion and he'd become closer and closer to a friend. She cared about him. She was fond of him. And...yes, he was attractive, but that wasn't relevant. They'd been traveling together for...she thought back and counted. Nine days. Over a week of somewhat friendly companionship and she'd missed companionship and he was right there and so when she'd been reaching for material while trying to give herself pleasure, her brain had simply plugged him in. Just like she used to think of movie stars like...

Well, that wasn't important.

Lucy dismissed the thoughts, literally shaking them away as she threw her robe over the back of the bathroom door, then reorganized her pack, pulling out the remaining vegetables and counting her ammo, making sure her extra clip was full and in reach. She ran a cloth over her hunting knife, even though it was already clean. She took a drink from her canteen and thought about seeing if she could afford a drink but then remembered that she'd been robbed. She lined up her bottles of purified water and placed them along the bottom of her pack for safe keeping. The extra clip for her pistol went into a side pocket. The vegetables stayed on the table for snacking, a cherry tomato popped into her mouth as she paced.

She grabbed one of the paperback books she'd looted, careful with the delicate pages as she carried it to one of the armchairs and kicked her bare feet up on the table. She was supposed to be resting, after all. Reading was very restful. So she opened to the first page and followed the story of a woman who lived in the prewar times, out on a ranch all by herself after her husband died. Only then did she feel settled, racing mind calming some, and she even thought about sharing the book with Cooper since he'd been a cowboy...or, he'd played on on TV at least. Maybe he would like to talk about life on a ranch during a time before he'd been born. Then she got to chapter three, and the handsome widower from the ranch next door showed up, and Lucy shut the book with a thump, not caring if she damaged the binding.

The other thick paperback she'd grabbed was by Dickens, so at least she knew that one would be safe.

Cooper didn't come back for a full two hours according to her PipBoy. She'd once again turned on the scratchy classical music station and was trying to lose herself in Great Expectations when he stepped through their door with Dogmeat, his vacant, mostly pleasant expression telling her that he'd either been drinking or taking some kind of chems...or both. Which was fine. She'd been fine on her own. She didn't need to be with him all the time and they could both do their own thing and just because her mind had randomly wandered to him while...

It didn't matter.

"Seems you learned 'stay' at least."

"I'm still not a dog. Find any jobs?"

"Couple of things looked promising. A few things need fixing around here. You could probably do it. You can take a look tomorrow when I'm gone."

"Oh...you're leaving tomorrow?" she asked, feeling another odd pang in her chest.

"Bright and early," he told her, sitting on the other chair.

When she looked up from her book, he was watching her, pleasantly vacant expression replaced with something else. She smiled reflexively, and he got up and grabbed his cleaning kit from his pack, then started to take his rifle apart for what she thought might be the third time that day. Figuring he was just no good at sitting still for this long, Lucy went back to her book.

Lucy didn't dream about Cooper that night like she'd feared she would with the two of them sharing a bed. The last thing she wanted to do was make him uncomfortable if she let something slip while asleep, especially since her body had been acting so strangely. As it was, he waited until she was curled up on that wonderful pillow, eyes heavy and struggling to stay open, to climb into the bed beside her, staying stiffly on his own side. And that was fine. When he'd held her before, Lucy knew it had only been to keep her warm, but they were inside tonight, so there was no need for that.

Instead, she dreamed about her father...about a long, twisting road to find him. She dreamed about a gun in her hand and her mother sitting in front of her, only her mother wasn't a ghoul...she was her mother just as she remembered her from that field, her smile sad and resigned as Lucy's finger rested on the trigger. She dreamed she was in the Vault, and Max was holding their daughter on his lap, and she knew she should be happy but something was wrong. She shouldn't be here. She was trapped...the room was too small and she couldn't find the door and even if she did she'd have to find another door and another one until she could escape.

She woke with a jolt, her frightened, still mostly asleep brain making her roll over, seeking out a source of heat and comfort, wiggling close until her head was back on his chest and his arm was around her. There, her brain decided, all rational parts still asleep apparently. This was safe. There would be no more bad dreams of being trapped here.

"Thought you loved that pillow, Vaultie," her new pillow murmured, sounding groggy and put out.

"Shh," she reprimanded. She could fall asleep again so easily. She *would* fall asleep again, and forget all about her dreams.

"Is this going to become a habit?" he asked dryly.

"Bad dreams." If he understood, maybe he'd shut up and let her sleep.

He huffed. "About me?"

She was so close to falling back to sleep! Frustrated, she brought her hand up and clumsily covered his mouth, fingers brushing against his cheek. "Shh," she urged, barely registering how he stiffened, breath catching, lips parting just a little under her hand. Then his warm chest expanded with a sigh and his hand came to rest lightly on her back and she smiled in victory, wiggling one more time to get comfortable before falling back into sleep.

She didn't wake again until Cooper shifted under her, like he was going to get up. Instinctively, her fingers tightened around his shirt and she shook her head, conscious brain still catching up to the rest of her. "No. Why?"

"You know, I don't recall signing up to be your personal pillow." The low rumble of his voice made her smile, eyes closing again. It wasn't even light out. And despite his words, his hand still rested on her back.

"It's an honest exchange."

Lucy felt his chuckle through her chest and her smile widened. She waited for him to ask exactly what the exchange was...what he was getting out of this, but to her surprise, he just tightened his arm around her, and she thought maybe Cooper Howard had missed holding someone as much as she enjoyed being held.

But then he sighed again, and when she glanced up at him, his jaw was tight, eyes trained on the ceiling, and then his hand was lifting off of her back. "I'd better get going. You'll have

to make due with the real pillow,” he told her simply, and she sat up, his tone making her feel fully awake for the first time. She didn’t want to push him...didn’t want to make him uncomfortable. Consent was important and she hadn’t asked for his.

“Right. Sorry.” Smiling sheepishly down at the blankets, she scooted back to her own side of the bed. “I had nightmares and...I...sorry. I didn’t mean to crowd you.”

He didn’t answer...just got up and headed to the bathroom, and she tried not to take it for rejection. That was just how he was. And she wasn’t offering anything! Just...friendship. Kind of. Friendly companionship. Civility. Companions traveled together and talked and...and kept each other warm sometimes. That was normal. She was just feeling a little restless after being in one spot for a whole day and she needed some fresh air.

Never mind that she’d lived most of her 26 years without fresh air.

She pulled the curtains back while he was gone, the sunrise bathing their room in soft light. When Cooper came out of the bathroom, he was dressed in the clothes she’d met him in, only they were clean. She could just make out an embroidered scorpion on his vest before he pulled the long leather jacket back on, throwing his pack over his shoulder and slinging his long shotgun over his back. Dogmeat hopped down from the chair she’d been sleeping in, glancing from him to Lucy, but he shook his head.

“You stay with her,” he told the dog, not unkindly, as he scratched her ears. Then to Lucy, “And you stay in this settlement. Understood?”

She crossed her arms. “I could help you.”

“You could also get shot again, and I’m not putting any more doctor visits on my tab.” He smirked when huffed. Then to Dogmeat, “Watch her. Make sure she stays?”

“How long will you be gone?”

“Should be back before dinner. It ain’t too far, and a couple of raiders shouldn’t take long to kill.” He wasn’t quiet meeting her eyes as he spoke, giving Dogmeat one last pat.

“What if you aren’t?”

“Well then sweetheart, you’ll have to put those pipefitting skills to good use.”

She knew he was joking. She knew he would be fine. This was Cooper Howard. The Ghoul. He’d spent over 200 years surviving out here, and there wasn’t a reason to think he wouldn’t survive 200 more. But it wasn’t the thought of her ability to survive on her own that made her whole heart clench in a pain so overwhelming and strange that she reached out, grabbing his arm before he could go.

“Cooper?”

He glanced in her direction, brow raised.

“Just...be careful? Please?”

That's when he finally met her gaze for the first time that morning, their eyes locking in the dim light, and he gave her a brief nod, lips turning up just a little. "I'll be back tonight, Vaultie."

And then she was alone again.

Chapter 11

Lucy wasted no time sitting around and thinking after he left. If there was one thing she knew how to do, it was to keep moving. There were always jobs to be done in the Vault, and Lucy excelled at finding them. So she changed into her Vault suit, made the bed, leaving her new clothes folded on her pillow. Pulling the plug on the bathtub, she let the old water drain through the grate in the floor. Then she holstered her gun and threw the strap of her canteen over her shoulder, leaving the pack and locking the door with the key Cooper had left on his nightstand. Her stomach felt better but she still took a pill from the stash the doctor had given her, wanting to get ahead of any pain. She was well rested and healthy and ready to earn her keep.

The wall for bounties was in Jack's bar, but Cooper had mentioned a job board with things she could do, so she went to the front desk where she found Mariana who pointed her towards a wall covered in papers, a doubtful look on her face. Lucy ignored that and scanned the available jobs. Some she couldn't do. A few she could. She took the first paper...a repair job on the water purifier. That killed three hours and earned her fifty caps. A fortune.

The second was for a busted turret. Two hours later, she had another twenty three caps.

Help in the communal garden. Ten caps and a lunch of vegetable soup, plus some extra for Dogmeat. She swallowed another pill when all of the crouching made her stomach ache.

Mariana watched her come and go, grabbing pieces of paper and then coming back for another, looking reluctantly impressed. But Lucy didn't ask how much their tab was and she didn't ask if Cooper had returned. She knew he hadn't. It wasn't dinner time yet. He would have come and find her. She had the key. She would not think about him traveling on his own or being ambushed by raiders or a life where she never saw him again. She just wouldn't.

Instead, she worked, and while she worked, she daydreamed. She could imagine living this way...finding a settlement and a home and making a life for herself on the surface. Rebuilding the world without repopulating it. Surely they needed teachers for the children who ran through the streets, kicking a ball or playing tag or, in the case of one brave little girl, approaching Dogmeat with a hand outstretched. The second the dog licked her, a horde of children seemed to appear from nowhere, and Dogmeat flopped over, tail wagging as she soaked up the attention.

This could be her life. She could go back for Norman and bring him out into the world. They could live in a settlement and he was so smart, he could find a job easily, and together they could be happy.

She pointedly didn't think about Steph, though. Steph who she loved and Steph who was from Vault 31.

For some reason, Cooper was always right there with her in those daydreams. Lucy chose not to examine that. Maybe he'd visit when he passed by. Maybe they could be friends even

after he inevitably left. Maybe he'd help her find a safe place to live first...a good settlement where she could make friends and contribute, close to wherever it was he lived so he could stop by sometimes. And that would be enough.

More work, more caps, more daydreams.

A rifle repaired at a discount rate. A man who had lost his right hand had clothes that needed mending. He chatted with her as she worked, telling her all about his husband who she'd met earlier in the fields who could make anything grow but who couldn't sew a straight line to save his life. A bloatfly infestation right outside the wall where they wanted to plant more crops that earned her a handful of caps and cost her a whole clip. An hour of guard duty and answering questions about living in a Vault when the other guards got bored.

By the end of the day, she had just under 120 caps, more than she'd ever had before, and no desire to spend them. It was nearing seven, according to her PipBoy, when she walked back into the hotel with Dogmeat, and Mariana was still at the desk. Lucy didn't look her in the eye, just nodded in her general direction. She couldn't bring herself to hope until she unlocked their room and..

And found it empty.

She took a pill and drank some water, pouring some into a spare bowl for Dogmeat. The dog had gorged herself on bloatflies earlier, so she couldn't be hungry. Lucy ate the rest of the cherry tomatoes and felt her heart constrict as Dogmeat curled up on the bed, huffing and closing her eyes. Mariana's knock on the door a few minutes later woke the dog...she'd brought more hot water and Lucy soaked, scrubbing her hair and her body and wishing every second that there would be a knock on the door and it would be Cooper...wishing that she'd have to call out 'just a second!' and throw a robe on and race to the door and he'd be there with his smirk and his guns and he'd drop a pile of caps on the table, looking proud and smug.

Lucy got out of the tub, checking the incision on her side, then drying off and putting her Vault suit back on. She grabbed her book, curling up in bed, her back to the wall, but she didn't even open it. Instead, she watched the door like she'd watched Cooper's movies, refusing to tear her eyes away from the screen. Beside her on the bed, Dogmeat whined.

He'd left before seven.

Then, when her PipBoy told her it was 10pm, Lucy got up, holstering her gun and locking the door behind her, Dogmeat on her heels.

It wasn't a long walk to Elliot's, and even though it was late, there were still some people out, walking the streets or spilling out of Jack's bar. Lucy ignored them, passing empty food stalls and the occasional group of older children still awake and playing in the streets. And with every step, she hoped she would run into Cooper. She hoped that he would catch her arm and demand to know what the hell she thought she was doing. She hoped that she could show him all the caps she'd made and tell him the water in the bath was probably still kind of warm. She'd buy him a drink. She'd sit at his side and bask in his warmth and take what she could get.

Of friendship.

Lucy had to bang on the front door for a full three minutes before Elliot answered, a twinge in her chest reminding her that this was rude...that visiting hours stopped at 9pm, and that people wanted to rest in the evening unless a visit had been prearranged. But this was an emergency and she would not wait until morning to get the information she needed.

The second Elliot saw her, his face dropped a little. “Lucy? Are you alright?” His eyes shot to her side where Cooper had patched her Vault suit.

“He’s not back.” She’d meant for it to come out self assured and confident and all the things Cooper was. Instead, her voice threatened to break.

His face changed. Worry. Realization. Pity. “It’s possible he was held up. Or he could have stopped for the night. Made camp.”

She knew he didn’t even believe his own words. “Where’s the base?” she demanded, gathering herself and swallowing against tears.

Elliot shook his head, eyes sad. “Lucy...”

“It’s been too long. He should have been back. Where is it?”

“Lucy, you aren’t well enough...”

“If you don’t tell me, I’ll find someone else who will.” Now she sounded self assured and confident. Now her voice was made of steel.

Elliot sighed and gestured for her arm. Holding out her PipBoy and bringing up her map display, she let him type in the coordinates. “It’s an old General Atomics store. I’ve heard travelers say they work out of the basement, but that town is crawling with them.”

Lucy nodded. “Thank you.”

“You shouldn’t go alone.”

Lucy went back to her hotel.

It was dangerous to travel at night. Even Cooper always found a place to camp out until it got light again. So she lay back on her bed and closed her eyes, Dogmeat curled up beside her in Cooper’s spot. Maybe, she thought, he would walk through the door. Maybe he would see her dressed in her Vault suit, pack ready to go, and his lips would turn up in that smirk he gave her sometimes.

“Going on a trip, Vaultie?”

“I was coming to find you,” she would tell him.

“Thought I told you to stay.”

“I’m not a dog.” And then she would reach for him, and the relief would make her eyes water and...

Lucy buried her face in Dogmeat’s flank, lip trembling as she took deep, deliberate breaths. She would not panic. She would not lose her head. She had been surviving on the surface for over a month now. She was strong and capable and even the Ghoul had been impressed with her a couple of times. She knew how to kill and eat feral dogs and bloat flies and radroaches. She knew how to make ass jerky. She could shoot and kill a raider before they killed her.

And she could save her friend.

The second the sun peeked over the horizon, Lucy was moving. She would travel light. Her pistol on her hip. A full canteen slung over her shoulder. Her knife in her boot. A few caps in her pocket, along with her room key. In the room, she poured water into her cupped hands for Dogmeat, gave her the last of the dog jerky, locked their door behind her, then set out. She felt strange as she walked through the hall in her Vault suit, gun at her hip, dog at her side, knife in her boot. Strange and cold and powerful.

Mariana was at the front desk, watching her with resignation. It seemed she’d talked to Elliot.

“If I don’t come back, there are caps on the table in our room. I left my pack too. You can sell it. It won’t be enough to cover everything, but it’ll be something.”

The woman nodded. “Be careful, Vault Dweller,” she urged solemnly.

There weren’t many people out that morning, but she felt their eyes on her as she marched determinedly out through the front gate of the settlement, glancing down at her PipBoy the second she was outside. The little green dot on her screen was only six miles away. Six miles was nothing. Six miles shouldn’t have taken Cooper more than two hours. But that didn’t matter. Because she was going to find him and finish this job and pay off their debt or she was going to die trying.

There was no one but Dogmeat to watch her back, so Lucy kept a sharp eye out as they walked, eyes scanning the horizon, the two of them marching relentlessly forward. A mile from the settlement she was forced to use one of her bullets on a mole rat that appeared from right under her feet, and Dogmeat tore into the other one. She didn’t stop to strip the meat, even if it would have lasted them a long time, just kept walking, Dogmeat hurrying after her once she’d had a few bites and had licked up the blood. She took a drink from her canteen making sure to ration it.

The town came into view at 9:30, and Dogmeat was instantly on the lookout, ears pricked forward, steps careful to match Lucy’s. She could see why the doctor had called this place a ghost town. It still looked like a prewar town she’d see in the movies, with cars on the side of the road and billboards for cleaning products and restaurants and even one for the Vaults lining the roads.

The first body she saw, obviously a raider, was behind one of those billboards. The second was slumped over beside the first. The third and fourth were on the porch of some kind of diner. And then she stopped counting. There were bodies all over the place...all raiders. Some had been shot. Some had been torn apart. So Cooper had made it, she was fairly sure of that. But something else had too...something that ripped people into pieces.

The ghost town was so absolutely silent that it made her skin crawl. No gunshots. No people talking. No animals. Just...bodies. And a turret in an alley that had been blown up, probably with Cooper's shotgun, another dead raider slumped over beside it. Her PipBoy told her she was close to the store she'd been looking for...and then she turned a corner.

The body on the ground brought her up short, heart jumping into her throat, palms instantly sweating. It was...a...a monster. Her brain had no other category for this. It was huge... bigger than anything she'd ever seen. Horns and claws and teeth...Dogmeat bared her own teeth, hackles raising, and Lucky grabbed for her, suddenly afraid that her only companion would charge it and there was no way Dogmeat could fight something like that. There was no way *she* could fight something like that! Had it gotten Cooper? Had it killed him? Was he one of the bodies in this horrible place?

Only...it wasn't moving.

She took a deliberate breath, in and out through her nose, and forced herself to take a step forward. Then another. And another. But the monster didn't move. And when she got a little closer, she could see why. There was a hole right through its head, a chunk of its face missing, dark blood pooling underneath it and dripping down the steps of the General Atomics store. She released Dogmeat who trotted over, giving the monster a cursory sniff.

Lucy scanned the area, but Cooper was nowhere to be seen. So...he'd made it inside? Had the monster belonged to the raiders? But a lot of the raiders had been torn apart, she thought, so probably not...maybe it had been attacking them too. Making her way up the stairs, she avoided the monster's corpse and the blood and walked up to the front door, hand hesitant on the handle. All along the front, the windows were boarded up, so there was no way to tell if anyone was inside. So, holding her breath, she slowly turned the knob, then stepped into the store.

Dogmeat took her cues from Lucy as the two crouched and walked inside. The shelves had all been arranged in rows facing the door, and Lucy held her gun out in front of her, careful not to let her shoes squeak against the tile floor. Beside her, Dogmeat, crouched, ears perked up, listening for trouble. She could hear voices now...they both could judging by Dogmeat's head tilt, but Lucy couldn't out any words until she'd gone past two rows of shelves, finally reaching the check out area, the remains of a cash register rusting on a countertop.

She didn't bother looking through the boxes on the shelves...she would loot whatever she could later. With Cooper. He was better at it anyway...could always seem to find things she couldn't. There was a door marked 'Employees only' and Lucy pressed her ear to it, holding her breath to hear better. Voices...but muffled, like they were far away. Pushing it open, she snuck through, then hesitated. To her right, a door labeled 'storage'. To her left, a hole in the ground with a set of stairs leading to what must have been the basement.

“Did you hear something?”

The voice behind the door made her decision for her, and Lucy hurried down the stairs, walking as lightly as possible. “Stay with me,” she whispered to Dogmeat, hurrying through the empty space to the nearest cover, a shelf that stretched almost to the ceiling stocked with refrigerators and ovens. They were all rusted and some were missing doors, but she was surprised that no one had hauled them away and sold them for scrap...at least the ones on the ground.

That thought was quickly wiped from her mind when she heard a voice, this one closer. “I’ve heard that old Dom Pedro is willing to pay a pretty stack of caps for your head, ghoul. The Brotherhood too. We could have ourselves a bidding war.”

“I heard he wasn’t such a loner anymore...heard he was traveling with a girl. And one of our scouts at the settlement down the road said a girl in a vault suit’s coming this way. That true? Find yourself a little ghoul-fucker pet?”

Lucy took another step, peering between appliances to try and get a count. Three raiders were standing in front of where she assumed Cooper was...and one of them had a minigun. Just the sight made her shudder...they might not be the most accurate, but with the spray of bullets they put out, they didn’t have to be. Holding a hand out to Dogmeat, she mouthed the word ‘stay’ and she did.

“How about we find the pet first?” the third raider suggested. “Give her to Dom Pedro too. I’m sure he’d find a use for her.”

“Well now, you can try,” Cooper told them lazily. “But I should warn you, she’s a biter.”

The aisle where the three raiders stood was filled with what she thought were old washing machines, stacked up four or five high, and someone had put a ladder at the end of the aisle. Turning to Dogmeat, she pointed at the door she’d come through. “Wait there,” she ordered, voice barely a whisper, and somehow, the dog understood, but she didn’t seem too happy about it. Carefully testing the lowest rung, Lucy took it slow, making her way up to the top where someone had laid boards in a makeshift pathway, every step making her wince in pain. She followed it on her stomach, crawling on her elbows and gritting her teeth at the pain until she could see all three of them. Overhead, the dim lights flickered...she’d have to be fast. Taking aim, she breathed in deep, then out. These people had kidnapped her companion. They were the primary aggressor. They’d shown themselves unwilling to talk things out and were threatening more violence.

Even as she thought it, she knew that wasn’t the whole story. They’d taken Cooper. She had to have him back. That was all there was to it.

“She can’t bite if we knock out all her teeth,” the man with the minigun told him with a grin. “Sides, she won’t need teeth for what I have in...”

Deep breath in. Deep breath out. And pull.

The bullet went through his left eye and he dropped. Lucy didn't take a full half second to celebrate, shifting and aiming at the second raider and pulling the trigger, this bullet going through her neck as the woman turned and took a step in her direction. Then she lay flat, holding her breath.

"What the fuck!" another voice screamed, and the sound of running footsteps announced at least two more of them. She mouthed a curse...she was fairly sure her clip only had 8 bullets left, so she really needed there to be less than 8 of them! She started to lift her head, but a spray of bullets quickly sent her flat again.

"She's up there!"

"Looks like the ghou-fucker came to us!" the last of the original three laughed. "She's up there! Top scaffolding, aisle two!"

She had to get down! The ladder was blocked! Scooting to the far edge of the wooden planks she'd been laying on, Lucy peered over the edge...clear. For now. First one leg, then two went over the edge, and she gripped the planks as her feet landed on the very edge of the shelf below. She let go, ducking behind a washing machine and peering around. There were footsteps above her, but she held herself perfectly still, trying to line up a shot...the man still guarding Cooper was scanning the room, gun drawn. There were at least three people above her. Then footsteps in the aisle behind her...five raiders. She could do this.

She had to do this.

Waiting until the raider on the ground in the aisle behind her passed, she turned and took aim, pulling the trigger once, then twice when the first went wide and lodged itself in the wall, cursing the way her hands shook. Six bullets left. Four raiders...that she knew of. But no one else had come. Maybe they were out! Maybe they were...raiding? Or maybe Cooper and that monster had killed the rest. Focus, she ordered herself, breathing in again as raiders above her stopped.

"She's not up here!"

"Come on, ghou-fucker! Come out...I promise I'll make it quick!" the man on the ground promised. "I'll show you what it's like to get fucked by a real man! Your ghou can even watch if you want!" She watched him grin down at Cooper. "What do you think about that, ghou? Want to watch me fuck your girl before she dies?"

Lucy couldn't hear Cooper's reply with the boots thundering above her, one person moving back the way they'd come, and two going forward. She edged around the oven and moved closer to the man guarding the Ghou, but she couldn't get the right angle and she wouldn't let herself waste another bullet. One more shelf down and she'd almost be at eye level, but maybe that was better...maybe she'd have a better shot then.

She started to move to the edge when a bullet ricocheted off the refrigerator she was hiding behind, and someone shouted, "There! Found her!"

“Fudge,” she hissed, ducking down, not sure how long the refrigerator would keep her safe... not long if they went around the other side.

Moving fast and using the oven for cover, she dropped to the shelf below her, feet landing just on the ledge as she clung to the side for support, then she dropped to the one below that, bullets still hitting that refrigerator until that save voice called “she’s moving! She’s almost to the ground! Get down there!”

Her ankle rolled a little when her boots hit the floor and the pain in her stomach made stars appear in her vision for a second, but she didn’t care, racing for the end of the aisle and around to a shelf that stood perpendicular to the one she’d been hiding in. The ladder was only a few feet away as she peered around a washing machine, aiming at the raider on the scaffolding and silently thanking her riflery teacher as she pulled the trigger, the bullet lodging itself in his stomach. Not a clean shot, but it would do.

“She’s behind the...” The other one was walking towards her and her next shot grazed the woman’s side, then another bullet tore through her chest. Four bullets. Two raiders. One on the floor, one on the other side of the room, maybe climbing down...she couldn’t tell and she was afraid to check. She was afraid to move...her heart was beating so loudly in her ears that she almost couldn’t hear and her hands were shaking...she was stuck. If she crossed to the other aisle, the raider not twenty feet away would surely shoot her. And if she stayed, the other might circle around to where she had no shelter. She had to move. She had to make a decision.

“I changed my mind, ghoul-fucker. I’m gonna make this real slow,” the man from before snarled.

She leaned out, taking a shot. It missed, shattering the glass pane in the refrigerator behind the man, and he fired three shots right at her, taking a step closer and grinning. She could see his too-white teeth as their eyes met for just a second, her ducking back right before she would have gotten a bullet between her eyes. She had finally managed to get a look at Cooper...his hands were tied behind his back, a bloody gash ripping the side of his shirt, but he was squirming, trying to get free, expression murderous. Maybe if she distracted them long enough...no...they’d probably taken his weapons! She couldn’t wait for him to save her! She had to save him!

Footsteps came from her other side and she turned just in time to see Dogmeat lunge at the woman who’d been aiming for her, the spray of bullets going wide as the dog clamped down on the second raider’s arm, shaking her like she would a radroach. Before the raider could properly aim at the dog, though, Lucy pulled the trigger, the first bullet catching the woman in the leg, and before she could shoot again, Dogmeat was making a meal of her throat.

The first raider was close, bullets going all around her, and she was pretty sure one grazed her shoulder, but she couldn’t make herself look, instead leaning around the corner and shooting as quickly as she could.

“Fucking bitch!”

If he could still talk, he wasn't down. One bullet left! She had to make it count! She ducked, another spray of bullets flying all around her, and peeked around the other side of the washer. His hand pressed to a bloody spot on his side and behind him, Cooper was hissing out what sounded like 'fuck, fuck, fucking fuck' over and over as he struggled with the ropes holding him in place.

Lucy didn't let herself think. She just took a deep breath, leaned around the washer, took aim, and fired.

And the pistol clicked.

She'd miscounted.

She couldn't help her scream when four bullets whizzed past her all in a row, the first one grazing her cheek before lodging in the wall behind her, and she jerked back, tears springing to her eyes, but she was not going to cry! She was going to kill this asshole. She was going to save her friend.

She holstered her pistol and crouched, pulling out her hunting knife. She knew this was stupid. She knew she was being reckless. But she couldn't bear the thought of losing Cooper, and so, the second the raider took another step, Lucy threw herself around the corner, lunging for the barrel of the gun and wrapping one hand around it, shoving it to the side right before he managed to shoot her, then stumbled back when the gun was wrenched out of her hands, coming down on her head and making her vision go blurry.

She stumbled but didn't go down as the Ghoul shouted something...her heart was pounding too loudly for her to hear him. One of her feet tangled around the raider's, ankle hooking his knee, and the fist that swung around and possibly broke her nose would have sent her back on her ass if she hadn't already thrown her weight against him, sending both of them to the ground.

The knife went into his side so easily, again and again. Side, chest, shoulder, and finally his throat, a spray of blood soaking her face and mixing with her own, and still she didn't stop, a horrible, feral scream filling her ears until she realized it was her. Only then did she stop and stare into the wide, unseeing eyes of the man who'd been about to kill her.

"Lucy?" He spoke so slowly...so patiently. But she didn't look away from the face of the man she'd just killed. "Lucy MacLean."

Gasping for air, she met his eyes, teeth still bared...there was blood on her face and in her mouth. She could taste it and it made her want to gag. Behind her, Dogmeat was chowing down on the raider, fully happy to enjoy her meal, and the sight almost only made her nausea worse.

"If you're done using that gentleman as a pincushion, would you mind untying me sweetheart?"

Silently, she pushed herself back to her feet, wincing as all the pains came to her at once...her ankle, her cheek, her stomach, her nose, her shoulder for some reason. Had a bullet grazed

her there too? She didn't remember. Wincing, she limped a little as she made her way to Cooper whose eyes stayed locked on her the whole time, even as she crouched and cut the ropes holding his ankles, then leaned around him and, carefully as she could, slid the bloody knife between his weathered skin and the rope, sawing until his hands came free.

He stood, giving her a better view of the gash across his clothing. Thankfully the skin underneath seemed to have mostly healed already. There was blood on his head, too, but he seemed okay. Cooper nodded to himself and glanced around the room full of corpses. He looked, dare she say it, impressed? If she hadn't been shaking so hard, that might have made her happy.

"Well well well...not bad, little killer. Although I distinctly remember telling you to stay."

Lucy's arms were around him before she knew what she was doing, a sob breaking through as she clutched the back of his old leather jacket. He went absolutely still under the onslaught, but she couldn't make herself let go. Not yet. He was alive. She wasn't alone and he was her friend and he was alive. "I'm sorry...I miscounted! I thought I had eight! I only had seven!"

It took him a second to parse that, then spoke as if she wasn't clinging to him for dear life. "That's alright," he told her, gentler than she'd heard him since he'd been digging that bullet out of her. "You had a backup plan...a fucking stupid backup plan, but a backup plan nonetheless."

His version of kindness only made her cry harder and she pressed her face into his chest. "I know it was stupid. I was scared that you...that..." she swallowed hard, voice shaking. She couldn't even say it.

"Vaultie, I'm sure you'd do just fine without me. You've managed this whole time," he assured her, voice dry.

"That's not why I was scared," she whispered, shaking her head. "I..." She didn't have words for it...didn't understand how he'd become so deeply important to her in such a short time and after such a horrible start. Instead, she tightened her hands around his jacket. "I'm just glad you're okay."

He was still for long enough that she almost apologized again...almost pulled away to go cry somewhere else. He hadn't signed up to be her personal pillow and he hadn't signed up to comfort her. But then, so slowly, as if he'd forgotten how to do it, his arm moved, hand coming up to rest against the back of her head, the other pressed to her back. He took a slow, deliberate breath, then patted her hair twice like she was Dogmeat, and she closed her eyes, inhaling his now familiar scent and trying to slow the tears that refused to stop.

"I'm fine, darlin'," he murmured. "Takes a lot more than a deathclaw and a couple of raiders to bring me down."

"I don't know what that means," she whispered, still crying, and she felt him chuckle a little.

"You see that ugly ass monster outside?"

“Oh...yes.”

“That’s called a Deathclaw. Nasty sons of bitches. Came out of nowhere and got me good. I managed to kill it but those assholes like to kick a man while he’s down.” He was rubbing her back, his breathing deep and his heartbeat steady against her ear. “Genetically modified for the American military. I worked with them in Alaska, back when I was in the Marines. Didn’t like ‘em then, don’t like ‘em now.”

“You were in the military?”

“Sure was. Wore one of those fancy armor suits and everything.”

Lucy nodded. “Yeah. That makes sense.”

He chuckled again, the sound soothing something inside her, and her tears slowed a little.

“How about you and me pick this place clean and pay off our debts, huh Vaultie?”

“Okay,” she whispered, but she didn’t let go. Not for a long time. He didn’t complain, just held her close until she was finally able to let him go.

Chapter 12

Lucy crouched in front of the steel door, bobby pin pulled from her hair wiggling around in the lock. Eyes closed, she pressed her ear close, listening and feeling for the pins. Learning the ins and outs of mechanical locks had been covered during her Young Pipefitters Association meetings...most locks in the Vault were terminal based, but terminals could go down. They could lose electricity. Spare keys could be lost. So it was always good to have a backup plan.

Cooper stood behind her, a pistol stolen from one of the corpses in his hand, scanning the room along with Dogmeat. They'd already taken a few things off of the dead raiders, including that minigun. "It'll be a bitch to carry, but it's worth a lot of caps," he'd told her, hauling it over to the pile they were going to have to figure out how to transport. The bigger items like the appliances could be retrieved by the people in the settlement and used for scrap and and parts, and she and Cooper couldn't carry all of the weapons, so they could have those too. But the best stuff, they wanted to carry back for themselves to make as many caps as possible.

Lucy already felt better, with him there at her side again. It felt right...this was how it was supposed to be. The two of them, together, and Dogmeat standing guard. She didn't want to examine that thought too closely, mostly because she was worried that more raiders would come, but also because it didn't really make sense. They were friends, she thought, and friends enjoyed spending time together, but not *all* of their time together.

The lock clicked and she grinned smugly up at Cooper when it swung open. "Told you I could pick it."

"Yeah, I could have shot it too," he told her with a huff, but she felt his eyes on her when she straightened and she tried not to flinch. He'd already warned her against tearing her stitches enough that she knew he wouldn't be happy about the blood she could feel running down her side, not to mention the new cut on her cheek thanks to that close call with a bullet...and she was fairly certain her nose was broken. She could still taste blood in her mouth and she wasn't sure if it was her own or if it belonged to the raider she'd stabbed.

The blue-tinged overhead lights illuminated a card table off in a corner that was surrounded by folding chairs. Scattered out on it were the contents of his bag...chems and bullets and a flask, along with a rolled up cloth and a StimPack. There was an old refrigerator too, and a cooler, both humming quietly and letting Lucy know that they still worked. Before she could look inside, he pointed at one of the chairs.

"Sit," he ordered, grabbing the flask.

Confused, she did.

"Let's see how much damage you've managed to do to Elliot's good work." Crouching in front of her, he grabbed a cloth from the table, splashed some of whatever he kept in his flask onto it, then held it to her cheek.

She hissed, teeth clenched, but the burn only lasted a few seconds.

“Hold that,” he ordered, pulling his gloves off the moment he did. His bare fingers were careful as he ran them along the bridge of her nose. “That asshole got you good,” he murmured absently, and she found herself unable to keep from staring...his face was so close to hers, his dark eyes focused on her nose. There was no reason that proximity should make her heart beat faster.

“I got him better,” she reminded him, immediately feeling like she shouldn’t have said that. It wasn’t good to brag about things like that...to feel pride in killing someone. That sort of force was only used when absolutely necessary and never celebrated. But Cooper grinned, huffing out a little laugh.

“That you did, little killer.” And then he pressed against the side of her nose, something clicking as the bone shifted making her gasp, her eyes watering. “There. Now let’s see those stitches.”

As expected, one of them had torn open. There wasn’t as much blood as she’d feared, but he still shot her a look, soaking that cloth in more alcohol and cleaning it up before sticking his StimPack into her side right above it. “You’ve already used two on me,” she muttered, teeth gritted.

“We’ll be able to afford more soon, don’t you worry about that. And there’s plenty here. This place is a veritable treasure trove of shit we can sell.” He pressed a piece of gauze to the stitches, then taped it to her skin. “Now, let’s see what we can find.”

What they found was a lot. Lucy had expected them to split up, but instead they went from room to room together, each of them taking a side and working their way towards the middle, Dogmeat following at their heels. In the cooler were the antibiotics they’d been hoping to find...ten whole bags full of the liquid medicine. They’d unplug that last since they needed to stay cool. In one of the cabinets they found duffle bags, and immediately started stuffing them. Bandages. StimPacks. RadX and RadAway. Other pills Lucy couldn’t identify but Cooper told her not to take. More vials that he took a close look at before stashing in his own bag.

There were medical supplies too...first aid kits filled with bandages and thread and sewing kits. One duffle bag was entirely full with medical supplies by the time they were done, the other with weapons and ammo, along with a few bottles of alcohol and other trinkets Cooper told her would sell well. It took a whole two hours to search the place, and even then, there were more things they could have taken if they’d had more people to help them carry everything back.

“Looks like we found you a rifle,” he called in one of the last rooms, and Lucy turned to find him holding up what looked like a prewar hunting rifle by the strap. “Ammo, too.”

It had a short barrel, probably sawed off at some point, and the wood had been worn smooth through the years. There was a scope, and the magazine was full. There were two more magazines with it, and she put them in her bag, slipping her head through the strap and

carrying the rifle on her back. “It’s perfect,” she told him with a smile, and his eyes slid away from hers.

“Good. Maybe now you can start shooting your own supper.” He was smirking when he turned around, leading the way to the next room.

Their last stop was the downstairs storage room with the cooler, which Lucy unplugged and lifted experimentally, taking a couple of steps. It wasn’t too heavy, just awkward to hold.

“Think you can carry that?”

“I think so.”

He reached down, grabbing the power cord and draping it over the top, then watched her critically for a few seconds before grabbing the minigun. “Alright, Vaultie, let’s go make some caps.”

The walk back felt a lot longer than her walk there, probably because the sun was now high overhead and the cooler seemed to get heavier with every step. Still, she refused to complain, especially since she was pretty sure Cooper was keeping his pace slower for her sake. It seemed he really had killed all of the other raiders, because no one came after them as they walked through the old ghost town. There were no footsteps trailing them or gunshots or raiders jumping out from behind billboards. Just the three of them making their way out of the city and into the wasteland.

He told her more about Deathclaws as they walked, describing the first ones he’d seen and how they’d changed. He told her how smart they were, and that some could even be reasoned with or communicate with humans, although those were few and far between anymore. Then she told him about her day without him and the jobs she’d taken, and how all the children had loved Dogmeat. “I was working in the garden when one of the little girls was finally brave enough to pet her. Then all the kids wanted to pet her. I think they wore her out, letting her chase them around,” she told him with a laugh. “They were all so afraid at first, but by the time I left the garden, they were all rubbing her belly and feeding her snacks. I think she’d be happy if we never left.”

Dogmeat had perked up at the sound of her name and tried to get Cooper to pet her despite his hands being full.

He grunted, the look on his face strange and far away, lips twisted in a sad smile. Then, after a long moment of silence, “My little girl loved dogs.”

The words almost brought her up short...almost made her drop the cooler on her foot. She had to fight to keep her expression normal as they marched on, and she was afraid he’d stop talking...that he’d realize what he’d said and clam up. But he just kept staring straight ahead, his voice soft in a way it rarely was.

“Roosevelt, especially. She’d lay on the floor and fall asleep on him when she was younger, and he’d let her. Wouldn’t move until she did. But she’d want to pet any dog she met.”

Lucy had a million questions...he'd said he wanted to find his family. Did he think his daughter was still alive? Had she been with him? Had she seen the bombs fall? Had he? What had it been like? To be one of the people who didn't have a Vault to go to? She settled on "How old was she?"

"She'd just turned seven when they dropped the bombs."

Lucy stayed quiet, not sure if she was allowed questions, or if they would make him angry. Or sad. Sadder. But he went on.

"We'd heard rumors about the bombs for a long time. Everyone was tense, just waiting for it to happen. Nobody wanted to let their kids watch the news. I was...I was with Janey. Barb and I shared custody by then. Since the divorce. I was doing a kid's birthday party, and Janey was with me...she'd just asked me if she could have a piece of cake, so I went and asked. Then...they dropped the bombs. We could see it from the house...big place up on a hill. I got her to the Vault entrance on Sugarfoot."

"Even if..." she hesitated, glancing over, and found that he was watching her. "If my father won't tell you where she is, I can still get you into Vault 31. We can start looking there. Norm can help us get in."

"Sweetheart, they're not gonna let me into a Vault."

"Then we'll make them," her voice had gone hard, fingers tightening around the cooler. "My PipBoy will get me in. I'll bring you with me. Or I'll sneak into 31 and look for you. And if they're not there, we can keep looking. There are only so many Vaults. I'll bet more will let me in. I'm one of them."

He lifted a brow. "I thought you'd want to find a place to settle down when all of this was over. You know how to fix shit. That's worth some caps."

Not without you. The thought was so sudden and vehement that it surprised her, and she had to force her smile. "I'll have time for that after we find your family. What about you?" she asked before he could argue. "What will you do when you find her?"

Cooper was quiet for what felt like a long time. Then he shook his head with a sigh. "I don't know, Vaultie. I guess I'll take it as it comes."

"Sounds good to me."

In the distance, she could just see the settlement. She was starving, nearly out of water, and besides, she didn't want to stop and put the cooler down just for a drink, so she'd be glad to finally make it inside the gates. But before they could, Cooper stopped, pulling the gun down, and then taking the cooler from her. "Drink," he ordered, and she did, draining her canteen. "You're not going to pass out on me, are you? Because I can't carry the minigun, the cooler, and you too."

"I'll bet you could," she told him with a smile, putting her cap back on her canteen and making him huff out a little laugh. When she held her arms out for the cooler again, he

jerked his chin towards the minigun.

“Your turn,” he told her simply, then started walking again, leaving her to grab the gun and hurry to keep up.

All eyes were on them as they walked into the settlement. Even the kids stopped playing as they passed, eyes wide as they watched them walk towards Elliot’s. The little girl who’d been the first to pet Dogmeat peered out from behind an adult’s leg, and the dog spotted her right off, trotting over and demanding affection. Cooper glanced over, huffed, and kept walking, Lucy right beside him, but when she glanced back, several more children had gathered to pet her too.

Elliot was waiting for them at the clinic, hurrying forward to take the cooler. He put it on the counter beside his other one, plugging it in.

“Your medicine, as requested. I didn’t bring any heads with me, so you’ll just have to trust that they’re all dead,” he told the doctor, grabbing the minigun from Lucy so she could remove the duffle bag from her shoulder and place it on the counter alongside the cooler. “Kept a couple of things. The rest is all yours. Am I to assume we’re all clear?”

“Yes,” Elliot murmured absently, opening the duffle bag and rifling through it. “This...this is more than I’d even hoped.”

“You’ve got a spy in your midst,” he warned. “Someone informed them that she was coming. You might want to look into that.”

That made Elliot tear his eyes away from the supplies. “A spy?”

“Didn’t get a name. Maybe just look for whoever isn’t happy about the fact that I killed all of them. Well, me and a Deathclaw anyway.”

Elliot blinked at him, seemed to gather his thoughts, then turned to Lucy. “Are you alright?”

“Tore one of her stitches,” Cooper answered for her. “I gave her a StimPack. Any chance all this covers another check up?”

“Of course. Lucy?” he asked, gesturing to the bed, and she hopped up, unzipping her suit.

“I’m fine. Barely hurts.”

Cooper gave a disbelieving grunt, looked around the floor like he’d lost something, then walked over to the door and sighed, crossing his arms. “Now you’ve got her playing with every goddamn kid in this place.”

“She’s having fun,” Lucy argued.

“She’s supposed to be a guard dog. Vicious predator? Killing machine? This ringing any bells for you, sweetheart?”

“Don’t act like she doesn’t sleep with her head in your lap,” she muttered, rolling her eyes, and Elliot seemed to go a shade paler, but Cooper only huffed and took a seat in one of the chairs.

“You ought to be fine with the StimPack now that the infection is gone,” Elliot told her. “Make sure to stay hydrated. Rest today, and you should be alright to move on tomorrow.”

“Thank you, Elliot.”

He smiled back at her, straightening. “No, thank you. It was almost impossible for us to trade or travel much at all with those raiders nearby. We appreciate you taking care of that for us,” he told them both, turning to Cooper who ignored him, still watching Dogmeat play with the kids outside.

“It was no problem,” Lucy answered for them both, ignoring how Cooper snorted.

They sold the weapons and ammo they didn’t need, leaving them with plenty of caps to spend. Lucy got another set of underclothes and an outfit to swap out with her vault suit so she wasn’t wearing it every day, more soap, and plenty of ammo, both for her pistol and her new rifle. Their next stop was the bar where everyone watched them walk in, wide-eyed and curious, but Cooper just led her to the bar, the two of them taking a seat. “Two shots,” he called to Jack who slid them over, waving her hand when he went to pay.

“Heard you took out those raiders. You drink for free tonight, ghoul. You too, Vault dweller.”

Lucy thought about telling her that they had names, but Cooper didn’t seem to mind, just threw his drink back, so she did the same, then nearly choked, coughing so hard she had to grip the bar to keep from falling off her stool. Cooper chuckled, reaching out absently to grab the fabric of her suit to keep her seated.

“That’s horrible,” she finally gasped. “How do you drink that?”

He grinned. “It’s an acquired taste, sweetheart.”

“Well...I don’t think I’ll be acquiring that. Sorry,” she added belatedly to Jack who was laughing to herself.

“How about something a little sweeter for the lady?” Jack asked, uncorking a bottle and pouring the light pink liquid into a long stemmed glass. It reminded her of something the party planners would bring out in her Vault for special occasions. Jack’s fingers brushed against hers as she passed her the glass, the touch lingering for a second as she smiled at her. She was quite pretty, now that Lucy was looking more closely at her, with short, curly hair and a soft smile.

Hesitantly, she brought the glass to her lips, not wanting a repeat of the last time, but when she took a sip, her eyes fluttered shut, lips tilting up when she swallowed. “Oh. That’s much better.”

“Where the hell did you get moscato?” Cooper demanded, and Jack glanced over at him but didn’t move from her spot in front of Lucy.

“I have my sources. Only the best for beautiful women that save the day.”

“Oh...I didn’t...” Lucy started.

“Everybody saw you leave this morning. Liam bet me we’d never see you alive again. I knew you’d be back.” She glanced at Cooper and grinned. “Hell hath no fury, and all that.”

Cooper rolled his eyes. “You want to talk all day or you want to pour me another drink?”

“Come on, ghou. It’s not like a lot of interesting things happen around here. We all want to hear the story of how this pretty little Vault Dweller took out all those raiders.” Jack leaned in towards Lucy and put her hand on her arm. It was strange...if she hadn’t known better, she would have thought the bartender was flirting with her...not that Lucy hadn’t ever thought about what sex with a woman might be like. She and one of her female classmates had kissed once, and it had been very nice, but those sorts of relationships, while not forbidden, were never encouraged in the Vault. Although, she thought, now that she wasn’t planning on having children to help repopulate the country, maybe none of that mattered. Still, she didn’t want to kiss Jack, no matter how pretty she was, and she didn’t want to have sex with her, even if she was curious and a little flattered at the attention.

Giving the bartender an apologetic smile, she pulled her hand away, shaking her head. “It was nothing. Really. He already killed most of the raiders. And the Deathclaw. I just killed the last few. And Dogmeat helped.”

Jack searched her face, then glanced over at Cooper who, Lucy discovered when she looked over, was glaring at Jack, his jaw set. He didn’t look sarcastic or annoyed or even frustrated with the bartender he’d just been on good terms with. No...he looked angry. Jack met his gaze, fearless and calculating, then lifted her hands, lips twisting in kind of a sad smile as she took a step back and nodded to Cooper. Without a word, she poured him another shot, sliding it over, and he relaxed some, downing that one too. Lucy kept sipping her moscato, trying to figure out what had just happened.

He waited for her to finish the glass before sliding off the barstool, jerking his head towards the door. “Come on, darlin’,” he urged, voice a little louder than before. Or maybe everyone else in the bar was just quieter when he was around. “Let’s see what they’re serving for lunch over at the hotel.”

Excited at the thought of real food, Lucy hurried to follow him, wondering why it felt like everyone was watching them go.

It was only a few feet later that the window display at a store a few doors down from the bar caught her eye. Stopping short, she turned and headed right for it.

“Don’t know if you know this, Vaultie, but the hotel is this way,” he called, sounding put out.

“I’ll be right back!” she called, duffle bag bouncing against her hip as she slipped into the store, Dogmeat waiting on the porch. Glancing back, she found he’d come to stand on the porch too, scratching absently at Dogmeat’s ears as he watched her through the glass. She threw him a quick smile, holding up one finger, then grabbed the white Stetson from the display and took it up to the counter.

“How much?” she wondered.

“Four caps,” the young man working there told her, eyes darting to the Ghoul waiting impatiently on his porch, then back at Lucy, looking sort of pale.

Lucy handed them over, then hurried back out to where he waited, plopping the hat on her head. “Look! We match!” she cried, pointing at her head.

He just stared at her, face unreadable, before his eyes seemed to slide off her, staring at the wall of the shop instead.

“And it’s practical,” she went on defensively, wondering if she’d offended him somehow. He was so hard to read sometimes...she didn't understand why her having a hat like his would upset him. “It will keep the sun off my face and keep me...”

“Come on, Vaultie. You’re worse than that dog, getting distracted,” he broke in, turning on his heel and heading for the hotel.

She trotted after him alongside Dogmeat, wondering if he'd ever stop comparing the two of them.

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for all of your kind comments!

The ‘real food’ at the hotel turned out to be more vegetable soup with a side of some of the best cornbread Lucy had eaten...maybe ever. The first bite nearly made her moan aloud, eyes closing as she savored it. When she opened her eyes again, still chewing, Cooper was staring determinedly down at his own plate. Hesitantly, she asked, “Can you taste things?”

“Some. Not much.”

“This cornbread is so good,” she told him, taking another bite and closing her eyes again.

“Really? Couldn’t tell.” He took another bite of the soup, then passed his own piece of cornbread to her. “You’d better fill up while you can, sweetheart. It’s going to be back to radroaches out in the Mojave.”

She dipped the cornbread in the soup, soaking up the broth and taking another bite. “Mhm,” she told him around a mouthful.

He didn’t seem angry with her...maybe, she thought as she ate, she’d read him wrong. Maybe he’d just been hungry and hadn’t wanted to wait for her to go shopping. But it had only taken a few seconds...and it wasn’t like they were short on caps, so she doubted he was upset about her spending four of them. Deciding to just chalk it up to his usual grumpiness, Lucy finished her soup, fighting against the urge to lick up the crumbs. Ever since they’d stepped into the room with the long cafeteria style tables, Lucy had felt like everyone was watching them.

No one approached them, though, and Cooper seemed unbothered, so she focused on eating, and smiled any time someone made accidental eye contact. He got up while she was eating the last bits of her soup, walking back up to the counter, his spurs jingling the loudest sound of the room as everyone around them went even quieter than before. At the counter, Lucy saw the woman standing there go still and wide-eyed, shrinking back a step. He just held out some caps and said something she couldn’t hear, then took a plate from her.

“Are you okay?” The harsh whisper surprised her, and she turned to find an older woman perching on the bench beside her.

“Oh...um...yes? Hello. I’m fine.”

“Are you traveling with *him*?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know who he is?”

Lucy made her smile firm. “I do, yes. We’re friends.”

A plate clattered onto the table, making both of them jump, and Lucy spun around to find Cooper dropping back into his seat. “Friends, huh?” he asked, lifting his brow, lips twitching.

“Yes. Friends,” she told him, grabbing one of the three cornbread muffins he’d bought and dipping it into what was left of her soup. “Thank you.”

He grunted, glancing over at the woman beside her without much interest before going back to his own food and grabbing a piece of cornbread for himself. The woman swallowed loudly enough that Lucy could hear her, then went back to a table a few rows away.

“So...we’re leaving tomorrow?” she asked, trying not to look around at all the people staring at them. It was strange, being watched so closely by so many people, when all she was doing was trying to eat.

“That’s the plan.”

“How far to the next settlement?” They couldn’t have been close when she’d been shot... otherwise he would have just taken her there.

“If the one I’m thinking of is still there, at least four days.”

“Why wouldn’t it still be there?”

“Raiders. Deathclaws. Supermutant attack. Disease. Infighting.” He lifted a brow. “Need I go on?”

“What’s a supermutant?” she asked.

“Mutated humans. Big. Strong. Some are intelligent. Some just want to eat you. Some are both.”

“So...are they ghouls?”

“Nope. Some scientists had the bright idea to mess with their DNA. Let’s just hope we don’t run into any. Takes too many fucking bullets to kill them.”

She had to second that. “How far to New Vegas?”

“If we follow the I15, another couple of weeks, depending. We won’t be able to walk all day, and we’ll need to stop along the way for supplies.”

“I15?”

“Interstate. Big road,” he went on when she just stared. “They built them all across the country so the military could mobilize faster if they had to. Mostly people just used them to travel. They were numbered.”

“Oh. How many were there?”

“A lot. They connected all the states. Didn’t you teach American history?”

“I taught the seven and eight year olds. We didn’t talk about the roads,” she muttered. “We mostly focused on more recent history. Did you drive on them?”

“All the time.”

“I wish I could ride in a car. It always looks so fun in movies.”

“Oh so it wasn’t just westerns in the Vault?” he asked, mockingly impressed.

She rolled her eyes. “Of course not.” Then, kind of sheepishly, “we also had the one where you were a detective.”

He laughed, and all heads turned towards them. “Damn, Vaultie, all you had were my movies?”

“My dad really liked you,” she murmured, sopping up the last of her soup, then passing him the last piece of cornbread. He took it, popping it into his mouth with a huff of amusement. “We had a couple of classics too. Alfred Hitchcock...those always scared Norman when he was little. And Jimmy Stewart. I liked the one with the rabbit. But we didn’t watch movies very often. It was kind of a treat so we didn’t wear out the holotapes. We had movie nights maybe twice a month. We all had to share the tapes.”

He grunted. *I’m listening. Interested. Maybe even curious.* He was in a good mood tonight.

“The books were the same. We had a big library that we all shared, and we had to be really careful with the books. Some things were family heirlooms, and we could keep those in our apartments, but we loaned them out sometimes. My...my dad and I would read books together.”

“No book club for young Norman?” he asked, mostly sarcastic, but she answered anyway, not wanting the conversation to end.

“No. I tried, but he was never really interested.”

“How much younger is he?”

“Two years.” Then, hesitantly, “Did you have siblings?”

“A brother. We weren’t close.”

She didn’t ask what had happened to him. No answer could be good, and his expression didn’t invite more questions. “Norman and I were always close,” she told him instead. “I

think he'd like it up here. I mean..." she laughed a little. "He'd hate it at first. But he'd want to know the truth. And I don't think he'd be okay with living in a Vault if he knew everything. He's good at fixing things too, and with computers."

"Well, you can go get him once we take care of your daddy."

She nodded, wishing she could ask if he was going to come with her.

Back in their room, Cooper draped his bag over the back of one of the chairs as Dogmeat hurried over to the chair she'd claimed, jumping up and curling up for a nap, apparently tired out by all the playing with children she'd done. Lucy was ready to curl up in bed and hopefully take one last hot bath before they left when he whistled.

"Damn Vaultie. Not bad for a day's work," he told her, looking down at the pile of caps on the table.

She grinned, trying not to preen too much. "There were a lot of things to fix."

"You trying to get us robbed, leaving them out on the table? You know there's a window in this room, right?"

Lucy's smile dropped. She hadn't thought of that. "No...I wanted Mariana to be able to find them if I didn't come back."

He gave her a long look, but before he could open his mouth, someone rapped their knuckles against their door, and when he opened it, hand on his pistol, they found Mariana and her assistant, buckets of water in hand. "I didn't order water tonight," he told her simply.

"You took out those raiders. This one's on the house."

He glanced back at Lucy, must have seen the pleading on her face, then sighed, taking a step back. "Can't argue that. Hear that, sweetheart? One more bath before the desert. You'd better enjoy it."

She did. Lucy lay in the bath until her fingers and toes were wrinkled and pruny, soaking her hair and washing with soap twice. She knew that by this time the next day, she'd be covered in sweat and sand, but it still felt so nice that she nearly fell asleep. It was only the thought of Cooper coming to find her that got her out of the bathtub, wrapping herself in a towel and changing into the soft clothes he'd bought her. Drunk with how warm and comfortable she felt, Lucy dropped onto her side of the bed, curling up on her side, a lazy smile on her face.

She would have fallen asleep if she hadn't felt his eyes on her, and when she opened hers, he was watching her, eyes soft and so gentle that it made her chest hurt. There was no reason for her to feel this way...they were friends. She'd said it out loud and he hadn't flat out denied it, so...they were friends. It was confirmed. Sort of. But he was looking at her in a way she didn't think anyone had ever looked at her.

"The water's still warm," she offered, not able to stand the silence anymore.

He huffed a little, amused. “Considering how long you were in there, I doubt that, sweetheart.”

“Last bath until the desert.”

He chuckled, pushing himself slowly to his feet. “That it is.”

Lucy got out of bed before she really did fall asleep, cleaning her guns and repacking her bag while he got cleaned up, making sure she had everything so they could leave as soon as they woke up. She was sure he’d want to get moving...get to New Vegas and find her father and then...then they would find his family? Like she’d promised.

And then? Would he leave her behind, then? Once she wasn’t useful anymore...once he didn’t need anything from her? Why did that thought hurt so much? Why did she feel this way about her friend? She knew how love was supposed to happen...at least, how she’d always thought it would happen for her. She would meet her husband on her wedding night and they would build a life together built on mutual respect and then, over time, they would fall in love. With Max, she’d definitely been fond of him. She’d thought he was kind and sweet and she’d known that he felt some kind of attraction towards her, which was nice.

The water splashed in the other room, pulling Lucy from her thoughts. Huffing at herself, she shook her head and put her pack down beside the chair where Dogmeat lay, kissing her on the head and scratching that spot she liked behind her ear. Dogmeat rolled over, somehow not falling off the chair, and Lucy obliged and scratched her belly. When she heard his footsteps, she climbed into bed, pulling the blanket up to her waist and grabbing the novel she’d been reading.

Cooper took his usual chair, skin still damp, and chuckled at Dogmeat who was watching him, head upside down, feet in the air. Lucy watched him unholster his pistol, laying it on the table, then watched him do the same with the shotgun he always carried. She glanced up from her book every few seconds, watching him take the guns apart, cleaning each piece. He had to have noticed the fact that she was spending more time looking at him than at her book, but he didn’t comment.

It felt oddly domestic, the two of them sharing this room and going through their routines together. In the Vault, the only person she ever would have lived with, apart from her family, was her husband. Monty. She’d been so excited...

“You ready to leave tomorrow?”

She nodded, his words pulling her from memories she didn’t want to relive. “Yes...I already packed.”

“Good. We’re leaving early, before it gets too hot. How are those stitches?”

“Fine. It doesn’t hurt much anymore.” Her nose still ached a little when she bumped it. Otherwise, she felt mostly fine.

“You have those pills he gave you?”

She had to bite back a smile, focusing instead on the same page she'd been on for the last few minutes, rereading the same sentence over and over. If she didn't know any better, she would have said he was fussing over her. But even though she was starting to consider him a real friend, she still wouldn't risk saying something like that out loud. "In my pack," she told him placidly, reading a couple of lines before glancing up at him again.

Any injuries he'd gotten from the Deathclaw or the raiders seemed to be gone, and again, she had so many questions. How did he heal so quickly? Did it hurt? Was he really okay?

Would he tell her more about his daughter?

Biting every one of those questions back and telling herself to be patient, Lucy managed to read two whole pages of her book before he was done.

They went to Jack's bar that evening since Cooper didn't seem very good at just sitting around, and although she poured Lucy another glass of moscato and gave her a quick, flirty smile, she didn't make any comments or move to touch her again. Soon, people from around the settlement trickled in, one or two at a time, seemingly just to get a glimpse of the two of them. Once again, Cooper didn't seem to notice or care about the people staring at him, just downing his shots and passing the caps to Jack. Lucy sipped her drink, lifting her eyebrows in question at Mary when she caught her staring, and the other woman muttered something to Jack, then went into the back.

"Do people always stare at you like this," she asked softly, scooting a little closer.

"Often enough."

"Because you're a...ghoul?" She still wasn't sure if that word was okay, but he never seemed offended when someone said it, or even when they used it as a title.

"Well it certainly ain't because of my devastating good looks, sweetheart."

She cocked her head, confused. "Are you being sarcastic? I think you're very attractive."

His eyes widened, and when he looked down at her, his expression was incredulous.

"You are," she insisted seriously. It was a fact...he didn't have a normal face, of course, because of the radiation, but she'd never thought he was ugly. "You're charismatic and mysterious...I think most women would find you attractive."

He just stared at her for what felt like a long time, mouth opening and closing like he couldn't quite figure out how to answer that. Then, with a quick shake of his head, he tossed another shot back. "It could also be my reputation as a bounty hunter," he went on like she hadn't spoken. "There are plenty of ghouls around. Or they might be staring at you. Vault Dwellers are a rare breed on the surface."

"Right...that's what Doctor Wilzig said."

"Not everyone's a fan."

She supposed she could understand that, even if the people at the settlement mostly seemed grateful to them...well, grateful and afraid.

Back at the room, Cooper waited until she was nearly asleep to get into bed, busying himself with rearranging his pack and petting Dogmeat while she sank into her pillow and drifted off. She woke when he got into bed, though, part of her wanting to scoot over and curl up against his warmth. She didn't though, reminding herself firmly that they were in a bed with blankets and that she did not need him for warmth right now. It wasn't appropriate to cuddle with him for no reason, especially when he hadn't shown any interest in doing so. Instead, she stayed right where she was, curled up on her side with her back to him.

This time when the nightmares woke her, Lucy stayed where she was after jolting awake, staring up at the darkness of the ceiling and trying to get her heartbeat under control. She could hear Dogmeat's soft, even breathing, and beside her, Cooper's wheezing ones. He hadn't liked it when she'd curled up against him the night before...he'd apparently been uncomfortable, and even if it made her feel safe, it wasn't okay to violate someone's boundaries, expressed or implied. So she stayed on her back and stared up at the ceiling for a long time. She didn't know why dreams of her home had turned into nightmares...didn't know why what she'd once thought of as a happy life now sounded like a prison sentence.

She thought about getting up...about going to the bathroom and splashing water on her face and trying to gather herself. She was about to, shifting to sit up and trying to move slowly enough that she wouldn't wake anyone, when Cooper spoke.

"Bad dreams again?" he asked, his voice startling her in the dark.

"Mhm," she mumbled, closing her eyes and going still like she'd been caught up after bedtime.

He hummed knowingly, and when he spoke, his voice was solemn. "About sex with your cousin?"

The surprised laugh burst out of her, a hand coming up to cover her eyes as her shoulders shook. "No," she giggled, shaking her head. "Not about that. It was never that bad."

"So it wasn't always good?"

"He's very sweet," she defended, making him snort in amusement. "And...eager."

He wheezed from the laughter then, coughing and sitting up, and in the dark, she could hear him taking a puff of his medicine. "I'll bet he is," he gasped out. When he caught his breath and dropped back onto the pillow beside her, his arm had shifted, and he gave a long, suffering sigh. "Come on."

She hesitated. "But..."

"I'm not going to get any sleep if you're over there being all weepy, darlin'."

“I’m not weepy,” she grumbled, but she rolled over anyway, resting her head on his chest, and she couldn’t help smiling when his arm wrapped around her, a hand resting on her back. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d felt so safe.

“So apart from your very sweet, very eager, very incestuous Vault relationships, what could you possibly have nightmares about?”

She curled her hand into his shirt, listening to the soft beating of his heart. Immediately she felt better, like her bad dreams were just that...dreams. “It’s stupid. I keep dreaming that I’m trapped in the Vault. I’m there, but...I know I’m supposed to be somewhere else. I can’t get out. And...and you aren’t there.” She regretted the words as soon as she said them. There was no reason for her to be so upset that he wasn’t with her in the Vault. Of course he wouldn’t be! He’d never lived in her Vault and he hadn’t been a part of her community and...

“Well...seeing as I’ve never lived in a Vault, that is pretty stupid,” he allowed, and she huffed, smacking his chest lightly with her hand and closing her eyes, unable to help her smile when he chuckled again. “But,” he went on, voice a little softer, “you’re out now, Vaultie. You don’t have to go back to living in a Vault. Not if you don’t want to.” His thumb rubbed against her back, his body heat seeping through her clothes and enveloping her, and it hit her that *this* was what she wanted.

But she couldn’t say that. He wouldn’t like it. Maybe he’d even push her away...tell her she was reading something into this that wasn’t there. So she tried not to think about any of it and just closed her eyes, focusing on the soft, steady sound of his heartbeat.

And when she fell asleep this time, she dreamed of the two of them walking across the wastes together.

The Child's Interlude

Jen Roberts knew a lot of things. She knew how to read, having learned her letters at home with her mom before she was even old enough to join the other kids at the schoolhouse. That wasn't something everyone could do...she knew adults at the settlement who could barely make out their own name in writing. She was the best at math in her class, and she knew how to cook as well as her parents. She knew how to patch a sock and repair tears in her shirts, pulling out the old sewing kit when she had enough clothes to fix up.

She knew that ghouls were monsters that ate people. They ranked right up there with super mutants and feral dogs of things she was to avoid at all cost...to stab or shoot on sight. They'd tear her apart and eat her. That's what her mother had said. Even if they weren't feral, they would be soon, so she'd told her it was best to avoid them altogether. It wasn't hard...they didn't see many ghouls at their farm a mile and a half from the Yermo settlement since those monsters weren't welcome inside.

And she knew that the only way she was going to make it back to said farm was by putting one foot in front of the other.

Pulling the stolen hat further over her face, she wished for the cool shade of their barn, their Brahmin grazing nearby. It was her favorite place to avoid both her chores and her brother, lying in one of the unused stalls and napping during the hottest part of the day. She wished for her father, who always talked about moving to the east coast where it wasn't so hot, and her mother, who reminded him every time that they probably wouldn't make it to the east coast on their own. Raiders or feral ghouls would kill them long before they even made it through the desert. She even wished for her little brother who liked following her around and asking her to play.

It was nearly dusk, and Jen knew that there was nothing stupider than traveling through the wasteland at night, especially when she didn't have so much as a blanket. She was lucky she had a stolen canteen of water, but that wouldn't last forever, and she knew it would take another full day of traveling to get home. At least. That's if she didn't run into feral ghouls or dogs or radscorpions. She was fast...faster than some of the kids at school, but not all of them, but she knew that she couldn't outrun anything if she was dehydrated.

This was her own fault...that's what she hated most. Her own fault for wandering too far from the farm in an attempt to escape her four-year-old brother's desperate attempts to get her to play with him. Her own fault for not paying enough attention...for being so stupid. But she blinked back the tears...she couldn't afford to lose the salt or the water. She would lock those thoughts away until she was back home. In the meantime, she had a plan. One foot in front of the other, look out for anything that wanted to kill her, and find a place to sleep that wasn't right out in the open.

Her parents were going to be mad. The thought made her chest hurt in the familiar way it always did when she upset them, and she wiped harshly at her eyes. She was too old to cry about stuff like that. She knew her dad would go quiet and solemn and tell her that what

she'd done was reckless...irresponsible. Her mom would probably just yell. Jen didn't know which was worse. But she was old enough to take it...old enough to have known better.

The shack she found right as the sun was going down was what her dad would call a Godsend, and what her mom would call good luck. It had four walls and most of a roof, which was more than she could have hoped for. It would be cold, but she knew that if she curled up in the corner and the wind didn't blow too hard, she'd be fine. Pulling out her knife, she looked around, holding her breath to listen better, but she didn't hear anything, so she crept to the place where the door hung on one hinge, placing her hands against the weathered wood and peering inside.

A dead bloatfly. Some bones. She grabbed the bloatfly by a leg and threw it outside, then kicked the bones out of the way, sitting down and pressing her hand to her stomach when it growled. She hadn't eaten a whole meal since breakfast the day before, and that asshole had given her some stale bread for dinner, but she'd been walking all day on just that, and she knew she'd need to find something else. She'd stolen his lighter...maybe she could tear a piece of wood off the door in the morning and make a fire when it wasn't so dangerous...cook some of that bloatfly.

She was curled up in a ball in the far corner, which was only about eight feet from the door, eyes closing against her will even though she knew falling into too deep of a sleep could get her killed, when she heard the voice.

"Well, sweetheart, looks like we're in luck."

She jolted upright, scrambling to pull her knife from her boot, back pressed against the wall, heart going a mile a minute. There was nowhere to hide...no windows to slip out of. She couldn't go for the door...if they were raiders, they'd have guns. If they were travelers, they still might try to rob her of her water. She slipped the canteen strap over her head and took a long drink, then placed it on the ground behind her. Hands shaking, she held the knife, edge still stained with red, out in front of her.

Then a muzzle appeared in the dim light from the setting sun, a dog pushing its way through the opening between the door and the wall, then trotted right up to her. It wasn't feral...its coat was soft looking and shiny, and although it was a lean animal, she was pretty sure it was well taken care of. It sniffed at her, edging closer, and the knife slipped a little in her sweaty hand. "Go," she whispered, desperately, shaking her head. "Go away. Please. Go." Slowly, she climbed to her feet...when the people came in, she couldn't be caught sitting down.

Sure enough, the door was pushed open, a man in a cowboy hat stepping into the room. "What did you find, girl?" he asked, then paused, cocking his head as he spotted her. His face was cast in shadow until he stepped fully into the shack when the light from the hole in the roof hit him, and she felt her breath catch. Nose rotted away, eyes sunken in a ravaged face...ghoul. She clenched her teeth together, clamping down on a terrified cry as she held the knife up, doing her best to look mean.

"I'll stab you if you come any closer, ghoul!" she snarled, holding the knife out and pressing herself so far into the wall that she worried she might accidentally push through the rotting wood..

“Huh,” the Ghoul muttered after a moment of silence, looking around the one room shack, then, to her surprise, holstering the gun.

“I mean it!”

He considered the blade for a moment, then nodded. “I don’t doubt it.” He talked weird and kind of slow, his words stretched out more than normal. She wondered idly if all ghouls talked like that.

“Cooper, is...” a lady’s voice cut off as she stepped into the room behind him, and Jen felt her eyes go wide once more. She was wearing long denim pants and a white hat to match the Ghoul’s tan one, a heavy looking pack on her back, and when her huge eyes landed on Jen, she paused. “Oh...hello.”

“Looks decent enough. Seems to be occupied though.” He jerked his chin towards her, moving further into the room.

Jen glared at him, gesturing with her knife. “One more step, rot-face and I’ll...”

“What did you just say?” The lady’s tone was so like her mom’s that time she’d heard Jen practicing her sweating on her little brother that she stiffened, mouth snapping shut as she turned back towards the lady who’d seemed to grow taller somehow.

“I...” Jen started to defend herself, but the lady crossed her arms, looking almost bewildered.

“Why would you say something like that? That is no way to speak to someone.”

Jen glanced at the Ghoul, feeling bewildered herself. Were they...traveling together? It seemed like it. But she’d never heard of a ghoul traveling with a regular person. The Ghoul’s lips twitched like he thought this was funny. Did ghouls think things were funny?

“He’s a ghoul! They eat people!” she reminded the lady sharply, pointing at the Ghoul as if the lady might not have seen him.

“She’s got you there, sweetheart,” the Ghoul told her with a chuckle.

Sweetheart? Jen grimaced. Did that mean...

The lady sighed, coming closer, hand resting on that dog’s back. Jen kept her fingers wrapped tightly around the knife’s handle. Just because the lady wasn’t a ghoul didn’t mean she wasn’t dangerous. Her eyes flashed down to the knife, then focused on Jen once more. “My name is Lucy. This is Cooper,” she introduced, gesturing to the Ghoul and emphasizing his name. She hadn’t known they had them. “And this is Dogmeat.” A long pause, then a pointed, “What’s *your* name?”

She hesitated...but there was no harm in sharing a first name. “Jen.”

“How old are you, Jen?” The lady, Lucy, asked, voice gentler than she’d heard anyone but her own parents speak in a long time...maybe ever.

“Fourteen,” she snapped, the word coming out steady even as she added two years. Fourteen was basically an adult. Fourteen was old enough to be out on her own...old enough to carry a gun and shoot and kill if she had to.

The Ghoul snorted at her. “Yeah? Me too.” He leaned against the far wall, crossing his arms and watching her and Lucy like they were putting on a play. She shot him her most poisonous glare but he just raised his brow where eyebrows would have been if he’d still had hair.

“Jen, are you traveling with your family?”

“None of your fucking business!” The rush of bravado left her just as soon as the unfamiliar curse came out of her mouth. She’d heard it in the settlement, but she’d never been brave enough to use it before, especially not with an adult in earshot. The lady tilted her head and gave her the same expression her teacher gave her when she was testing her patience. Still, there was something gentle about this lady that made Jen wonder how she’d survived this long. Maybe the ghoul protected her?

“Would you like to try that again?” she asked, voice deceptively calm, and from the corner of her eye, she saw the Ghoul pop something into his mouth.

“I’m going back home,” she muttered, arms crossed, fighting the urge to tack a ‘ma’am’ on there. This lady really was like her teacher.

“Okay. Are you by yourself?” Lucy asked, looking around the room, then back at her with such genuine concern she had to drop her gaze to the ground.

“Yeah. I’m almost there though.” Another day or two of travel was close.

“Where’s home?”

“About an hour out of the Yermo settlement.”

“Huh...when did that one pop up?” the Ghoul wondered idly, and she gripped the knife, not willing to admit that she had no idea...that it had been there as long as she could remember.

“It’s been there forever,” she told him instead, trying to sound derisive.

He just snorted again. “So, thirteen years? I’ll bet I haven’t been out this way since before your daddy was born, sweetie.”

Jen had no idea if that was true...he talked like a person, sort of, but he was a ghoul. Did ghouls tell the truth? How long did they live?

“Why are you traveling so far by yourself?” Lucy wondered. The ‘at your age’ was implied, but she was nice enough not to say it.

“Some asshole took me yesterday. I killed him.” Here she glared at the Ghoul so he’d know she wasn’t afraid to do the same to him. He didn’t seem too worried, but his eyes did linger on her bloodstained knife. So did the lady’s. “Now I’ve got to get home.”

“Took you?” Lucy asked, glancing over at the Ghoul. “You mean...he kidnapped you? Why?”

“Slaver, I guess.” She tried her best to keep her voice nonchalant. No need for these two weirdos to know she’d cried the whole time he’d been dragging her behind him, rope tied around her hands. That she’d curled up as far away from him as possible the night before, sobbing into her bound hands and praying to whoever would listen that he didn’t touch her. That she’d been too afraid to remember the knife in her boot until after he’d gone to sleep... that she’d thrown up after she’d stabbed him in the neck before dawn, nearly severing his head in her desperation to be free again.

That she’d only grabbed his hat and his water and lighter before fleeing, not realizing she’d left the gun until she’d been nearly a mile away and too scared to go back for it. Or that she’d wandered too far south because she’d been so afraid and exhausted, not realizing it until she’d looked up at the sun..she’d added hours to her trip because she’d been too stupid to focus.

“One of Caesar's, maybe.” The Ghoul told his lady when she turned to look at him. “I haven’t heard anything about him in a while, so he may not be around anymore. Could be raiders too.”

Lucy turned back to her, still gentle. “You said you’re almost there? How much further?”

“A day, maybe.”

“Okay...why don’t we come with you?”

“We?” the Ghoul interrupted, incredulous. “Darlin’, you got a mouse in your pocket? Who the hell is ‘we?’”

Lucy shot her ghoul a look. “She lives close to a settlement.”

“We just left a settlement yesterday. You want to stay in another hotel that bad? Because if you plan on getting sidetracked every other day, it’s gonna take us the rest of your life to get to Vegas.”

“I thought that was the golden rule.”

He just stared at her like her mom looked at her dad sometimes when he was trying to tame a feral cat or rescue an injured dog. Like he loved her but he didn’t know what to do with her. Could the two of them be together like that? Was it even allowed? She guessed out in the wastes, you could do whatever you wanted, but in a settlement?

Lucy held up her arm, and for the first time, Jen noticed the device there. It wasn’t like anything she’d ever seen...it had a green square the lady tapped, and something that looked like a map popped up. “If it’s the same Yermo from before the war, it’s not even out of our way. We just follow this road north and we’ll be there in a day or two.”

The Ghoul turned to Jen, then back at his lady friend. Sighing, he shook his head and sat down, folding himself slowly onto the floor and leaning against the wall. "Fine. But if she stabs me, I'm making jerky out of her."

"He's kidding," Lucy hurried to tell her when she scooted a little further away from him.

"The hell I am."

Jen was more inclined to believe him.

Lucy sat on the floor beside him, right in the middle of the two of them, and hesitantly, Jen sat back down too, sticking to her corner. The dog made her way over, sitting beside Jen and resting her head in her lap. Hesitantly, she gave the dog's head an experimental pat, smiling a little when her tail started to thump against the wooden planks of the floor.

In the quickly disappearing light from the setting sun, Jen saw the Ghoul hold something out to the lady whose face lit up in delight. "How many of those did you buy?" she cried, and he chuckled. It was a strange sound, wheezy and soft...it didn't fit with what she knew about ghouls. Ghouls didn't laugh. They ate people. They were monsters.

"Enough for supper tonight at least."

To her surprise, a moment later Lucy held a cup out to her, and when Jen peered inside, she found a couple of cherry tomatoes, a few pieces of dried meat, and on top, a cornbread muffin. "Are you hungry?"

She was too hungry not to nod and take it, fingers grabbing at the meat and stuffing it into her mouth before she'd made the conscious decision to eat it. She didn't think she'd ever been so hungry in her entire life. The tomatoes burst in her mouth when she bit down, and even though the cornbread was a little stale, it was still the best thing she'd eaten in a long time, slightly sweet and crumbly.

"It's mole rat," the lady told her like this was all normal...like the three of them had eaten together plenty of times. Like it was normal for ladies and ghouls to wander around together and share food with strange kids. "The meat. We just shot it yesterday."

"Thank you," she murmured, remembering her manners now that she'd had a couple of bites, and the lady smiled softly at her.

"You're welcome."

The Ghoul held an inhaler to his mouth and took a puff of something. Drugs? Or medicine? She was afraid to ask...afraid to let her gaze linger too long lest he turn his attention back to her, so she went back to her food, trying to eat the rest slowly enough that she wouldn't be sick.

"Whose Ceaser?" Lucy asked after a moment, taking a bite of her own cornbread and breaking the silence.

“Some people pronounce it with the c, like the Emperor,” the Ghoul told her, eyes on the door that didn’t close all the way. “He’s just another nutjob that wants to control the wastes. Set up his little society after the Roman Empire. You learn about that down in your Vault?”

“Of course we did. The Roman Empire was one of the largest empires in history, and it reached its height in 117 AD stretching from...”

“Alright, Miss MacLean,” he told her with a snort. “Wasn’t asking for a history lesson. You know how they punished criminals?”

She went quiet, and when she spoke again, her voice was almost afraid. “They...crucified them?”

He nodded. “That they did.”

“Do...do they still...”

“They did. Last I heard, about fifteen or so years ago, there was some kind of battle at the Hoover dam. Caesar’s Legion went toe to toe with the New California Republic...tried to take control of New Vegas from the decrepit old asshole running it.”

Jen thought his choice of words was interesting considering what he was, but kept that thought to herself.

“Who won?”

“No idea.” He didn’t sound like he cared much either. Jen had heard all those words before...Caesar’s Legion and the NCR...and she knew that New Vegas was a city. But her family kept to themselves...tried not to hear too much gossip just in case it led to trouble.

Then Jen let herself backtrack. “Vault?” she asked, turning to the lady.

“Oh...yes. I’m from a Vault. Vault 33.”

Jen couldn’t have hidden her curiosity if she’d tried. “Really?” she demanded, questions spilling out of her as she leaned in closer. She’d never even met someone who’d *met* someone that lived in a Vault! “Why did you leave? Is that where you got that thing on your arm? Where is it? Are you going back? What was it like? Did you really have running water? I heard you could turn a lever and hot water came out of a pipe for taking a bath! And a boy at school told me that people down in Vaults could have cake every day if they wanted!”

Lucy laughed, her smile indulgent like the one her dad gave her sometimes when she asked lots of questions. “Um...I left my Vault because my father was kidnapped and I wanted to find him. Vault 33 is by the ocean...”

“Santa Monica,” the Ghoul put in, popping a cherry tomato into his mouth.

She nodded at that, glancing back at him. “California,” she clarified, and Jen was glad because she didn’t know where Santa Monica was. “This is a PipBoy,” she told her, holding

up her arm for closer inspection. “And yes, we all have them. I do want to go back to the Vault to see my brother but I don’t want to live there again. And we did have running water.” The lady thought for a second, then went on. “We didn’t have cake every day, but we did have it for special occasions. I had cakes for my birthday every year, and we had one at my wedding.”

Jen wrinkled her nose, unable to help herself. “To him?” she asked, jerking her chin towards the Ghoul who lifted both brows, and Jen thought Lucy’s face might have gone kind of red. Then again, it was hard to tell with the sun so low. She didn’t seem bothered by the question, though.

“No. Um...my husband was from another Vault. Or...I thought he was. So, raiders actually snuck into my Vault and one of them pretended to be the man I was supposed to marry. I met Cooper on the surface after I left.”

“Oh...you two got married up here?” That made more sense, she guessed. She didn’t know if anyone would marry a regular lady and a ghoul, but she didn’t think ghouls lived in Vaults, so it had to have been on the surface.

“No. We...Cooper and I are friends. We aren’t married. I’m not married anymore. To anyone.”

“Oh.” Jen didn’t think that was the whole truth, but these were strangers and her mom was always telling her to keep her nose out of the business of strangers...plus, the last thing she wanted to do was make the Ghoul mad, or interact with him at all really, so she moved past it. “What did you eat in the Vault?”

Lucy answered more of her questions as the light faded, the Ghoul getting up partway through, but even though Jen pointed her knife at him the minute he got up, he just walked outside, that dog trailing behind him. He didn’t come back until the lady was telling her all about the cornfield where they grew crops, sitting back down in the spot at Lucy’s side, pulling off his long, tattered coat and laying back.

“Enough yapping, darlin’. It’s past her bedtime.”

Jen’s jaw went tight but she bit down on her tongue to keep from snapping back at him. This wasn’t her brother, and she still had half a mind to slip out of the shack once he was asleep and risk traveling at night to get away from him. Sure, Lucy seemed nice, but would she keep him from eating her in her sleep? Then again, he didn’t seem too interested in her. And he had shared his food. Well, their food. Still. Jen decided to curl up in the corner like before and keep her knife close, just in case.

“Here,” Lucy murmured, and when Jen opened her eyes, heavy from exhaustion now that her belly was at least mostly full, the lady was laying something on top of her...something warm. A blanket? Who the hell gave away a blanket for nothing?

“Thanks.” Jen couldn’t help from sounding suspicious, but Lucy just went back to her place beside her ghoul, laying down beside him on her back. Through eyes so heavy she could barely keep them open, every blink feeling like her last, Jen watched him give her that long

coat, then lift his arm. The lady rolled over until she was right against his side, her head going to his chest, and his arm wrapped around her, hand resting on her back. They moved like they were following the steps to a routine they'd done a hundred times before, and as Jen finally let her eyes close, knife on the ground by her hand, she wondered why Lucy had lied about them being married.

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much to everyone who has been reading and reviewing! Your kind words mean so much to me and I try to reply when I can! I don't have anyone beta reading this so please forgive any mistakes! I try to fix them when I catch them :).

Lucy knew that Cooper was awake when she opened her eyes. His wheezing breaths were steady and even, and she worried that he needed to take more of his medicine. She could tell that the sun was starting to rise, the shack filling with a gentle glow, and it was warmer than it had been when she'd fallen asleep. She'd given the little girl her sleeping bag, so of course Cooper had offered to let her sleep close to him again, and his hand was still pressed to her back...because he must not want to wake her. Or maybe he just missed human contact. She thought that was probably more likely. People on the surface were cruel to ghouls a lot of the time, and even if he'd done some cruel things to her when they'd first met, she knew now that he'd been doing a job...trying to find the doctor. Then trying to get his medicine. Ever since he'd invited her to travel with him, he'd been mostly kind, if not grumpy and strange at times.

He kept her warm. She gave him human contact. An honest exchange.

She would get up soon, she promised herself. She needed to use the bathroom and probably check on Jen, and then they would need to get her back home and continue their journey toward New Vegas. But Cooper's arm was so comfortably heavy around her, his hand warm on her back, his chest rising and falling, and she could hear his heart beating steadily under her ear.

This was what she wanted. It was strange...attraction, Lucy understood. Attraction was a natural part of life. Attraction and desire and lust were all normal and healthy. Lucy had been attracted to plenty of people. She had felt desire for Max in Vault 4...desire and attraction and, honestly, the hope of some sexual release. And when she'd kissed him, that had been nice too...she'd hoped that they could live together in the Vault one day. Have a happy life together. Fall in love.

So what, she wondered, was this? It was attraction, for sure. Cooper was her friend, and she also thought he was attractive. It was okay to be attracted to your friends. It was okay to desire your friends too...but it was more than that. She wanted to stay with him. Just the thought of parting ways made her ache with sadness. She liked it when he smiled and when he laughed, which was normal for friends, but also when he held her.

She wasn't the only one in this friendship, though. Sure, Cooper tolerated her company. Maybe he even liked her...he'd saved her life and he looked out for her. He took care of her.

No one, she thought, had ever taken care of her so well. But he hadn't seemed happy in the hotel when she'd crawled into his arms without being invited, and while they'd been staying at the hotel so she could recover, he'd spent a lot of time seemingly avoiding her, cleaning his guns over and over or leaving the room altogether. And sometimes it was like he didn't even want to look at her for too long, eyes always slipping away from hers.

Then, the day after they'd left the settlement, when it had been time for them to sit down to lunch, he'd pulled out a cornbread muffin, chuckling and giving her the softest smile when she'd felt herself practically bouncing in excitement. He took care of her. He liked it when she was happy. But he hadn't communicated anything further, and there was nothing more important than enthusiastic consent, so Lucy shifted against him, planting a hand on the ground and pushing herself upright. His arm withdrew immediately, letting her go, and she gave him a cheerful smile. "Good morning."

He grunted, sitting up, his eyes going right to the corner along with hers. The little girl was still asleep, wrapped in Lucy's blanket, Dogmeat curled up beside her, chin on her shoulder. Jen was nothing like the children Lucy was used to...the children in the Vault could be rambunctious and defiant, of course...that was normal human behavior and developmentally appropriate. But this little girl had the air of someone who'd seen too much...who'd grown up too fast. Then again, she'd grown up on the surface. The children in the Vault had been protected from this world. None of that protection had been extended to kids like Jen.

"You know we ain't taking in every stray we run across, right?"

"We're not taking her in," Lucy reminded him, pushing herself to her feet and holding out a hand to him. "We're just escorting her back home, which happens to be the direction we were traveling anyway."

He took her hand, his fingers warm against hers, stolen fingers brushing against one another as she helped him up. "And if it hadn't been on our way?"

Lucy just smiled and shrugged a little. "Guess we'll never know."

He sighed, shaking his head, then turned back to the corner. When she followed his gaze, she found the little girl staring up at them, face peeking out from under the sleeping bag. Jen might not be one of her students, but Lucy was determined to treat her like one, even if she was a bit rough around the edges. She was still just a child.

"Good morning," she greeted with a smile.

"Hi," the kid mumbled, keeping a close eye on Cooper as she climbed out of the sleeping bag and then to her feet, staying close to the wall. He didn't pay her any mind, just pulled his duster back on, slinging the ammo belt over his shoulder and then the shotgun, saving the holster that sat on his hip for last. Without a word, he headed outside, Dogmeat jumping up and following him, and Lucy gave her a reassuring smile.

"Don't worry. He won't hurt you. He's nice," she promised the girl, although 'nice' wasn't exactly the right word. He *could* be nice. And she didn't think he'd hurt a child as long as that child wasn't actively trying to kill him.

“Darlin’, you can’t go around telling people I’m nice,” Cooper called from outside. “I do have a reputation to uphold.”

Jen gave her a dubious look, sticking her knife in her boot. The night before, the girl had looked worse...eyes wide and terrified as she’d pressed herself against the wall like she’d wanted to go through it, she’d looked like a cornered animal. Now she looked a little better, probably thanks to the food and rest. Lucy dug in her pack, pulling out a bottle of purified water, then held it out.

“Make sure to ration it,” she warned softly. “I don’t have a lot.”

The girl just stared at the water, uncomprehending. “What do you want for it?”

“Nothing,” Lucy assured her. “It’s a gift. You can have it.”

Jen snatched it like she might change her mind, hurrying to fill her canteen with it. “Thank you.”

“Of course. Are you feeling okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“Did the person who took you hurt you?” she asked, trying to be delicate.

“I said I’m fine.” There was a little bit of bite to her voice. So she didn’t want to talk about it. Lucy didn’t blame her.

“Okay.” Lucy nodded, grabbing the sleeping bag and rolling it up. Then she tilted her head towards the door, raising her voice with a smile. “We should go. He’s a very mean bounty hunter that doesn’t like to be kept waiting and who definitely isn’t nice.”

Outside, she could hear Cooper snort, and could practically see him rolling his eyes. Jen’s eyes shot to the source of the sound as if she could see him through the walls, then back to Lucy, lips twitching a little. Lucy counted that as a win and led the little girl outside.

“Better?” she asked.

He just grunted, but she could see him fighting his own smile.

“You know,” Lucy told the girl once they’d gotten started, the three of them sharing pieces of jerky for breakfast, “I was a teacher in the Vault.”

“You act like a teacher,” Jen told her, making Cooper snort again. He walked a little ahead of them, and she noticed that Jen stuck close to her and as far away from him as possible, Dogmeat walking by her side. Every once in a while, the little girl would reach out and pet her, and the dog’s tail would whip back and forth in excitement.

“I taught the little children...first and second graders. I taught gymnastics too. And I helped teach the older children how to maintain some of the equipment around the Vault. Do you go to school?”

“Yeah, sometimes. Some of our neighbors have kids too, and we all do lessons together at the little schoolhouse out behind their farm. And sometimes we go to the settlement.”

“What subject do you like best? I always liked history. And English. I liked reading books.”

The girl glanced at her, kind of hesitant, and Lucy hoped she wasn't pushing too much. Kids in the Vault always loved answering questions about themselves but this girl seemed more reserved. “I'm good at math.” Then, after a moment of silence, “What's gymnastics?”

“It's...a form of exercise. We did routines and competed to see who could be the best. We learned how to do cartwheels and flips...lots of different types of movement.”

The girl just stared at her and Lucy looked around. It was all sand along both sides of the road, and there weren't any major cracks in the asphalt where they were. “Let me show you,” she offered, putting her pack and rifle down. A few feet ahead, Cooper sighed, but he moved off to the side of the road, crossing his arms and waiting, seeming resigned.

“Go ahead,” he told her sarcastically, gesturing towards the road. “We're not pressed for time or anything. I've got nothing better to do than watch you teach this kid how to do a cartwheel.”

She laughed. “It only takes a second.” She took a couple of steps, then pushed off from her right leg, going from a cartwheel to a back handspring and finishing with her arms up, big smile in place just like she'd been taught. “Like that!” she told the girl whose jaw had dropped.

“How did you do that?”

“Nope,” Cooper cut in, shaking his head. “We ain't doing wasteland gymnastics, Vaultie.”

“I thought you had nothing better to do?” Lucy reminded him, grinning when he shot her a look. “I distinctly remember you saying we weren't pressed for time.”

He huffed, shaking his head and resumed walking. Still smiling, Lucy grabbed her pack and her rifle. “I'll try to explain it while we walk. Come on.”

The girl did, and Lucy did her best to explain the process of a cartwheel while not stopping so Cooper didn't get grumpy. The girl tried a couple of times, ending up in a heap in the sand most times, but to her credit, she got right back up every time, and although Cooper glanced back at them a couple of times, he never complained. In fact, Lucy could have sworn he almost smiled when Jen landed on her feet after several attempts.

“Better!” she cried, clapping. “It takes a lot of practice. We used to have practices a couple of times a week when I was little. I started when I was five.”

“My mom started teaching me how to shoot when I was six,” the girl volunteered, more relaxed than Lucy had seen her since they'd first met. “I'm the best at shooting bloatflies out of all the kids in the settlement. We had an infestation once, and I helped the grownups kill all of them.”

“Wow. That’s impressive.” Lucy made sure to keep her voice sincere but not too over the top. Kids hated being patronized, and it really was impressive. “I didn’t see any animals until I left the Vault. I didn’t even know bloatflies existed when I was six.”

“Then where did you get the dog?” she wondered, petting Dogmeat.

“Oh, she belonged to someone I knew.” She winced a little at the memory. “Then when he died, Cooper took her in.”

He glanced back at her, brows raised. “More like she started following me around.”

She shrugged, then turned back to the girl, not about to get into the specifics of that story. “Do you have pets?”

“Kind of. There are a couple of cats that live in our barn. We can’t really pet them, but sometimes they sit with me. And my dad tried to rescue a dog that got hurt but it died.”

Cooper stopped, and for a second, Lucy thought he might say something about that, but he just turned to look behind them. Lucy turned too, but she couldn’t see anything for the sun, even with her hat. Beside her, Jen took a drink of water from her canteen, eyes focused on Cooper.

“Cooper?” Lucy asked, keeping her voice soft.

He grunted.

“What’s wrong?”

He took a puff of his inhaler, then shook his head. “Nothing. Let’s...”

Beside Jen, Dogmeat tensed, then Lucy spotted it...something moving under the sand beside them. “What...” she started, then grabbed Jen by the arm, yanking her back behind her as something huge emerged from the ground. She knew the shape of the thing but not the size, although she really should have been used to that by now. Dogmeat snarled, racing to the side of the scorpion that was at least twice her size, dodging the stinger that shot out inhumanly fast as Lucy grabbed her gun, firing three shots and hitting the tail twice.

“Aim for the head!” Cooper called, his own gun going off beside her. She did, taking a step back, Jen’s hand gripping the back of her shirt as stumbled back too. The scorpion took two of her bullets to the head before dropping, but another one was already crawling out of the sand and skittering towards her, the clicking noise making her shudder. Jumping back, she dodged the stinger, firing and missing, then firing again and making the thing screech when she hit it in the head. It didn’t stop coming though, and she took several steps back along to the road to give herself some distance. That finally allowed her to catch sight of Cooper again who had several of his own to deal with, although his were smaller. One of them went down with a gunshot to the head just as Lucy finally managed to kill hers.

Behind her, Jen screamed, and Lucy turned just in time to see the giant scorpion that had come up behind her. The little girl threw herself to the side, stinger following her and hitting

the pavement right where she'd just been standing. Lucy turned, gun raised, when something stabbed her in the hip, her whole leg catching fire as she went down hard with a cry, leg giving out from under her. "Fuck!" she gasped, thinking absently that Cooper was a bad influence just as Jen appeared from behind her, throwing herself at the scorpion and driving her knife into the top of its head, Dogmeat barking and snarling at its side as if to distract it.

"Fuck!" An echoing cry came from Cooper who was glancing over at her, firing as he tried to make way over and kill all four of his. Lucy twisted from her spot on the ground, aiming and unloading three bullets into the scorpion behind her, spinning as soon as it dropped to aim at the one Jen had just stabbed, Cooper giving a pained grunt behind them. One glance at him showed that he was still dealing with two more small ones despite the constant gunfire that made her head ring.

Jen was surprisingly fast, jumping away as Lucy sat up, struggling against the burning in her leg to take aim, firing as soon as Jen was out of the way. Dropping her pistol, Lucy grabbed her rifle instead, forcing herself to her feet and firing again, the two of them stumbling back as it approached. Then Jen wasn't behind her anymore, and she glanced back to find her lunging towards another one, knife flashing as it disappeared into the scorpion's head. Another shot at the giant one coming towards her dropped it, and she spun again. "Jen, move!"

The girl did, dodging sideways just as Lucy moved in closer, risking the stinger to shoot it point blank. Thankfully, the scorpion dropped with a last screech, twitching a few times before laying still.

With no more coming for them, Lucy turned and aimed at the final one coming up behind Cooper, stinger primed to strike, and shot it twice in quick succession, grinning in relief when it dropped. He spun right as it hit the sand, pistol ready, then relaxed, looking around the immediate area, then at Dogmeat who was digging into the biggest one. Lucy hadn't realized how loud the last few minutes had been until it was suddenly silent apart from her out heartbeat pounding in her ears.

"Here," the little girl offered, and Lucy turned to find her holding up the pistol by the barrel. Smiling, she took it.

"Thank you."

"Goddamn pests," Cooper grumbled, making his way over. "People used to keep them as pets if you can believe it." There was a hole in his vest right at his shoulder, and another one on his side, and he limped a little as his eyes scanned her, then the little girl. "Did you just stab that thing with a knife?"

"Yeah," Jen told him, chin up in defiance like she was ready for a fight.

He huffed, shaking his head, smile reluctant and impressed. "Well alright then. You've got nerves of steel, kid."

The girl just shrugged, turning to Dogmeat like her eating a scorpion was the most interesting thing happening, but Lucy saw her straighten, her smile growing despite herself, and she

didn't even back away when Cooper reached them.

"Alright, little killer. How bad?" he asked.

"You're hurt too." She reached for his shoulder but he brushed her hand aside.

"It's healing as we speak. You, on the other hand..." he leaned in, eyeing the hole in her pants. "Sit down," he ordered, and since there were no boulders or rusty cars around to lean on, she just sat on the hot pavement, legs outstretched, the movement making her wince.. "If you're going to get stung by a radscorpion, which I don't suggest you do, the bigger the better," he told her conversationally as he pulled out his canteen and poured a little of the water onto the wound in her hip. "The bigger they are, the more diluted the venom."

He handed her his canteen and she took it with shaking hands even though she had her own, taking a sip. She felt strange...light headed and kind of weak, although not nearly as bad as when she'd been shot.

"You know how to get the meat off a radscorpion?" he asked the little girl who tensed at the question as though remembering who exactly he was, then she relaxed a little and nodded.

"Yeah. I've seen my dad do it."

"Go ahead and get us some lunch then, sweetheart."

She nodded, pulling her knife back out and heading for the biggest one that Dogmeat wasn't currently eating.

"I'll get a fire started. You'll feel better after you eat. Here. Last one." He pulled a cornbread muffin out of his pack and Lucy couldn't help laughing a little, their fingers brushing as she took it.

"Thank you."

He used a few pieces of scrap wood to get a fire started right there in the middle of the road, and Jen returned to them with chunks of meat he put in a tin cup that he nestled in the flames. The first portion went to Lucy, and she tried not to grimace at the gamey flavor. She was getting used to eating strange things, and if she thought about it, scorpions were at least better than flies. He gave the next serving to Jen, then ate some of his own, wincing as he shifted beside her and taking a sip from his flask, then a hit from his inhaler.

She did feel better after eating, but he still poured a little of his alcohol over the hole in her hip, then covered it in gauze. "We'll mend those next time we stop," he told her, gesturing to her pants. "You ready to get a move on?"

Lucy nodded, grateful that when she stood, the pain was reduced to a dull throb. She felt stronger too...less dizzy. Jen kept glancing at her as they walked, looking nervous, and Lucy shot her a smile. "Do you see radscorpions a lot at your farm?" she asked, noticing that Cooper's limp, while better, was still there.

“Sometimes. We found a nest a couple years back between us and the settlement. I had a gun then, though.”

Lucy kind of wished she had a gun now, even if the thought of children having to carry one for survival made her stomach turn. Children should be safe! They shouldn’t have to know how to kill something just to survive.

“You...” Jen hesitated, then raised her voice a little. “You said they were pets?” she asked, addressing Cooper without a knife in her hand for the first time.

“That they were,” Cooper told her. “People out here bred them to be more docile...they weren’t hardly as big as your hand.”

“Did they sting?”

“They could. Usually didn’t though.”

The little girl hesitated, then glanced at Lucy. “How old is he?” she asked softly, but Cooper heard anyway, giving a short chuckle.

“Old, sweetheart. Old as dirt.”

A long silence, then, “Are you from before the war?” she asked, voice incredulous.

“Now what makes you think that?”

“How else would you know they raised scorpions as pets, or what they used to look like?”

“She’s got you there,” Lucy told him, grinning when he glanced back at her.

That seemed to be all the confirmation she needed, and although she stayed close to Lucy, Jen’s questions came rapid fire from then on out. “Wait...so you were really alive before the bombs fell?”

“I was.”

“What was it like? Before?”

“Better.”

“Did you not have to worry about radiation?”

“Didn’t even know what that was until I was grown. Wasn’t a problem before the bombs. Not for most people.”

“Did you drive a car? Like...a real car?”

“I did.”

“What color was it?”

“I had more than one, sweetheart. The last one was yellow.”

“What were the animals like?”

“Smaller. Less dangerous.”

“Did you have a TV? A real one that worked?”

“I did.”

“What did you do? Did you have a job?”

“I was a Marine. Fought up in Alaska.”

“Does that mean you wore the armor!?”

“Sure did.”

“I saw a knight last week! He was wearing the armor too!”

That brought Cooper to an abrupt halt, and Lucy froze beside her. Slowly, he turned around, brows raised. Nervously, Jen snapped her mouth shut like she might have said something wrong.

“Did you now?” he asked, voice surprisingly mild

She nodded. “Yeah. He didn’t have a helmet on though. The armor had a big scratch in the front. He was passing through...my parents talked to him.”

“Which way was he headed?”

“Are you going to hurt him?” she asked, voice faint, sounding like the kid she was as she glanced over at Lucy.

“He’s my dad,” she put in softly before Cooper could answer. “He...he did something really bad. He lied about something important and he hurt a lot of people. We need to talk to him.”

Thankfully Cooper didn’t correct her. And technically it was true...surely they’d talk to him before he killed him. Jen hesitated, looking between the two of them, then pointed the way they were heading. “He was going towards the settlement. Up this road.”

Cooper nodded, looking relieved. “Well, darlin’, at least we know we’re going the right way.”

It was another four hours, the sun close to setting, before a ramshackle looking farmhouse came into view. Jen had tried cartwheels a few more times, but it was too hot to keep trying, so she’d switched to asking Cooper more questions about life before the war. Surprisingly, he hadn’t seemed too put out, just answered her questions and kept walking. Then she played fetch with Dogmeat for a while when the dog came up to her with what Lucy feared was a

human bone. Jen just took it and threw it, laughing when Dogmeat raced after it, then sprinted back, bowing playfully, her tail whipping back and forth.

“This yours, sweetheart?” Cooper asked, pointing to the house coming closer with every step, and Jen’s shoulders sagged in relief as she nodded.

“Yeah. That’s mine.”

He stopped, turning to them. “What are the odds your parents don’t shoot first and ask questions later?” he wondered, expression wry.

To Lucy’s surprise, Jen hesitated, lips pressed tightly together. “I...I’m sorry,” she told him, looking it. “I don’t think you should meet them. They...”

“Hey!”

The sound had her words dying in her throat, and they all turned to find two figures approaching fast, a man and a woman, both with rifles pointed right at him.

Cooper strode towards her then, grabbing Lucy’s arm and pushing her behind him as he backed away from Jen, Dogmeat glued to his other side.

“But...”

”Darlin’, ain’t much more dangerous than a parent looking for their kid,” he warned her. “And you aren’t getting caught in the crossfire. Not again.”

“Wait!” Jen called, sprinting towards the two people that must have been her rapidly approaching parents, hand in the air. “It’s me! I’m okay! They helped me! They’re nice!”

Cooper shot Lucy a look. “See what you’ve done?”

”Jennifer!” The man’s voice was hoarse...desperate. The woman still had their rifle aimed straight at Cooper.

“I’m okay! It wasn’t them! They found me! They...” Her words were cut off when the man drew her into his arms, hand on the back of her head, rocking her back and forth like a baby. Lucy put a hand on Cooper’s arm, squeezing gently, her forehead resting on his shoulder for a moment as she remembered his own lost little girl. He seemed to stop breathing at the contact.

“Who the hell are you?” The other person, a woman, demanded, sounding just as upset as the man.

”Hi! I’m Lucy!” She called, peering over Cooper’s shoulder and waving. “This is my friend Cooper. We’re just passing through!”

“Ran into your little girl. Thought we’d bring her back. We were passing through this way anyway,” he put in.

“What could the likes of you want in these parts, ghoul?”

Lucy stepped right around his arm, slipping away when he went to grab her. “We were passing through,” she repeated, voice harder. “We’re trying to find someone, and we ran into your daughter. We wanted to help her.”

“There’s no reward, ghoul fucker. So...”

“Mom, stop!” Jen cried, grabbing the barrel of the gun and pointing it down at the ground. Lucy was glad...based on what she knew of Cooper, he was probably about one more word from pulling his own gun. “She’s nice! They both are! They helped me!”

When the woman looked down at her daughter, she looked like a completely different person. Softer. She grabbed Jen’s arm and pulled her close, nose resting in her hair, one hand still holding the rifle.

“We’ll be on our way,” Cooper told them. Surprisingly, he didn’t even have his gun drawn, but he did move so he was in front of her again, and she knew he’d draw if he had to.

Jen looked at them, then at her parents, seeming torn.

“They helped me,” she told her parents again, tugging on her mom’s arm. “They protected me from radscorpions. She’s a teacher! She’s from a Vault! And her husband was in the Marines!”

Lucy flushed but didn’t correct her. It didn’t matter...if them thinking he was her husband made them a little more likely not to shoot, she was fine with it. In front of her, Cooper sighed. Then, when she was quiet, he glanced back at her, brows raised. She just stayed focused on the lady with the rifle, though, making sure it stayed pointed at the ground.

The man approached then, putting his rifle back on his back. “You should stay for dinner. We’ve got a room in the barn too, if you want a place to sleep for the night.” His voice was softer than his wife’s, but he looked them in the eye as he strode forward. Cooper tensed, but the man just held out a hand. “It’s the least we can do.”

Cooper stared at him for a moment, considering, then shook his hand. Lucy did the same, giving him her best smile. “That’s really kind of you, but...”

“I insist. I’m Eric. This is my wife, Kathleen. We can’t thank you enough for bringing our daughter home.”

“It was no problem,” Lucy assured him. “We really were coming this way anyway.”

He nodded, then turned back to his wife and daughter, wrapping an arm around Jen and speaking softly to his wife. The woman didn’t look happy, but Jen’s soft voice joined in and Lucy only caught the end, her voice raising a little on “and I threatened to stab him and he didn’t shoot me!”

Lucy turned to Cooper, torn between the idea of a free dinner and a place to sleep and sitting through it with someone who obviously didn’t want them here...someone who didn’t like

ghouls and was apparently willing to shoot them on sight. “Should we?”

Cooper met her eyes, seeming to look for something there, then glanced down to the gauze on her hip and nodded to himself. “Why sweetheart, don’t you know it’s rude to turn down a stranger’s hospitality?” He shot her a quick smile before making his way towards the family, and, after a moment’s hesitation, Lucy and Dogmeat followed behind.

Chapter 16

The moment they were inside the house, Dogmeat plopping down on the front porch with a piece of jerky Cooper had tossed her, Lucy started to regret accepting this invitation. It was a small home, but as clean as any place she'd been inside since coming to the surface. They walked into a dining room, a cookstove and a refrigerator in one corner, and she realized they must have a generator. They'd passed a pump on their way to the house, along with the strange, two-headed cows, and Lucy wondered if there was an underground spring somewhere nearby that they pulled water from, and if that water was less radioactive than what she'd run into so far, or if they purified it somehow. She didn't want to ask...didn't get the feeling that Kathleen thought much of her to begin with.

Eric guided his daughter into another room where Lucy spotted a worn looking sofa and a bookshelf, but she tried not to stare...didn't want to be rude. "Thank you again for inviting us to dinner."

"I didn't," Kathleen told her shortly, moving over to the stove where a pot already sat. She struck a match and lit the burner, stirring whatever was inside.

She had no idea how to respond to that...nothing in her upbringing had prepared her for this situation. "Can I help you with anything? I can set the table or..."

"Bathroom's through that door. There's a basin of water if you want to get cleaned up." Her tone told Lucy that it wasn't really a suggestion and she was suddenly aware of every stain on her clothing...every piece of dirt and grime stuck to her.

"Of course. Thank you," she murmured, nodding to her and slinking into the bathroom, Cooper right behind her. The moment he shut the door, she put her hands to her face, leaning on the wall. "Oh my god," she muttered, cheeks flushing. "I just offered to help her in the kitchen and I'm filthy! I have radscorpion blood on my shirt!"

Cooper grunted, and when she glanced up at him, he was taking a puff from his inhaler, one hand gripping the table where the basin of water sat.

She hadn't really looked at him this closely since they'd fought off those scorpions...she'd known about the wound on his shoulder and the one on his side, but there were two more places on his back where his clothing had been ripped open. "Cooper?"

"Hm?"

"How many times did those scorpions get you?"

"No idea." He lathered the soap sitting next to the basin on his hands and scrubbed them.

The ones he'd been fighting were small...so the venom was more concentrated. He healed faster but...could the venom make him sick? He'd seemed focused on taking care of her before...had he been acting strangely? Then again, she hadn't noticed him acting odd when

he'd been outside of the Super Duper Mart and when she'd come back outside, he'd been on the ground. But he'd been hiding it from her then. They were friends now, right? Why would he hide anything like that from her now?

"Are you feeling okay?"

"Just peachy, sweetheart." He rinsed his hands, grabbing a towel to dry them off.

She reached for the back of his jacket, fingers just brushing against the edge of one of the tears in the fabric, when his hand shot out, quick as a radscorpion stinger, and caught her wrist.

"Now what exactly are you doing?"

Startled, she froze, but she wasn't afraid of him. Not anymore. "You're hurt," she told him simply. "I just wanted to help."

"It's already healing, Vaultie. Don't need any help."

"But..."

"Leave it, darlin'," he warned, voice tight.

She didn't understand...didn't get why he wouldn't let her just take a look when he'd helped her so many times. But he looked serious and not a little frustrated so she tightened her jaw and pulled her arm away, giving him a bright, cheery smile to hide her own frustration. Every time she thought she was starting to understand him...but it didn't matter. She had more important things to focus on. Like getting through this dinner. "Okie dokie."

She grabbed the soap, lathering her hands, then tying her hair back and washing her face for good measure. Pulling a brush through her hair, she tried to fluff it up some and make herself look at least sort of presentable. Then she dabbed some water on her shirt, trying to get the worst of the blood out. All the while, he just watched her from his spot by the door. She wasn't mad...she just didn't understand and she'd thought they were friends and sometimes he seemed to like her and sometimes he just pushed her away, wanting to keep her at arm's length. Why? Was she reading more into their relationship than was there? Had she been wrong when she'd thought that he was starting to like having her around?

Back in the kitchen, the table was set, Jen already in a chair next to a little boy who watched them with wide, deep set eyes. "Hello," Lucy greeted him with a smile, face softening automatically at the sight of him. "I'm Lucy. It's nice to meet you."

"Hi," he whispered, scooting a little closer to Jen.

"This is my brother, James."

"It's nice to meet you, James."

"You too." The words were practiced, his eyes going to Cooper behind her.

“This is my friend, Cooper.”

“Hi,” he whispered.

Cooper nodded, taking the seat across from Jen, and Lucy sat beside him. Eric and Kathleen placed dishes on the table, serving spoons included, and Lucy fought the urge to jump up and offer to help again. Instead, she did her best to look perfectly at ease, smiling at Jen and her brother. “How old are you, James?” she wondered.

The little boy held up a hand, thumb folded down.

“Four?” Lucy confirmed, and he nodded.

“He’ll be five next month,” Jen told her.

“That’s exciting. Do you do anything special for your birthday?”

“This isn’t a Vault,” Kathleen put in tightly as she sat down at the end of the table beside Lucy, Eric taking the spot by Cooper. “We don’t have the things I’m sure you’re used to.”

Thinking back to her ‘rules for a house guest’ lessons, Lucy made herself smile. “Our birthdays were always really simple in the Vault. We had Jello Cake, and homemade gifts. Clothing, homemade dolls...my favorite gift I ever got was a teddy bear my mom made for me.”

“I have a bear too,” James told her with a shy smile. “And Mama’s going to make a cake.”

“That sounds like fun.” Lucy scooped food onto her plate, passing the bowls to Cooper after she was done. Dinner was beans and corn and potatoes with some seared cubes of meat, all of it a little bland, but Lucy wouldn’t have complained if they’d put a gun to her head. She was just grateful for a full meal that included vegetables, since she had a feeling those were going to be few and far between in the desert.

“Our daughter said you were a soldier,” Eric spoke up, sounding hesitant like he wasn’t sure if he should believe that. Lucy understood...she’d had a hard time with the whole ‘prewar’ thing too. In fact, she still did.

“I was. Marines. Fought the Chinese up in Alaska.”

“What’s Chinese?” James wondered, picking up a piece of meat with his fingers.

“China was a country a long time ago. Chinese people lived there,” Cooper told him.

Eric took a bite of his food, swallowed, then asked, “What do you do now?”

So far, lots of people they’d run into had heard of Cooper, at least by reputation, but he’d mentioned that he hadn’t been this way in a long time, so Lucy thought maybe his reputation hadn’t made it this far east.

“We’re on our way to New Vegas...looking for her daddy,” he told them, jerking his head towards Lucy, and she was glad he hadn't brought up the whole bounty hunter thing.

“Right...the man in the power armor.”

Lucy nodded. “Yes. We need to talk to him.”

“What about?” Kathleen wondered, voice dry. She obviously didn’t believe they would just be talking.

“He has something to answer for,” Cooper told them simply.

Lucy hoped they would leave it at that.

“Jen said you were a teacher?” Eric asked Lucy, still doing his best at courtesy. She could appreciate that.

“Yes. I taught first and second grade, mostly history.”

“I’m going to school next year,” James piped up, dropping his fork in his excitement to tell her. “I’ll get to go with Jen!”

“The kids go with a couple of our neighbors,” Eric put in with a smile. “We’re too far from Yermo to send them there. Plus we need their help around their farm.”

“Oh, do you grow all of your own food?”

“Most of it. Corn, beans, potatoes, tomatoes. Plus we’ve got the chickens and the Brahmin.”

“Are those the cows with two heads?” she asked hesitantly.

“Yeah. Guess you didn’t have those in the Vault.”

“She said there weren’t any animals in the Vault at all!” Jen told them.

“None,” Lucy confirmed. “I’d never seen an animal up until I left the Vault.”

“Huh. Looks like you found a good dog.”

“She’s the best.”

Cooper huffed.

“How exactly did the two of you meet?” Eric wondered, glancing between the two of them.

“Oh...um...” Lucy ran through the story in her head, desperately trying to make it sound better than it was. “We met in Filly. A settlement in California. I had just left my Vault and we...had a mutual acquaintance.”

Cooper’s lips twitched but he thankfully didn’t laugh. “That we did,” he muttered.

“And then we started traveling together when we realized we were both trying to find my father.”

“Have you been together long?”

“Not very,” Lucy admitted, then realized he was asking if they’d been *married* long, thanks to Jen. She was torn...on one hand, she’d told the little girl the truth. On the other, if she just went along with this, they might be nicer to him...not that Kathleen was being *nice* exactly, but she hadn’t pulled out a gun yet.

Just then, the little boy reached for the bowl of potatoes, his hand knocking against his glass of milk, and it spilled everywhere, covering the table as Kathleen jumped up to get a rag. Lucy couldn’t help being grateful to have the spotlight taken off of them, then surprised when Kathleen kissed the boy’s head as he apologized.

“It’s okay, baby. Accidents happen.”

Thankfully, Jen took over talking for the rest of the meal, telling them all about how Lucy had taught her how to do a cartwheel and how she’d practiced a lot on their way back, then gave them a play-by-play of the radscorpion attack, Lucy chiming in to tell them how brave their daughter had been...how she’d helped kill them with only a knife. Then at the end of the meal, Lucy stood when Kathleen did, plate in hand.

“Please, let me help you clean up. It was so kind of you to let us eat with you...I’d like to help.”

Jen and James both got up too, ready to help, and the woman relented. “You can wash. The kids know how to dry and where everything goes.”

While the three of them cleaned up and Kathleen took leftovers out to the chickens, Cooper stepped outside with Eric. She wondered what they were talking about...if he’d tell her. She wondered why he wouldn’t let her help him when he was hurt. And she wondered if her leg was going to be sore the next day...it throbbed dully with every heartbeat, and he’d been stung more than her...was he in pain too? Did the medicine he took help with that? Were they friends? If they were, did that mean she was allowed to ask him these things?

She didn’t have long to think...soon Jen and James were competing to tell her all about the farm and their school, and to ask her more questions about the Vault. She answered them as best she could, telling them all about her apartment that she shared with her family and the crops they planted and the food they ate. She told them about Norman when they asked too, trying to avoid questions about her father. James told her that he wanted to be a knight when he grew up, and Jen rolled her eyes.

“You can’t. Knights get recruited when they’re really young. They train for their whole lives.”

“Really?” Lucy wondered. She hadn’t known that.

“Yes. They live there and train and go to school and everything, all together.”

“I have a friend in the Brotherhood.”

Jen’s jaw dropped. “You do?”

“Yes. His name is Max. We traveled together for a while. He’s very nice. I haven’t seen him in a while, though...he was in the armor when we met.”

“It’s so big!” James all but whispered, like a knight might be waiting around the corner.

“It is. It’s kind of scary, huh?”

He nodded, solemn. “Yeah. But knights are really strong and brave and they protect us!”

Lucy didn’t know if that was true...not anymore. But she just smiled and let him tell her all about his dreams of becoming a knight even as his sister insisted it was impossible.

Kathleen thanked her once all the dishes were clean, gesturing to her husband who had returned to the house with Cooper. “He can show you the room in the barn. We keep a bed in there for visitors. We’ve got water too.”

“Thank you again.” Lucy smiled at her, but the woman just nodded, and she gave up for the night. Her etiquette lessons were getting her nowhere with Kathleen, apparently.

She did her best not to limp as Eric showed her and Cooper to the room in the back of the barn. There was a bed in the corner with a makeshift table made out of a piece of wood laid across some milk crates. Off to the side was a wall made of boxes, and behind it, a basin of water sitting on an old nightstand along with a stack of folded wash cloths. Before he left, he hesitated in the doorway, glancing at Cooper. “I really do appreciate you taking care of our daughter. My wife too. She’s just...she has a hard time trusting strangers.”

“Probably a good thing,” Cooper told him simply.

“It wasn’t any trouble,” Lucy insisted. “Thank you for the room. And for dinner.”

“Of course. We’ll be in the main house if you need anything. I’d better help get the kids to bed.”

With that, the two of them were left alone in the room that smelled like hay and animals, Dogmeat already claiming a spot in the corner. That was fine with Lucy...over the last few months, she’d certainly slept in worse places. She went straight to the makeshift bathroom, unzipping her pants and pulling them down to her thighs in front of the basin of water, wincing at the movement, then twisted to look at the gauze on her hip. No blood had seeped through, and when she pulled it off, the wound was red and tender, a bruise forming around the puncture, but it didn’t look infected.

Cooper came up beside her, reaching for a cloth, but she grabbed the top one before he could.

“I’ve got it.”

He froze, hand hovering, then met her eyes, brows raised.

“It’s fine. I’ll take care of it,” she insisted.

Cooper smirked. “Uh huh?”

“Yep.”

He hummed, taking her in, wheels obviously turning. “Alright.” Crossing his arms, he leaned back against the wall, and she did her best to ignore him as she dug in her pack and pulled out more gauze, tape, her canteen, soap, and a tiny bottle of alcohol that Elliot had given her. “You’ve been holding out on me,” he commented, brows raised at the alcohol.

The smile she flashed him was sweet, then she turned back to the task at hand. Unfortunately, the angle was going to make this difficult, but after refusing his help, she knew she’d do it on her own if it killed her. She dunked a cloth in the basin of clean water, wrung it out, then pressed it gently around the puncture to clean the dirt off her skin. Next was the soap, and she did her best not to drip water on her jeans as she rinsed it off.

“You know, another set of hands might help make this a little easier, considering you can’t see what you’re doing.”

“I can see just fine,” she assured him.

“You are aware that I know what you’re getting at?”

“I have no idea what you mean.”

“I’ll just bet you don’t.”

She dabbed around the hole that scorpion had left in her, pointedly not looking at him, then picked up the bottle of alcohol. She didn’t let herself hesitate as she dumped some on the cloth, nor when she pressed it to the wound, but she couldn’t help the way her whole body jerked from the pain, tears filling her eyes against her will as they slammed shut. Clenching her jaw, she refused to cry out. Instead, she tried to breathe through it, the sharpness fading some after a moment, but when she opened her eyes, Cooper didn’t look amused anymore.

Taking a shaky breath, she reached for the gauze, but another hand closed around it first. “Come on, Lucy,” he murmured. “Let me help.”

“I can do it.”

“I know. But it’ll be easier if I help.”

“You don’t let me help you.” Her voice came out petulant like a child and she hated it. “If we’re friends, I want to help you too,” she told him then, trying to sound more reasonable.

Cooper was quiet for a long time, seeming to search her face for something. Then he gave a short nod. “Alright.”

She wasn't sure what he was agreeing to...if he was just saying that he understood what she was getting at or if he was saying she could help him. Either way, ran a dry cloth gently around the area, then pressed gauze to the puncture on her hip and taped it in place, smoothing the tape down as gently as he could. Then he moved away so she could pull her pants back up, her careful not to catch the gauze or move too much.

When she looked up at him again, he was unbuttoning his vest, laying it down beside the basin of water, then the shirt underneath. His jaw was clenched tight enough to break teeth, and he refused to look at her as he yanked the undershirt off, turning around abruptly and giving her a view of the places where the scorpions had stung him. There was a puncture wound by his shoulder, and the one she'd seen before on his side. The worst was right by his spine on his lower back, though, off to the right and so deep it had torn into the muscle. It was obviously healing, but slower than she thought it would be.

The skin on his back had been burned by the radiation, of course, and his ribs, while not sticking out, were visible. He was stiff, arms perfectly still at his sides, and it hit her then... he hadn't wanted her to see him. She'd never once seen him take his shirt off, which seemed strange considering the men she'd grown up with had never hesitated to be seen with the top part of their suit pulled down. And she'd seen plenty of men on the surface without their shirts. But people on the surface called him 'ghoul' and told him he wasn't welcome in their shops and Jen had called him 'rot face' and suddenly she wanted to wrap her arms around him...she didn't think he'd want her to, though. So instead, she got to work.

Dipping a new cloth in the water, she put one hand by his shoulder to steady both him and herself, then carefully started to clean the area around his shoulder, then his side, and then the worst one where it looked like the stinger had lodged and torn at his skin. His breaths were deliberate and shaky, and she wanted to ask if he was okay but she didn't want to embarrass him if it hurt, so she just tried to be careful, her thumb rubbing back and forth over his skin in a way she hoped was comforting. The skin under her fingers was rough and warm, raised in some places and pitted in others, and she wanted to run her hands over his whole back...to know what he felt like.

Attraction was normal, she reminded herself firmly, but boundaries were important and she wouldn't cross his. He was already on the fence about her doing this. She wouldn't give him a reason to tell her no the next time he got hurt.

Next was soap to clean and water to rinse. She used a fresh cloth to dry his skin, then used alcohol, him tensing every time. "Sorry," she murmured as she cleaned the one on his lower back, trying to make sure it was sanitized. "This one's deeper."

He didn't answer.

When she had finished taping gauze to each wound, they both just stood there for a moment, and she had to force herself to take a step back...to remove her hands from his skin. He was so warm...

He was her friend and she was helping him and she would be respectful of his boundaries. "All done," she told him, capping the bottle and packing her first aid kit away. She could feel his eyes on her and turned to meet them. "Do you feel okay?"

“Fine, sweetheart. They’ll all be healed by morning.”

“Good.” And with that, she pulled out the soft clothes he’d gotten her for sleeping, leaving him in the partitioned-off bathroom and headed out to the main room to get changed.

She was already in bed when he emerged from behind the wall, snug and warm under the blanket. Of all her Vault luxuries, she wasn’t sure if she missed her shower or her bed more. Maybe, she thought, one day she could help a settlement set up a system for running water. Maybe they could have purified water come out of a tap just like in the Vault. And maybe she could help them with a power grid too...help everyone have electricity to power refrigerators and water heaters and ovens and anything else they might need. Maybe Norman would help her bring luxuries of the Vaults to the people that needed them.

Maybe Cooper would help too.

He put out the lantern in the corner, casting the room into darkness, then climbed into bed beside her, his warmth immediately filling the space under the blanket. Lucy stayed where she was. She was already warm. She had no excuse. He hadn’t signed up to be her pillow. She was attracted to him and something else too but she needed to squash that before she made him uncomfortable. Still, in the dark, she risked a question. “Did the venom make you sick?”

“It doesn’t feel *good*,” he told her simply. When she was quiet, he went on. “I heal fast, sweetheart. That venom just slows it down some.”

“I have more of those pills Elliot gave me. For pain.”

“Save ‘em. God knows you’ll need them. You attract trouble like a magnet.”

She gaped at him, sitting up on her elbow, words out of her mouth before she realized he was baiting her. “How was it *my* fault that...” He was chuckling before she’d even finished and she bit her tongue. Dropping back onto her pillow, she rolled over, putting her back to him and fighting a smile.

“What, not gonna use me a pillow tonight, Vaultie?”

“Nope. You’ll just have to keep yourself warm,” she told him lightly, making him chuckle again.

She knew, though, that if he asked...if he reached for her, she’d say yes.

He didn’t ask. Didn’t reach for her. And even though she was covered in a blanket and his body heat made the bed comfortably warm, she still felt just a little cold. Banishing that thought, she closed her eyes and willed herself to fall asleep. It had been a long day, and the next one would be another long day...in fact, she had nothing but long days for the foreseeable future, so she needed her rest. She didn’t dream of the Vault, thankfully...in fact, she was so tired that she didn’t dream at all.

And in the morning when she woke, her head was on his chest, his arm around her, warm hand rubbing slowly back and forth against her back.

She must have sought him out in her sleep.

Cooper didn't complain.

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much to everyone who has been commenting! It means so much to me to know that people are enjoying this story that I'm having so much fun writing! Also, I'm justme--emily on Tumblr if anyone wants to chat :)

Lucy dressed in her Vault suit that morning, trying not to think too hard about the position in which she'd found herself that morning, or how it had felt to wake to Cooper's hand absently rubbing her back. He'd been awake...he was always awake before her, and for a long moment, she'd just lay there, enjoying the sensation. But the moment she'd shifted, his hand had stilled, arm dropping from around her. She hadn't gotten straight up though...had lay there for a few more of his heartbeats instead, her hand resting on his chest beside her head.

This is what I want.

This isn't what he wants.

With a sigh, she'd rolled over onto her back, pinning his arm to the bed and laughing at the look he shot her. His lips had twitched and he'd shaken his head, closing his eyes and releasing a long breath.

"Think I could get that back?"

"I don't know...you..."

The sound of barking had made them both jump, all playfulness forgotten as Cooper had slipped his arm out from under her, on his feet before she'd even managed to sit up. The door had been ajar and he'd yanked it open, only to freeze, dropping the gun she hadn't even seen him pick up.

"Cooper?"

"This is your fault," he'd told her simply, putting the gun back on the ground beside the bed. Frowning, she'd gotten up and moved past him, peering out into the bright morning sunlight, only to find James and Jen racing through the yard, Dogmeat in hot pursuit. The little boy had tripped and the dog had pounced, attacking him with her tongue and making him squeal in laughter.

"How is that my fault?" she'd asked with a laugh.

He'd pointed a finger at her. "You're making her soft." There had been no bite to his words so she'd rolled her eyes, pushing gently against his shoulder as she'd passed and making him

huff out a laugh.

Hair brushed, face scrubbed, teeth cleaned, and everything else as clean as she could get, Lucy zipped her Vault suit, glad that it was at least mostly clean. Once again, she wished for her washing machine and dryer, or at least another stream, but seeing as they were in the desert, she doubted that was going to happen any time soon.

Outside, the kids were still playing with the dog, neither of them paying Lucy or Cooper any mind as they passed on their way to the main house. Jen looked like a little kid, laughing and dropping onto the ground so Dogmeat could lick her face, and she wrapped her arms around the dog, burying her face in her soft fur.

The door was thrown open, and inside the kitchen, Kathleen stood at the stove, making breakfast, while Eric set the table. "They're liable to kidnap that dog of yours," he warned them with a wry smile.

"I'm liable to let them," Cooper grumbled, grunting when Lucy elbowed him.

"We are not leaving her! She's family!"

"Whose family?" he asked, incredulous.

"Our family!"

"Ours, huh?" His voice softened and she smiled at him, unable to help herself.

"Yes. Our family."

"You can fill up your water at the pump." Kathleen put in, interrupting the look he was giving her, and they both turned to the woman who was carrying food over from the stove. "If you keep following the I15 north, you're gonna run into another settlement in about two days. Watch out for the canyon, though. Don't get too close. The people that live there ain't always friendly," Kathleen told them, placing plates of eggs and some kind of meat on the table along with pieces of homemade bread. Lucy's mouth watered, stomach rumbling.

"Much obliged," Cooper told her with a nod, taking a seat, and Lucy followed suit.

"What about the settlement in Yermo?" she wondered, then took a drink of milk that was cold from the refrigerator. It was a little different than milk from the Vault, but still good.

"Best you skip that one," Eric put in, solemn as he poured his own glass of milk. "They don't take too kindly to...strangers."

Lucy opened her mouth but snapped it shut when Cooper rested a hand on her knee under the table. He wasn't looking at her, but he gave a gentle squeeze before going back to his own breakfast, a clear signal. For once, she followed directions, thanking them again for the food just as the kids came running through the front door. Cooper's hand shot out, catching his glass of milk right before James bumped into the table on his way in, Lucy following suit almost too late.

“Wash up, you two,” Eric ordered, taking a seat at the table while Kathleen took a plate with a handful of eggs and chunks of meat out to the porch.

“The dog can catch her own food,” Cooper told her.

“She entertained my children and let me make breakfast in peace for the first time in twelve years. She’s earned it.”

“Sir, can she stay?” James asked from the doorway to the bathroom, cheeks flushed from running.

Cooper shook his head. “Sorry, son. My *wife* here has grown pretty attached to her.” He smirked at Lucy, emphasizing the word, but she refused to rise to the bait, just focusing on her food and trying not to focus on the fact that she really didn’t hate that. Not at all.

“She’s a guard dog,” he went on. “Helps us keep an eye out for trouble on the road.”

“Are you leaving today?” Jen asked, peering out from the bathroom, towel in hand to dry her face.

“Soon as we finish eating.”

“Will you come back?”

Both children watched them with hope in their eyes, and Lucy couldn't help glancing at Cooper. His lips twitched a little, face softening.

“If we pass this way again, we’ll stop by.”

“You’ll be welcome.” Kathleen didn’t look at either of them as she said it, taking the chair beside Lucy.

She smiled down at her eggs, nudging Cooper with her knee. Maybe her etiquette lessons had paid off after all. He seemed to read her mind, shaking his head, lips twitching as he took a bite.

The silence didn’t last long...the kids arrived at the table and regaled them with tales of playing with Dogmeat all morning and the way the cats had all hidden from her and how fast she was between bites of food, neither of them seeming the least bit intimidated by Cooper anymore. Lucy wondered if Jen had talked to her brother about him, or if the little boy was just too young to be afraid of someone different for too long. He listened, grunting every once in a while, but he didn’t really seem bothered by the kids.

Then again, she thought, he’d had a daughter. And he’d worked at children’s birthday parties...so at one point in his life, he’d been used to being around kids.

When it was time to leave, they both filled their canteens at the pump and Lucy drank her fill, then filled it up again. The sun was already hot as it beat down on them and she wasn’t looking forward to walking through the desert, but at least they’d both have water. Back in their room, Lucy slung her pack onto her back, then her rifle, then buckled her holster,

glancing around to make sure she had everything, then smiled to herself when Cooper dropped a handful of caps onto the middle of the bed.

The kids both gave Dogmeat one last hug, then Jen surged forward and threw her arms around Lucy. Surprised but trying not to show it, Lucy put a hand on the back of the girl's head, closing her eyes when she squeezed her.

"Thank you," she whispered into Lucy's vault suit.

"Keep a gun on you from now on if you're gonna wander," Cooper told her, and she nodded.

"I will."

"Hopefully we'll see you again soon," Lucy murmured, patting her back, and the girl smiled up at her.

"See you soon." She said it like it had been a promise, and Lucy hoped it was one they could keep.

And then, once again, they were off.

It was less than an hour later that they passed the gate to the settlement, Cooper barely sparing it a glance from his spot slightly in front of her. Lucy turned to look though, staring at the makeshift steel fence made of what looked like scrap that stretched across the side of the road.

"It's not right," she couldn't help from saying, and Cooper chuckled a little like he'd been waiting.

"I know, Vaultie," he told her, more placating than anything.

"It's not," she insisted, glaring at the guards who stood by the entrance.

"Keep moving, ghoul," one of them called, gesturing with their rifle.

"We wouldn't visit your shithole if you paid us!" she snapped back, deliberately speeding up so she could walk beside Cooper. She was kind of surprised at how much energy that took.

"Goddamn, sweetheart. You've sure got a fucking mouth on you," he teased.

"It's your fault," she grumbled. "You're rubbing off on me."

"No swearing in the Vault?"

"It wasn't conducive to building community or effective conflict management."

"I guess I'll give you that. No fights in the Vault either?"

"We argued sometimes." Then, quietly, "Once Norman and I got into a fight and I shoved him."

He gave her a look of mock surprise. “You *shoved* him. Jesus, Vaultie, I’m shocked they didn’t kick you out for that.”

She laughed. “He could be really annoying when we were kids! He took my book and wouldn’t give it back.”

“Definitely a shoving offense.”

She smacked his arm, still giggling. “It was. He deserved it.”

“You won’t hear any arguing from me, darlin’.”

“I hope he’s okay,” she told him suddenly, arms crossed as they made their way down the road, all three of them looking out for raiders. The sun was so bright it made her dizzy, though, and she had to fight the urge to close her eyes against the glare.

“Any reason he wouldn’t be?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know. He lost our father and me all at once. And I know he has Chet to look out for him...”

“Those two fucking too?”

She knew he was joking...at least, she was pretty sure he was joking, but her mind went back to Jack at the bar, her hand lingering on Lucy’s arm, and the man whose clothes she’d mended...whose husband she’d met working in the garden. It made sense. If you weren’t focused on having children, and if you fell in love with someone...well, it seemed like love tended to come before marriage on the surface.

While she was lost in thought, Cooper turned to stare at her, wide-eyed. “Sweetheart, if you’re about to tell me that you and your brother are both fucking the same guy who is also your cousin...”

“No...my brother isn’t having sex with Chet. That isn’t really done in the Vaults. Or...not in my Vault. Marriages happened for the purpose of having children.”

“Ah.”

“I mean...that’s...that’s what we were supposed to do. Repopulate the country. And...even if they weren’t cousins, Chet and Norm couldn’t have children.” But if her brother lived on the surface, would he rather be with another man? “We didn’t marry for love,” she told him simply. “I never expected to. I hoped that eventually, once we got to know each other, my husband and I would fall in love but...well, he stabbed me so...” she shrugged, her smile wry.

He didn’t laugh. “That sounds like a shitty system, sweetheart.”

“It was all a lie anyway. We were never going to repopulate the country. I don’t even know what the point was. There are still people on the surface. If it was an experiment, I don’t

understand it. But I want to get Norman out. After we find my dad...he can help us. Find your family. He will...he's so smart and...I think he really will be happier up here."

"Was your brother in your riflery club?"

"No. He wasn't much of a joiner."

"Can he shoot?"

She winced, seeing his point. "I'm sure he'll learn fast."

"Great. Can't wait."

She couldn't help but notice that wasn't a 'no.'

It wasn't too much later, Lucy wilting in the sun even with her hat to keep her face from burning, that Cooper seemed to perk up. She was more than ready for a break, feeling more and more tired with every step, but she usually waited for him to find them a place to stop, not wanting him to think she couldn't keep up, and she'd long since dropped her eyes to the sand, struggling to keep them open against the bright sun. She missed the settlement and the hotel and warm baths and clean sheets and...

"You ever swim before, Vaultie?"

"Swim?" she repeated, his words bringing her out of her haze. "In water?"

"Yeah, sweetheart. In water."

"No. The Vault didn't have a pool. It would have been wasteful to use so much water for a leisure activity."

"Huh. So you don't know how?"

"No," she confirmed, wondering why exactly he was talking about swimming in the desert. She pulled out her canteen, taking a long drink. They were out of vegetables, unfortunately, so it would be dried meat or whatever they could catch for lunch. Maybe, she thought, they'd come across some mole rats or even bloatflies. "Do you?" she asked, belatedly remembering her manners.

"I do. Even had a pool when I was married. Hot tub too."

"A hot tub?"

"Mhm. Smaller than a pool, but big enough for a few people. The water heated up. It had jets so the water came out of the sides fast. Gave you a massage."

"So...a bathtub?"

He nodded. "Kind of. But outside. Bigger, too. They weren't for getting clean."

Lucy couldn't imagine having access to so much water, especially now. "Did your daughter swim?" she asked without thinking.

"Like a fish. Her mom insisted on getting her private swim lessons, but I taught her at home too. She wasn't allowed to swim without us, though. Could be dangerous. Kids used to drown in pools when no one was watching."

"Is it fun?"

He reached into his bag and pulled out a bottle, then shook one pill into his hand that he held out to her.

It took Lucy a moment to identify it. "RadX?"

"Take it and I'll teach you to swim."

Brow furrowed, she looked around. There were some old abandoned houses, most of them piles of rubble at this point, a few hundred yards from the road, and some hills in the distance. Otherwise, they were in the middle of nothing. "Um...Cooper," she started gently. "We're in the desert."

He grinned, still holding out the pill. "Do you trust me, Vaultie?"

Against all odds, she did.

Lucy took the pill, swallowing it with a sip of water, then followed him as he took a sharp right and headed for the houses. Did one of them have a pool? But there wouldn't be any water in it even if there was. Or maybe...a bathtub? But you couldn't swim in a bathtub even if they did have enough water to fill it.

Soon they were climbing up a little hill, her a few feet behind him, Dogmeat trotting ahead. "This used to be a real nice place. A little oasis for the moderately wealthy," he told her.

"Oh...you've been here?"

"Drove through back before the war. Then wandered over about forty years ago...maybe more. Hunting down a bounty. I thought we were getting close...looks like I was right."

"Do you think there's anything in the houses to loot?"

"Maybe. We can take a look after your swimming lessons."

As they got closer, Lucy thought she saw a hint of blue. She chalked that up to her strangely persistent exhaustion though...she'd thought that she was getting stronger after so many days spent walking. And then, somehow, they walked around the remains of a house and there it was. Lucy rubbed her eyes, but it was still there, and when she turned to Cooper, he was grinning at her, looking smug.

"Is...is that..."

“Sure is.”

A lake. It was a lake. A lake in the middle of the desert. She could see that the houses had once encircled it, skeletal trees still growing around the edges, with rotting wooden platforms lining the edges. It wasn't as big as the lake Cooper had used her as bait in, but it would still take a while to walk all the way around it.

“How?” she whispered, stopping right in the middle of what must have been someone's backyard.

“Underground aquifer pumps the water in. They made themselves a nice little lake right in the middle of the desert.”

“We can swim in it?” she confirmed.

“We'll have to look out for anything that might want to make a snack out of you. I ain't looking to go fishing today. But yeah, Vaultie, we can swim in it.” He started towards the place where the backyard slopes into the water, leaning down to take off his boots, and she did the same as Dogmeat ran along the shore, stopping to take a drink, then waded into the water.

Lucy didn't even take her Vault suit off, just unzipped it to her chest and made her way to the edge. It was a blue green color, a little murky, and she could spot some tiny fish swimming around. Hesitantly, she put a bare foot in...it wasn't cold, exactly, thanks to the sun beating down on it, but it still felt nice.

Cooper left his guns beside hers right at the edge, along with his ammo belt, vest, and tattered coat, then followed her to the edge, stepping in without hesitation. Immediately he was up to his knees in water.

“How deep is it?”

“Out in the middle it's deeper. You'll be able to stand in it here.” He held out a hand.

Lucy couldn't find it in herself to hesitate as she took a step, foot sinking into the mud at the bottom, little plants brushing against her leg. She took another step, then another, until she was able to reach out to him. He caught her hand, then led her a little deeper until the water hit her waist. She finally stopped there, tugging him to a stop.

“Don't worry, sweetheart. I didn't bring you all this way just to let you drown.” He turned to her. “Alright, Vaultie. Step one. Learn to float.”

“Float?”

“That's right. Lay back.”

She looked around, uncomprehending. “Lay...back?”

“In the water. You'll float on the surface.”

He hadn't lied to her yet...still, it went against every instinct to let herself lean back, one of his hands resting under her back, the other under her knees as he supported her. She closed her eyes, body tense, and waited for him to drop her. He didn't, though...he just held her.

"Breathe," he instructed. "Deep breaths."

She let out a shaky breath, then another, water lapping at her ears and face but never coming up far enough to get in her mouth. Slowly, she started to relax, and the pressure from his hands disappeared as her eyes closed. It was nice, actually...relaxing.

"There," he murmured. "Easy as pie."

"I've never had pie."

"Shame. We'll have to find you one."

"How do you make it?"

He took a step back and she opened her eyes, watching. "Crust. Filling. Crust on top. My favorite was apple. Sliced apples, cook them soft, add cinnamon. You could make cherry filling too. Any kind of fruit. Chocolate."

"That sounds good."

"We served it hot with cold ice cream."

Hesitantly, she moved her arms, testing to see if she'd keep floating. She did. "We had jello cake in the vault."

"Darlin' is that just jello in the shape of a cake?"

Her lips twitched. "Yes."

"That's just sad."

She laughed, pointing her toes and then letting her arms relax at her sides. The water felt so good, and it was nice to relax...she thought she might even be able to go to sleep. Opening her eyes, she watched him as he stared down at her. She liked it when he looked at her like that...like she was important. "What's step two?" she wondered.

He blinked at her, as if pulled from a trance. Then, "step two is swimming."

"Step two to learning how to swim is swimming?" she asked dubiously.

"Sure is. Keep up, Vaultie. You're gonna do what you're doing now, but on your front."

She tilted herself upright until her feet were back in the mud.

"Like this," he told her, pushing off and stretching his arms out in front of him, then using them to propel himself through the water. "Kick your legs, keep your chin up." He swam

away from her for a few strokes, then turned, standing upright to face her. “Come on, Vaultie. Your turn.”

After a moment of hesitation, she pushed off and reached out the same way he had, propelling herself through the water in his direction. At first, she felt awkward and uncoordinated, struggling to get her arms and legs to work together in a new way. But she only swallowed water once, grimacing at the taste, and by the time she made it to where he stood, she was doing it! She was swimming! Outside! In a lake!

”I,” she started, getting her feet under her, only to gasp when they landed on nothing, arms shooting out to him on instinct as she swallowed water and sputtered.

He caught her by the elbows. “Step three, tread water,” he told her, voice calm as anything. “Just kick. And try not to drown me, would you?” Despite his words, his hands were gentle as they held her up.

”Okay...okay...” She nodded, still clutching his arms and coughing, fingers digging into the fabric of his shirt. “I can do that.” It took a moment to convince her fingers to loosen their death grip on his arms, but after a few deep breaths, nose burning from the water she’d inhaled, she was finally able to just rest her hands on him, then let go altogether, hesitantly moving her arms out to the side as she kicked. “Okay. Good. I did it. I’m doing it!”

“You’re doing it,” he agreed.

“What’s step four?”

”How about we stick with these three for now. We’ll work on swimming underwater later.”

Later. They’d do this again? ”Is this how you learned to swim?”

”Nope. My daddy threw me in the neighbor’s pool when I was seven.”

Her jaw dropped and he laughed.

“I figured it out pretty quick. Thought you might just drown though, and that would be a pain to deal with. Jerky would take longer to dry out. Figured we’d go with a slower approach.”

She snorted. ”Yes, I think this way is better.”

She thought about asking why exactly he was teaching her to swim. They weren’t going to be swimming in New Vegas. It wasn’t a skill she’d need to find her father, or his family. But she liked to think that maybe he was just being nice...maybe he liked spending time with her and doing things that weren’t strictly necessary.

Out in the middle of the lake, the water was colder, and Lucy lay back once more, floating on her back. Beside her, Cooper did the same, his eyes closing. She took the opportunity to study him for a moment, tracing the sharp angle of his jaw and the abrupt ridge of where his nose had been...the places where his skin clung to the bone underneath. She found that he

didn't look strange to her at all anymore, not like when she'd first seen him. Now he was just Cooper. Her friend.

Soon the movement of the water separated them, just a little, and Lucy kicked her feet so that she could float closer to him, little by little, until she could loop her arm through his. "I don't want to lose you," she justified, eyes closed as the sun beat down on them.

"You're not going to lose me, sweetheart."

That, she thought, felt like a promise. And even if he didn't mean it in the way she wished, she would still cling to it.

But Cooper could only sit still for so long. Soon, he was treading water again, pulling her up with him by their looped arms. "Alright, Vaultie. Time to eat and get going. Your whole face is going to peel off if you spend any more time in the sun."

Tiredly, she agreed, and they made their way back to shore where Dogmeat had put her head on her paws for a nap. He pulled out some jerky while she washed her spare clothes, laying them out to dry in the sun, and they ate lunch together by the lake while their clothes dried.

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for all of your kind reviews! I swear they mean the world to me and make my day so much better. I hope you enjoy <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The sun was so hot...Lucy had thought that she knew heat. She'd been so ridiculously, insanely hot when Cooper had been dragging her through the desert at gunpoint, her hands tied, a rope around her neck. She'd been ready to beg him for water, even though she'd hated him...ready to get on her knees and plead with him before he'd dumped what was left on the ground.

Lucy didn't think he'd do that again. In fact, she would put all of her caps on the fact that he'd give her water if she needed it. He seemed fond of her now, and he'd saved her life at least once, and he'd taught her to swim...so she wasn't worried about that. Cooper took care of her. But as they walked away from the lake, heading back to the road, she did worry that she'd have to take another break. She never wanted him to think she was weak, or that she couldn't keep up, and she knew that he slowed down some for her...took more breaks than he needed. But an hour after they'd left the lake behind, she was already exhausted again.

She counted her steps for a while to try and keep her mind off the heat, but when she lost count for the third time, she gave up and watched Dogmeat instead, her hat pulled low over her face to keep the sun out of her eyes. The dog didn't seem nearly as bothered by the heat and Lucy wondered if she had been specifically bred to survive in the wastes or if it was breed specific.

"What kind of dog was Roosevelt?" she asked, fighting the urge to close her eyes as she walked.

"Border collie," he told her in a voice almost too quiet to hear. When she looked up he was further ahead than she'd thought, and she forced her feet to move faster so she could catch up. "Smart dogs. They were bred to herd sheep...protect them too."

"What kind of dog is Dogmeat?"

"German Shepherd, or something close. Probably genetically modified."

"Mm," she agreed.

"Over at the Enclave, they're up to all sorts of shit. I wouldn't put breeding genetically superior mutant dogs past them."

“She was the doctor’s,” she told him, nodding.

“Yeah. It’s a good thing she wasn’t with you when you offed him. She might have put up a fight.”

It took Lucy at least five steps to process that, and when she did, she stopped short. “What? Offed him?”

“Yeah, Vaultie. Killed him.”

“I...no...I didn’t...”

He didn’t look particularly bothered by the thought. “Hell, darlin’, I’m sure...” he started, turning back to her, but she was still shaking her head, aghast.

“I didn’t kill him! He took something...Vault Tec Plan D. He said it was banana flavored.”

Cooper tilted his head, considering her. “Huh...”

“He told me to cut his head off...it was horrible, but he asked me to and he’d already taken the pills...”

He nodded at that. “I’ll admit, I was pretty confused when I stumbled upon that particular scene.”

“You thought I murdered him?” she cried, horrified.

“Well, I thought maybe he was dying anyway and you helped him out. But this makes more sense, come to think of it.”

Lucy shook her head, but she wasn’t able to say she wouldn’t do that...not anymore. After all, she’d done it for her mom. “I didn’t even know he had the pills. He knew my last name somehow...knew about my Vault and what it looked like inside.” She ran her sleeve over her face, uselessly wiping at the sweat on her forehead. “What is the Enclave? What do they do?”

“It’s hard to get a straight answer on that.” He started walking again, moving a little slower so she could walk beside him. “They’re all tied with Vault Tec for sure...best you don’t find yourself on their radar. That’s how your scientist friend got a bounty put out on him.”

“That’s why you were after him?”

“It is. Me, the Brotherhood of Assholes, your momma’s girlfriend...” He waved a hand. “Course now the Brotherhood has that technology...”

“What will they do with it?” She asked, ignoring the ‘momma’s girlfriend’ part. She was too tired to make any sense of that.

But Moldaver had kept her ghoulished body around for all those years...

“Nothing to benefit anyone else, I’ll tell you that much. The Brotherhood doesn’t share.”

When they finally stopped for the night a little before dusk, Lucy was ready to drop. Cooper pulled some jerky out from their dwindling supply, taking a seat with his back to a rock and holding it out to her, but she waved him away, not able to stomach the thought of food.

That brought him up short. “Cuisine ain’t to your liking?” he asked, but despite his words, he didn’t look amused.

“I’m too tired.” She sat down beside him, head dropping against his shoulder. Dogmeat hurried over to worm her head under Lucy’s hand and she did her best to pet her with her eyes closed.

“Don’t tell me you’re getting sick, sweetheart.” A hot hand rested against her forehead, but if anything, she felt clammy now that the temperature was starting to drop.

“I’m just tired.”

He grunted, not sounding like he believed her. “You ought to eat something.”

“I’ll eat tomorrow,” she murmured, rubbing Dogmeat’s belly until the dog finally got up and collapsed on her side beside Cooper, signaling that it was now his turn to pet her. He obliged.

Lucy must have fallen asleep on his shoulder because the next thing she knew, he was moving her, shifting down so they could lay down under the sleeping bag turned blanket. She wiggled closer to get to her usual spot, finding her place with her head on his chest, and his arm was tighter around her than usual.

“What’s going on?”

She felt more than heard the question, the rumble of it soft against her ear. “Do you want me to move?” she asked, worried she was making him uncomfortable.

“Nah. Wouldn’t want you freezing to death.”

She hummed in agreement, then fell asleep before he could ask anything else.

Cooper had to shake her awake that morning...she was dreaming of the Vault again, only she was at the door, waiting for someone to open it...and Cooper was outside. He was going to get her out, right? He always looked out for her...he’d get her out.

“Lucy?”

“Mhm,” she asked, squeezing the fabric under her hands. Did he know she was in there? He had to!

“Lucy?” he asked, voice soft and insistent, and something shook her.

Why was he saying her name? He never said her name. “I’m right here,” she mumbled.

“Yeah, I know that. You’re the reason I can’t move my goddamn arm.”

That took her a moment to process, then she was awake all at once, sitting bolt upright, then swaying when the movement made her dizzy. “Oh...I’m sorry...” she whispered, blinking away the dream and looking around, the sun already low on the horizon.

Cooper was quiet, and when she looked back at him, he was studying her too closely for comfort.

“Sorry,” she told him again, sheepish, but he didn’t look upset. Before she could ask what was wrong, he grabbed his bag, pulling out a piece of jerky and handing it to her. Lucy took it, forcing it down. She knew she needed to eat, even if it was turning her stomach for some reason. She ate the second piece he handed her too, unable to help from noticing that he wasn’t eating any. “How much do we have left?”

“We’re gonna have to go hunting today if we don’t run into anything.”

“What’s out here?”

“Plenty of bugs. Bloatflies, cazadors, scorpions, radroaches.” He stood up, holding out a hand to her. “Geckos too.”

She took the hand he offered, letting him pull her up. “Isn’t that a lizard?” she wondered, throwing her pack over her shoulder. It felt too heavy all of a sudden, and she had to plant her feet to keep from toppling over.

“Yeah. Used to be small, just like everything else. Now they’re nasty sons of bitches. Big as Dogmeat. They must fuck like rabbits...they run in big packs. The green ones are venomous.” He started walking and she followed.

“Do rabbits have sex often?”

He snorted. “It’s an expression. And yeah, leave two of them together and you’ll have a hundred before long.”

“Are there still rabbits?”

“Yeah. They don’t have fur anymore, though.”

She hummed, talking more to keep herself awake than because she was taking any of this in. “I saw pictures of them. In the Vault. In our textbooks. They’re cute,” she murmured. Pulling out her canteen, she took a long drink, the water reviving her a little.

“People kept some kinds as pets.”

“There were a lot of different pets.”

“Yeah...people would keep just about anything as pets back before the war. Fish. Snakes. Lizards. Tigers.”

“Tigers?” That woke her up some, and she realized she’d been walking with her eyes closed. “Those are dangerous.”

He shrugged, palms up. “What can I say? People have always been stupid.”

An hour in and she had to stop...she just couldn’t do it anymore. He kept walking, not noticing that she’d stopped yet since she’d long since been too tired to keep up a conversation, and the sight made her stomach twist. “Wait,” she whispered, knees hitting the asphalt and making her wince. Dogmeat raced back to her, nudging her cheek with her cold nose, and then Cooper was there crouching beside her and pushing the dog out of the way. “I have to stop. I can’t...”

“Alright, darlin’. We can stop.”

They shouldn’t, though...they needed to keep moving and find more food and get to New Vegas...she hadn’t wanted to slow him down! “Just...just for a second,” she tried to assure him.

“Sounds like a plan.” He put a hot hand on her forehead, not sounding concerned, but she didn’t believe him. Cooper worried about her. He was fond of her. He was her friend.

Lucy turned her head away when a wave of nausea hit, pushing him away so she wouldn’t throw up on him. He dropped his hand, mouth opening to say something just before she lost what little she’d eaten for breakfast onto the asphalt. His hands returned then, one on her shoulder, the other pulling strands of her hair back away from her face. When she was done, he rubbed slow circles on her back.

“That all?” he asked, not unkindly.

She nodded, only kind of sure that was true. Maybe she was sick. The last time she’d been this miserable...

He took her arm then, flipping it around and leaning close so he could look at her PipBoy, the two of them coming to the same conclusion at the same time.

“Do you know how...” she started, then closed her eyes, running out of energy halfway through the sentence.

“Sure do. The last vault dweller I made into jerky had one.”

Lucy rolled her eyes and he chuckled.

“My ex wife had one,” he told her, voice softer. “Come on, let’s sit over here where it ain’t so hot.”

Lucy tried to help as he got an arm around her and pulled her to her feet, stumbling along and letting him lead her off of the road and over to the sandy dirt. It was hard, though...her legs didn’t want to cooperate, and her eyes refused to stay open for long.

”Time for a dose of RadAway unless you want to end up like me.”

“But I took...I took the RadX. Before we swam.”

“It wasn’t that. Rads are everywhere out here...including in most of the stuff we’re eating...” his jaw was tight as he eased her pack off, then the rifle, then lowered her down to sit against a boulder. “We ain’t got much choice. You might need to start taking the RadX before we eat.”

“We don’t have enough,” she mumbled, closing her eyes when the world spun.

He sat down beside her, rolling her sleeve up and pouring a splash of alcohol onto the crook of her elbow, then inserted a needle into a vein with hands so practiced that she barely felt it. “We’ll get more.”

“You’re good at that.” Lucy let her head fall onto his shoulder. “Did you do this too? Before?”

“Are you asking if I was a doctor?” He chuckled, the sound strained. “I played a cowboy on TV, remember?”

“You were a detective once too.”

“Never a doctor, though. No, I picked this particular skill up after the bombs fell.”

She could feel the RadAway flow into her veins through and shuddered as he held the bag up. “I don’t like this,” she mumbled, wrinkling her nose. She’d been unconscious the last time she’d had to have RadAway, and hadn’t realized she’d be able to feel it moving through her.

Cooper shifted beside her, guiding her to lay down and rest her head on his leg, tilting her hat so it hid her face from the sun.

“Don’t worry. This’ll help.”

“Feels weird.”

“You want to lose your nose?”

“You still look good.”

He was quiet for a long time. Then, “I looked better with the nose, sweetheart, and so do you.”

“I think this is what Max gave me...after.” She didn’t spell it out. After he’d used her as bait and made her drink irradiated water. After he’d sold her. But he was different now and at some point, she realized, she’d forgiven him.

One of his hands must have been holding the RadAway bag, but the other rested on her shoulder, thumb rubbing back and forth. It felt so nice...so soothing, like laying in the water with her arm looped around his. The hat over her eyes made it blessedly dark, so she gave in

and closed her eyes, slipping into a light doze where the only dreams she had involved floating in a lake with Cooper.

Lucy came to slowly, blinking into the darkness and wondering idly what time it was. Cooper hadn't moved other than to rest a hand over the spot where the needle had been in her arm, and she felt so much better...stronger and more awake than she'd been in two days. A snout rested on her leg, and she moved her hand to Dogmeat's head, smiling when she wiggled in happiness.

"Good girl," she murmured, scratching her head.

"You awake?"

"Mhm."

"Think you could tell me next time you're about to drop from radiation poisoning so we could do this a little earlier?"

"I didn't know I was."

"Fine. Think you could tell me the next time you start exhibiting all the signs of radiation poisoning? They had to have covered those in the Vault, right?"

"They did...I thought I was just tired."

"How you feel now?"

"A lot better."

"Good. We're still a day off from another settlement, and I ain't carrying you the whole way."

She smiled from under the hat. "Why not?"

"Because you're heavy and I'm old."

Lucy laughed.

"You hungry?"

"Mhm."

"Get up and eat, then."

She did, sitting up with his help and wincing at the brightness of the sun. It wasn't so blinding anymore, thankfully, but it was still hot, and she wished they could find another lake. He gave her two pieces of jerky, watching her eat them, but she could have eaten more. Instead, she took a long drink from her canteen, glad she had more water in her bag.

“Well, that’s the last of the jerky, so unless I decide to eat you, I’m out of luck.” Cooper climbed to his feet, holding out a hand that she took.

“I could always eat you first.” She sat her hat back in place, laughing and swatting him away when he flipped his finger against the bottom of the brim, nearly knocking it off her head.

“Doubt I’d taste very good. What about the dog?”

“We’re not eating Dogmeat! She’s too cute!” Lucy scratched the dog’s back, grinning when she leaned against her leg. “Besides, she’s family, remember.”

“Oh right. Forgot I had a wife now. Don’t recall the ceremony but...”

Those words sent electricity shooting through her, goosebumps prickling her arms. She almost wanted to apologize...to remind him that Jen had assumed even when she’d told her they weren’t married and that she’d just been trying to keep the peace. Then again, he was just teasing her...that was harmless, right?

“How could you forget? It was beautiful,” she told him with a grin, throwing her pack and her rifle over her shoulder and walking towards the road. He followed, Dogmeat running ahead. “Much better than my first one.”

“Yeah?”

“Mhm. And my first wedding was very nice.”

“Until your husband stabbed you?”

“Exactly. At the second one, we had flowers...”

“Where the hell did we get flowers?”

She laughed. “And food that wasn’t irradiated...”

“My question stands.”

Lucy waved a hand. “We got everything from the Vault.”

“The fuck we did,” he snorted. “I ain’t taking shit from a Vault.”

“*And* I got to wear my very own wedding dress.” She turned to him with a smile as they stepped onto the asphalt, ignoring the interruption.

“As opposed to your first wedding when you wore...”

“The Vault wedding dress.”

“The what now?” Cooper lifted his brows, leaning in like he might have misheard.

“The Vault wedding dress! It was beautiful! I got to wear pearls too! And lipstick!” Lucy tried not to think about that night too much, but she couldn’t help remembering what it had

felt like, her hair done, her face made up, that white dress and the pearls...dancing with her dad and Norman...

“You’re telling me there was one wedding dress for everybody?”

She nodded. “We all wrote our names on the inside on the day of our wedding.”

He shook his head. “Jesus, that’s depressing.”

“Why?” she laughed. “It really was beautiful...I feel bad that Monty probably ruined it. I don’t know if they’ll ever be able to get the blood out...”

“He stabbed you *and* ruined the only wedding dress in the Vault on your wedding night? Fuck, it ain’t going to be hard to be better than this guy.”

“Exactly. You’re already winning.”

He huffed out a laugh at that, shaking his head and staring out at the distance. “Alright. Unless you’ve got any food left over from this wedding of ours, we’re going to have to find something to eat or go hungry tonight.”

“Unfortunately we just ate the last of the jello cake.”

“I did *not* have jello cake at my wedding.”

“Why not?” she asked through laughter at his offended tone, scanning the landscape for movement. Every other day it had felt like *they* were the ones being hunted...dogs and bloatflies and scorpions...it felt like something was always trying to kill them. Now, though, all was still.

“Because jello isn’t cake.”

He seemed to be firmly set in his opinion, so she let it go. If he wanted to have real cake at their pretend wedding, she supposed she could compromise. “I’ve never had real cake,” she admitted. “No eggs or milk in the Vault. I mean...we had powdered eggs for breakfast and soy milk so I guess we *could* have made one...it would have been wasteful to make a cake big enough for everyone for every big occasion, though. Jello is a lot easier. You only need the powder and water.”

“As god as my witness, Vaultie, I’m going to find you a real cake.”

“Before or after we find dinner?”

He snorted, rolling his eyes, but he was grinning to himself, and she couldn’t help smiling too.

Without any radroaches or bloatflies in sight to eat (Lucy tried to imagine explaining this sentence to the person she’d been three months ago and almost laughed), Cooper took a left off the road, heading towards what turned out to be the ruins of an old neighborhood.

“Probably not much around, but we might be able to find some food.”

“Shouldn’t we keep going towards the next settlement?”

“You can’t walk all day in the sun and not eat. Me, maybe, but not you.”

His tone left no room for argument, and honestly, she was starving, so she didn’t want to. Instead, she followed him across a field until they reached a street lined mostly with rubble and a couple of viable looking houses in either direction. He pointed to the right.

“Take the dog. Meet back here.”

“And if I run into anyone, shoot them before they shoot me?”

“You got it.”

Lucy nodded, patting her thigh, even though she fully planned on trying to talk to anyone she might run into before shooting. Cooper didn’t need to know that. “Come on, Dogmeat,” she urged, and the dog followed after her as she headed for the first house, determined to be better than Cooper at looting this time.

Unfortunately, the first house was a bust, other than the bowl she found which would be helpful to eat out of. The stairs to the second floor were so full of holes that she didn’t even try, not wanting to get tetanus and radiation poisoning all in one day, so after searching the ground floor, she moved on, pistol in hand just in case. The next viable house she came to was a little better...it was only one story, but she found more soap, and a half full bottle of rubbing alcohol in a busted medicine cabinet. No food though, even after she’d searched the kitchen from top to bottom. Twice.

The third house was the most intact of the three she’d visited, with a second floor and stairs that didn’t look like they’d collapse under her weight. In the kitchen she did find a can of Cram at the very back of a top shelf after climbing onto a chair so she could reach, along with a bottle of pills that were for headaches according to the worn label but that had probably expired. She grabbed them anyway, thinking she might be able to sell them. She was just searching the upstairs bathroom to no avail when she heard a gunshot that had her and Dogmeat both bolting down the stairs and back onto the street.

The second and third gunshots led her straight to Cooper and the corpses of three bloatflies, a smug grin on his face as he gesturing grandly. “Looks like we’re having a feast for dinner.”

And, despite the disgusting work of actually preparing the bloatflies for eating, Lucy found herself smiling right back at him.

Cooper built a fire with a couple of pages from the romance novel she hadn’t ended up reading while Lucy got started preparing the flies to eat. It was still gross, and her hands still ended up covered in goo, but she couldn’t help being excited at the thought of their first real meal since they’d left Eric and Kathleen’s. Chopping up the edible parts, she put the meat in cups to cook by the fire, poured a little water over her hands to clean them, then started pulling out her scant treasures, handing him the can of Cram to cook along with the bloatfly meat. “There’s not much here,” she told him with a shrug. “There are a couple more houses I could search though.”

He grinned. “Huh.”

Lucy narrowed her eyes, immediately suspicious. “Huh, what?”

“Guess I just had more luck than you.” Smug as ever, he started pulling out his own finds and her jaw dropped. Three cans of Cram. Two cans of beans. A Stimpack. Bandages. More rubbing alcohol. A bottle of pills. A box of snack cakes. And, the cherry on top, a bottle of Nuka Cola, cherry flavored. He used his knife to pop the top, holding it out, and she couldn’t help reaching for it.

“You knew the houses on the left were better,” she grumbled, taking a sip. Not cold, but delicious and sweet.

He chuckled. “Sorry. I’m just that good, darlin’.”

Lucy huffed, handing the drink back. He hesitated before taking it, eyeing her as he took a sip, then offering it again. She took it, drinking deep and closing her eyes at the sugar and the slight taste of chems that must have been from his mouth. Then, reminding herself that she should *not* be thinking about her friend’s mouth, she sat the bottle down in the dirt between them and stabbed a slice of Cram with a fork, blowing on it before taking a bite. It was salty and rich, and she could have eaten the whole can. She hadn’t even realized how hungry she’d been until that moment. Next was a piece of the bloatfly meat. It wasn’t as soft as the Cram, nor did it have as much flavor, but it was still food and she was starving, so she had to fight not to swallow it whole.

Cooper took a smaller piece of meat, chewing thoughtfully for a moment. “We’ll stock up at the next settlement...get some vegetables too since you insist on not getting scurvy.”

“Do you know what it's called?” she asked around a mouthful of insect meat. “The settlement.”

“No...I haven’t been out this way in a long time. The one I’m thinking of might not even be there anymore. It’s been years...I usually stick closer to the coast.”

“Why?”

He shrugged. “Old habits die hard, I guess. More business out west anyway...never saw much reason to go wandering around the desert.”

“Have you ever been to the east coast?”

“Not since before the war. It’s a hell of a long trip without a car. Plenty of shit in the way too...Deathclaws and super mutants and worse.”

Lucy swallowed, then took another sip of cola. He pulled out his flask and took a drink.

“Were you from the west coast? Before?”

“Moved there after I left the Marines.”

“Did you like it?”

“Sometimes.” He took another drink from the flask. “A lot of the time. Weather was nice. I had a job I liked there for a while. A family. Everything I wanted.”

She knew the rest, of course. His wife had worked for Vault Tec. The bombs had fallen. He’d lost it all.

“What if the settlement isn’t there?” she finally asked, imagining several more days of traveling through the desert with a dwindling food supply. They’d be okay, she tried to tell herself, because Cooper would be with her and no one knew how to survive as well as he did. Still, the thought of finding an empty settlement made her heart sink a little.

Cooper’s mouth twisted into a soft smile. “We’ll do what we always do, sweetheart.”

Lucy smiled back...she couldn’t help it. Not when he called her sweetheart like he meant it. Lifting her canteen, she held it out. “Take it as it comes?”

He nodded, tapping his flask against the side. “Take it as it comes.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm justme--emily on Tumblr if anyone wants to find me and chat! Thanks for reading!

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much to everyone who has been reading and especially to everyone who has left a review! They make my day every time, and I appreciate you all so much. I hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

They set out early the next morning, passing a can of Cram back and forth as they walked. Lucy couldn't help noticing through surreptitious glances that Cooper let her eat most of it, only taking small pieces with his fork, or even just holding the can for a while without eating before passing it back to her. They'd started walking before the sun fully rose and she was grateful that some of the chill from the night before lingered, at least for a little while. As she looked out at the hills in the distance, she could tell that Cooper was watching her...could feel his eyes on her when she took a drink from her canteen or scraped the side of the can of Cram to get the last salty pieces.

She wanted to assure him that she was fine...that she'd slept through the night, curled up against him for the body heat, and that the RadAway had done its job. That he didn't need to walk beside her instead of in front of her, close enough that their arms brushed every once in a while. She didn't, though...it was kind of nice, these reminders that he cared about her...that she meant something to him.

Dogmeat took turns walking at either side of them, demanding affection from one, then the other, then sometimes ran off into the endless fields surrounding them, hunting little creatures along the way. At one point, she returned with a stick that Lucy took from her, throwing it as hard as she could and gasping when she leapt into the air, jaws snapping around the stick and landing gracefully on her feet.

They played the same game for a while, Lucy throwing it higher and further by turns and laughing every time the dog jumped for it, catching it every time. "You're so smart!" she cried when she trotted up to her, leaping around and bowing playfully. "You're the smartest dog ever!"

She wiggled happily, leaning on Lucy's legs and letting her ruffle her fur.

Cooper chuckled when she moved to his side instead, barking when he snatched her stick away, then taking off after it when he threw it out ahead of them. "I don't know if I would say the *smartest*..."

"Of course she is!"

"How many dogs you met, Vaultie?"

Lucy huffed. “That’s irrelevant,” she told him primly, making him bark out a laugh.

“I’ll give you this, she’s got the most energy of any dog I’ve ever met. Roosevelt would have given up thirty minutes ago.”

“Do all dogs like this game?”

“Depends on the breed. Roosevelt didn’t care much for it. He was a herding dog, not a retriever. He’d play tug-o-war with you, but he liked going on walks more than he did playing with toys.” Cooper snatched the stick when Dogmeat brought it back, then threw it again. “She’s a high energy breed...bred to work, run, play...if you tried keeping her cooped up in a house all day, she’d tear up everything she could get her teeth on out of boredom.”

“So she couldn’t be a Vault dog.”

He snorted. “No way in hell.”

Looking out at the wide open sky, Lucy didn’t think she could do it again either. All her life, the Vault had been her home...comfortable and safe and familiar, but she had a feeling that if she went back, it would feel more like a hole in the ground. “I don’t blame her,” she murmured, thinking about endless miles walked and lakes to swim in and so many people to meet...good and bad alike...the Vault had been so *bland*. So uniform...even their literal clothes had been uniforms. How hadn’t she felt that before?

“Take a look.”

Lucy turned, following his borrowed pointing finger, and stared at the horizon right past the hills they were about to pass. It took a moment, a hand brought up to block the sun’s glare, but then she saw it. Smoke.

“Probably from the cookfires. Looks like we’re getting close.”

So the settlement wasn’t empty. She grinned, bouncing a little as she turned to him, already dreaming about a full meal and maybe even a bath. “Do you think there’s a hotel here?”

He lifted his brows, lips twitching. “Why? You think we’re staying the night in every place we pass?”

“No...are there hotels that rent out rooms by the hour?”

He stared at her like she’d said something crazy, eyes wide as he blinked at her. “What now?”

“Like...a hotel room you don’t have to pay for for the whole night,” she tried to explain, head tilted in confusion. “Where you can just pay to stay there for an hour or two.”

“I know what ‘by the hour’ means, sweetheart. What I’m asking is, why would you want that?”

“We could rent a room for a couple of hours. I’ll pay!” she assured him. “We could take a bath and clean our clothes. Eat some real food?”

He nodded, shifting his hat so it covered his face some. “Maybe,” he told her simply.

Shrugging to herself, she went on. “Dogmeat can get some water and rest too. I don’t know how she’s able to run around so much with all that fur when it’s so hot. Oh, maybe they’ll have those cornbread muffins.” Lucy couldn’t help smiling at the memory. “And we can stock up on RadX! The next time we eat something with a lot of rads, we can eat the snack cakes too! That’s cake! Like you were saying...”

“That ain’t real cake. They’re probably stale as hell by now. You want something fresh.”

“Do you think they’ll have cake here?”

“I wouldn’t count on it. Maybe in New Vegas if it’s still standing. Used to, you could go to a bakery, a place where they just sold bread and cakes and desserts.”

She smiled and closed her eyes at the thought. A whole store full of fresh food. She couldn’t even imagine it. “We cooked in the Vault,” she told him. “Maybe I could learn to make a cake. I know how to make a lot of things...I would have cooked for my husband. I mean, he would have cooked too...it wasn’t a traditional gender roles thing.”

He grunted, not sounding like he believed her.

“Really, it wasn’t.”

“So you wouldn’t have raised the kids and cleaned the house while he went to work?”

Lucy hesitated. “I...I mean...we lived in apartments,” she murmured.

He huffed, lifted a brow. “You’d have been able to keep working? Decide not to have babies?”

He wasn’t wrong. Unless her husband had worn a condom every time they had sex, she would have gotten pregnant eventually if she was capable. That was the whole point. “We had childcare,” she told him simply. “I would have kept my job.”

“They have birth control in the Vault?”

“Of course. We had pills and implants that you could get after you’d had children.”

“But not before?”

“Okay, so...it was kind of a gender roles thing,” she gave in, snapping a little. It had felt so normal while she’d lived there. “Of course we were supposed to have children if we got married! But I wanted that. I...I thought I wanted that.”

“Because that’s what they told you to want all your life. It wasn’t all that different before the war, if that helps. The American dream, a white picket fence and 2.5 kids.” His voice wasn’t

cruel...just matter of fact.

Lucy frowned at that. "How can you have two and a half children?"

He chuckled, ignoring her question. "Plenty of people had kids that shouldn't have...that just did it because that's what they were told to do. Figures they would have kept that up in the Vault."

"Did you ever consider it?" she wondered, only hesitating a little. "Living in a Vault, I mean?"

"Sure. That was the plan...well, at first I didn't think the bombs were really gonna fall. But I'd always planned to buy a spot in a Vault just in case. I did the commercials for them, after all. Got to meet some of those scientists from Vault 4. Seemed like normal people. I advertised for that fucking hellhole." He shook his head, grimacing.

"You didn't know," she told him softly, moving a little closer so her arm brushed his.

"No," he agreed with a sigh. "I didn't. I wouldn't have done their stupid fucking commercials if I'd known. But then I started figuring it out...my friends were telling me shit about Vault Tec and I was so sure...hell, my wife worked there. It couldn't be that bad if Barb..." There was pain in his voice then, raw like he was just finding out about a betrayal all over again. "Shit, Vaultie. You know what it's like, finding out someone you trusted...I mean, trusted completely, was willing to sacrifice so many people for their vision of some greater good bullshit."

Lucy nodded. "I do," she agreed, voice faint.

"I asked her why she didn't just leave Vault Tec. Me being in that war, it scared her...I think...she couldn't take feeling that helpless again. I think she wanted the control that came with that job. I told her we could just buy a spot in the Vaults. She said she wanted to make sure we got into one of the 'good' ones."

She shuddered, remembering the video she'd seen in 4...what they'd been doing to people for years without any repercussions. How many people had suffered? How many had been killed without anyone outside the Vault even learning their names? How many Vaults were there? Were any of them actually good? Were there more where people from the past were still alive somehow?

"So yeah...up until then, I'd thought about it," he told her, nodding to himself. "I remember...she told me there were no dogs in the Vault." He reached down, patting Dogmeat on her side, taking the stick again and throwing it. "For some reason, it hit me then...what kind of freedoms they could take away with all of us locked up down there. That's what I was doing all that fucking fighting for up in Alaska...freedom. Turns out we were the ones that were losing our freedom. All the leaders of this country cared about was control and profit. That never changed, Vaultie."

Lucy looked out at the horizon, the sun already high enough in the sky to make it hot again. "It doesn't feel like there's anything we can do about it," she admitted. It felt too big...and

she suddenly felt very small. In the Vault, every member of the community had been integral to survival. Out here...out here, all there was was freedom. Vast and sometimes terrible. "But...I want to. It's not right."

She expected him to say something about wasteland rules or her golden rule or just laugh. Instead, he gave her a pat on the back. "One step at a time, sweetheart. Find your daddy. See what he knows. We'll take it from there."

We . The word made her heart warm as she smiled down at the asphalt.

They followed the road for a few more miles before the walls of the city came into view. Lucy practically bounced at the thought of a bath and a room out of the heat as they approached the guards. She would pay. Gladly. If she could just get cleaned up, she would gladly hand over the caps. "Do all settlements have walls like this?"

"The ones that last do. Walls, guards, turrets if they can get them. The more wide open a settlement is, the better a chance raiders have to come in and take what they want. Or Caesar's men, if they're still around. Hell, some settlements charge you an entrance fee."

"They make you pay just to go inside?"

"They do. And you've got to pay more if you want to live there."

On one hand, safety was valuable on the surface...something that actually had to be thought about. But, Lucy wondered, was safety that only applied to the people who could afford it worth having? How was that any better than the vaults?

"I doubt this one is like that. It ain't big enough. The ones I'm thinking of having running water. Generators too, enough for the whole town."

"I do miss running water," she murmured wistfully. Still, she thought, even without running water, a bath would be nice. A room to wash their clothes in. A safe place to rest just for a few hours. "So...about that room..."

He shook his head, lips twitching. "What room?"

"Come on! Just for a few hours!" She nudged him with her shoulder as Dogmeat headed over to the wall, sniffing as she went, probably hunting some unfortunate critter that, once she caught sight of it, wouldn't be long for this world. "I'll pay! Besides, we're making great time!"

"Oh, you speaking from experience?" he asked, snorting when she nudged him again.

"We know we're on the right trail thanks to Jen, *and* we're only a few days behind him. And according to the map, it's only..." She brought up the map, fiddling with the dial, then grimacing, glancing back up at him while he smirked. "About 130 miles to New Vegas," she muttered.

"Oh yeah. We're making great time," he told her, nodding sarcastically. "Might as well be in a car with how fast we're moving."

Lucy rolled her eyes, hating that he was right.

“*But* I guess a couple more hours won’t kill us,” he relented, grinning when her face lit up.

“Really?”

“I’m sure for the right price, we can find a room for a couple of hours. And a bath. But you’re paying, sweetheart.”

She bounced on her toes, struggling to contain her excitement. “Of course!”

“So you probably ought to get better at looting.”

“I’ll have you know I’m excellent at looting.” She grabbed his arm and squeezed it, bouncing a little on her toes again as they made their way towards the guards stationed at the entrance to the settlement. It was a woman and a man, both with rifles, and Lucy’s steps faltered when both rifles came up the moment they approached, pointing straight at them. Beside her, Cooper went still, one hand drifting down to his gun before stepping slightly in front of her.

“Hi,” Lucy greeted with a smile. “We’re just passing through. We’d like to stop and...”

“On your way, rot-face,” the woman snarled. “Your kind ain’t welcome here.”

Lucy felt her smile fade away, flinching like she’d been slapped. It took her a second to parse the words as her heart seemed to lodge itself in her throat, the disappointment so sudden it choked her. Visions of a bath and a room disappeared, leaving her feeling tired and hollow and so angry it shocked her. They needed supplies! What were they supposed to do?

“Such hostility,” Cooper murmured, voice as charming and smooth as ever, but there was an edge to it. “One might think you don’t want our caps.

“The girl’s welcome,” the other guard told him, his rifle still pointed right at Cooper’s head. It made her sick to see it...made her want to push him out of the way. “Hell,” he said, looking her up and down as best he could considering Cooper was blocking her, “she’s more than welcome. You, on the other hand...”

“That’s wrong!” She couldn’t hold back anymore, furious tears filing her eyes. “He’s a person! You can’t discriminate against people! It’s not right! We aren’t causing trouble! We just want to get supplies!”

If anything, the guards looked like they might laugh at her, glancing at each other and then back at her with cruel amusement. “Sorry, ghou-fucker. Them’s the rules,” the man told her with a grin.

Never in her life had Lucy wanted to punch someone in the face...that sort of violence was taboo in the Vault. A functioning community couldn’t allow that type of conflict. So maybe the surface really was changing her, because she just knew, all of a sudden, how wonderful it would feel to break his nose with her fist.

“Forget it,” she snapped instead, grabbing Cooper’s arm and fighting the tears that she absolutely would not let fall. Not in front of these horrible people. He let her tug him a few steps away towards the road, then slid his arm out of hers until he could catch her hand, fingers intertwining with hers and pulling her to a stop. “What?” she asked, voice forcibly steady, refusing to turn around. “We’ll stop at the next settlement. We should go.”

“Lucy.” His soft voice brought her up short and she closed her eyes tight. She couldn't stand hearing him talk to her so gently...not when she was already so angry and sad. Not letting go, he came to stand in front of her, the soft clinking of his spurs letting her track his movement, then his free hand cupped her cheek, gloved thumb brushing a tear away before it could make it down her face.

When she opened her eyes, the wry sadness on her face made her heart seize in her chest. “Want me to kill them?” he asked, so solemn she had to laugh, his lips twitching a little in response.

“No...let’s just keep going. We don’t need anything from them.”

“We can’t just keep walking until we find a place that’ll let a Ghoul in,” he told her, all too reasonable.

“But it’s not right!”

“Be that as it may, you’ve still got to eat if we’re going to make it to New Vegas. I sure as hell didn’t bring you all this way just to watch you starve to death.”

“I won’t starve to death,” she grumbled. “We can hunt. Bloatflies are...”

“Full of rads,” he reminded her. “You’ll get radiation poisoning again if all you eat is mutant bugs. Not to mention scurvy.”

Her lips twitched against her will.

“Alright, sweetheart, here’s the plan.” He reached into his pack and pulled out a bag of caps, placing it in her hands. “Sell whatever you can. Buy what we need. Take Dogmeat with you. Then we’ll be on our way.”

She knew he was right and she hated it. Staring down at Dogmeat who’d come closer, nosing her way under Lucy’s hand, she focused on petting her for a moment, letting out a deep breath. “Okie dokie,” she whispered, nodding.

“That's the spirit.” He pressed his canteen into her hand. “Fill me up, would you?”

Lucy nodded again, turning back to the gate and feeling that same anger rise up in her again.

“Alright, little killer,” he told her, voice a little louder. “Try not to shoot anyone. I’d hate to have to come in there after you.” He grinned at the guards who both clutched their guns a little tighter.

“No promises,” she called over her shoulder, patting her thigh for Dogmeat to follow and making him chuckle.

The guards both eyed her closely as she walked between them, Dogmeat sensing her mood and baring her teeth as she passed. “Good girl,” she murmured, scratching her head. When Lucy glanced back at Cooper, she found him leaning against the rusted remains of a car, drinking from his flask and looking for all the world like there was nothing he’d rather be doing than fiddling with the trigger of his pistol. Smiling a little, she turned and made her way into the settlement.

Inside, it was similar to the last one they’d been to...lots of people wandering from shop to shop, kids playing in the streets, and stalls of food lining the makeshift streets. Lucy knew it wasn’t their fault...knew they hadn’t made the rules, but she was still angry with every one of them as she surveyed the area, taking note of the shops. They were like the ones she’d seen before...a pharmacy, a dentist, a doctor, someone cutting hair on the porch of a house, and plenty of food stands lining the roads. People ambled back and forth between shops, children running through the streets, laughing and chasing each other, and through it all, Lucy felt oddly cold.

Cooper was supposed to be with her.

Shaking that thought off, she headed towards the shack with a sign out front informing her that they bought junk. First, she would sell what she could, then she would buy what they needed. Easy. She wasn’t wearing the Vault suit, so she wasn’t getting as much attention as she usually would, walking alone through town, but a lot of the children did stop and stare at Dogmeat who stuck close to her side even as she walked into the shop.

Inside it was cool and dark, a welcome relief from the sun, but she found she didn’t care as much...that she wasn’t thinking about a nice bath or cleaning her clothes anymore.

She didn’t bother trying to haggle, just took the caps offered, then went straight to the pharmacy and used the caps to buy a bottle of RadX, two bags of RadAway, and two StimPacks.

“Where you headed?” the young woman selling to her wondered, voice hesitant as she glanced down at Dogmeat and took Lucy’s caps. She was probably a teenager, and the young man mixing something up in the back didn’t look much older.

“New Vegas,” she told her, grabbing a toothbrush kit and handing over the caps for that too. She’d been using her finger and looted toothpaste up until then and was tired of it.

“By yourself?” she asked, sounding both shocked and a little in awe.

“I’m traveling with a friend.” With that, she threw her stuff in her pack and headed for the water pump, Dogmeat pressed against her thigh. Usually, the dog wandered around, sniffing anything she could find and playing with local children. Now, though, she stuck to Lucy like glue as she filled her canteens, then Coopers, then a bowl for Dogmeat to have a drink. Lucy leaned against the brick building beside the pump, grateful for her hat as she took a long

drink and tried not to think about baths or clean clothes. She wasn't giving these people any more money than she had to.

Lucy wasn't used to anger like this. She knew all about conflict resolution and how to talk to people even when they were upset and how to compromise so that the community could continue to thrive. But none of her communication skills seemed to work on the surface. If she'd tried harder, could she have convinced the guards to let Cooper in? Did she give up too soon?

"Can I pet your dog?"

The voice startled her, and she looked up to find a little boy, maybe seven, standing a few feet away. Behind him were a group of kids, all his age or younger, watching Dogmeat with wide, curious eyes.

Lucy had to smile, letting out a breath and relaxing her shoulders a little. "Of course. She's nice." Reaching down, she scratched Dogmeat's head. "Go say hi," she urged.

Needed no further permission, Dogmeat trotted over to the children, tail wagging, and Lucy filled her canteen the rest of the way to replace the water she'd drank, then headed over to the food stalls lining the road. All of them sold fresh produce, so she got a little over everything, remembering the community garden from the last settlement and wondering where this one was. What she'd bought would last them a few days at least, and along with the Cram and the snack cakes and whatever they could hunt, she was pretty sure they'd be okay for a while.

The last stall she came to as she made her way towards the exit was selling pieces of crispy, fried meat on a stick, and Lucy couldn't resist the smell, digging in her pocket for the caps before she'd even asked what exactly the meat was.

"You the one that came here with that ghoul?" the vendor asked, lips curled.

Lucy paused, caps clutched in her hand so tight they dug into her skin. "We're traveling together, yes. Can I get two of those, please?" She decided she didn't care what the meat was...that she didn't want to have a conversation with this man.

"You know, it's only a matter of time before..."

"Can I get two of those, please," she repeated, voice hard, her smile brittle. Dogmeat chose that moment to return to her side, taking a seat right beside Lucy's leg.

Grudgingly, the man handed them over.

"Come on, Dogmeat," she murmured, patting her head as the two of them headed for the exit. She'd had about enough of this place.

At the front entrance, the same two guards were still standing there, eyes trained on Cooper who apparently hadn't moved. He was watching the entrance, tilting his hat back when he caught sight of her. She smiled reflexively when she met his gaze, left hand lifting to show him what she'd found for lunch, when the guard beside her huffed out a little laugh, moving

to block her way and grinning down at her. He was too close...Dogmeat tensed, teeth bared, and she saw Cooper get up as she took a step back.

“That was fast, sweetheart. I thought you’d take a little longer...maybe find a real man to...”

Honestly, it wasn’t the worst thing anyone had said to her on the surface. Not by a long shot. But Lucy was at the very end of her rope. Open communication did not always work on the surface. In fact, it rarely seemed to. She’d already attempted to communicate her feelings to this man, and now he was invading her personal space and speaking inappropriately to her. He had no right to call her ‘sweetheart’ or to reach for her, hand on its way to her arm like he was going to grab her.

Lucy gave in, pulling her fist back and making contact with his nose, following through like she’d been taught in her Vault mandated self defense class, which she’d first taken at age six. Behind him, Cooper stopped short, gun already drawn.

The guard went down hard with a screech, blood drenching his shirt, gun flying from his hands as he sprawled in the dirt. When he glared up at her, he didn’t look like he wanted to touch her anymore...he looked like he wanted to kill her. She found she didn't care. “You fucking cunt!”

“Now, now,” Cooper’s drawl was just short of amused. “That ain’t no way to speak to a lady. Boy, didn’t your mama and daddy teach you better than that?”

There was a click behind her, and when Lucy turned around, the other guard was pointing her rifle at her with hands that shook. The reason for that was apparent when Lucy glanced over and saw Cooper pointing his own gun right at the woman’s head. At that moment, he looked every inch the cowboy from one of his movies, arm outstretched, hat shading his face, his expression as cold as Lucy had ever seen it. She half expected him to start talking about a Mexican eulogy.

“The way I see it,” he went on, a little quieter, “you pull that trigger, all three of you will be dead. But if you lower your rifle, we’ll be on our way, never to darken your doorstep again.” His voice was all too pleasant, but it still sent chills down Lucy’s spine.

The woman’s eyes darted over to him, the blood draining from her face as she took a shaky breath. On the ground, the man glanced at his rifle, blood dripping from between the fingers he held to his face, but didn’t go for it.

“Come on, sweetheart. We seem to have worn out our welcome.”

Hesitantly, Lucy took a step towards him, eyes still on the gun pointed at her, but the woman was already lowering it, pointing it at the dirt instead, eyes trained on Cooper. He lowered his pistol too, finally smiling, but Lucy wasn’t fooled, and the guard didn’t seem to be either.

“You ever come back here...” the man started from the ground, but when Cooper turned to him, he snapped his mouth shut.

“Son, if I were you, I wouldn't finish that sentence.”

He didn't.

Lucy held out Cooper's canteen and he took it, wrapping an arm around her and leading her back to the road, guiding her to walk in front of him. One hand stayed on his gun, the other on her shoulder. “I thought I told you not to start any trouble.”

“No, you told me not to shoot anyone,” she reminded him, voice forcibly light. Her knuckles throbbed, but she'd been right...it had felt good. “I didn't shoot him. I *punched* him.”

“Well, little killer, I suppose you've got me there. Didn't know they taught hand to hand combat in that Vault of yours.”

“I know how to use a sword too.”

He chuckled, squeezing her shoulder. “Now *that* I've gotta see.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! I'm justme--emily on Tumblr if you want to chat!

Chapter 20

“What do you think this is?” Lucy wondered, pulling the crispy meat off the stick with her teeth and chewing. They weren’t quite out of sight from the settlement, but they were far enough away that he no longer seemed worried about the disgruntled guards opening fire on them.

“Tastes like Iguana.”

She wrinkled her nose. She understood that there were a lot of foods she wasn’t used to on the surface, but she kept being surprised by the things she found herself eating. “Isn’t that another lizard?”

“Sure it.”

“Are they big like the geckos?”

He thought for a minute. “I don’t think I’ve run across any, to tell the truth. They used to be about the size of your arm.” He took a bite. Swallowed. “So, a sword, huh?”

She grinned. “I was on the fencing team. We learned other techniques too in phys ed.”

“Huh.”

“Do you know how to fence?”

“No, Vaultie, surprisingly enough they didn’t cover fencing in the Marines,” he told her with a huff of laughter.

“Just guns?”

“Just guns,” he confirmed. “And the power armor.”

“What’s it like? Wearing the armor?”

“Like wearing a giant metal suit. Bulky. Hot. Design flaws could make it dangerous. Useful as hell, though. Helped us beat the reds. Communists,” he clarified before she could ask. “Hell of a lot of good that did us, but it felt important at the time.” He took a bite. He took another bite, pulling off a piece of meat, then pulling off another with his fingers and tossing it to Dogmeat who leapt into the air and caught it. “Why were they teaching you to swordfight in the Vault? Did they think it was fucking medeaval times out here?”

“It was one of our physical activity clubs. It’s good for coordination and strength. There weren’t as many opportunities to get physical activity naturally as it is on the surface. We each had a weekly recommended amount of movement prescribed by our Vault doctors. But there were other clubs too. Chess. Science and technology. Book clubs. Gardening.”

“I’m guessing you were in all of them?”

She laughed. “No one would have time to be in all of them. I had to work.”

“Right.” He took a puff from his inhaler.

“Should I have tried to get you more of those?” she asked, voice a little quieter.

“Nah, I’m set for another two months at least.” He put it back in the pocket of his weird bag, which reminded her...

“Why does your bag look like that?”

He lifted his brow. “Pardon?”

“Your bag.” Lucy gestured towards it. “It’s a weird shape. It doesn’t have straps.”

“Sweetheart, this is a saddle bag.”

She thought for a moment. Then, “saddle? Like for a horse?”

“Just like. You drape it under the saddle to carry things.”

“You’re not a horse.”

That got a wheezy laugh out of him. “An astute observation, Vaultie. I’m glad they taught you that much.”

“I just mean...why do you carry it?”

“Because it’s mine.”

She rolled her eyes. There was no pressing him when he got like this. To her surprise, though, he went on, amusement still in his voice. “I had my horse with me when the bombs fell...I was doing the whole cowboy schtick for the kids.”

“You mean...that’s from before the war?”

He nodded. “Sure is. Genuine leather. Take care of it and it’ll last forever. Well, for over 200 years.”

“Wow,” she murmured, staring at it. “Are there still horses?”

“I’ve seen a couple of mutated ones.”

“Do they eat people now?” she asked, grimacing.

“They aren’t predators, exactly, but if you die in front of them, they won’t turn down a free meal.”

That, at least, was kind of promising.

The clouds rolled in when they'd been walking for about two hours, Lucy trying to be careful of her water intake as always, caught between trying to stay adequately hydrated and rationing her water. The break from the sun was nice, and she tilted her head up, looking around at the clouds.

"Looks like rain soon," Cooper told her, scanning the horizon. "Take one of those RadX. You probably ought to start taking one a day, at least...the rads are worse out here. You're breathing them in with all the dust."

"Is the rain dangerous?" she wondered, swallowing the pill with a precious sip of water.

"Not like it used to be. It's irradiated like all the water, but it doesn't look like it's going to be a radstorm. Those are green."

"What happens in a radstorm?"

"What happens is we find shelter unless you're looking to become a ghoul. Radiation spikes, lightning...they happen more on the east coast, I hear, but we got a few out here back in the early days."

"Do we need to find a place to shelter now?"

"It certainly wouldn't hurt. Storms in the desert don't usually last too long...keep an eye out."

They picked up the pace, both of them scanning the horizon for a place to hide out. The clouds seemed to get darker by the minute, but Lucy couldn't help appreciating the dropping temperature. The air felt different...wet, somehow, even though it hadn't rained yet, and she wished she could enjoy it more.

The first droplet that landed on her nose made her jump a little, and it was quickly followed by several more, the soft patter of the drops on the dirt filling her ears until the rain was soaking her, cooling her off and feeling like heaven against her hot skin. "Oh...this is nice," she told him, closing her eyes and tilting her face up.

"Yeah, it ain't the rain I'm worried about," he muttered, still intent on finding shelter. As if on cue, thunder rumbled and lightning flashed off in the distance and Lucy jumped at the sight before hurrying after him once more, Dogmeat sticking close.

Thankfully it wasn't too much longer before they found the remains of what Cooper called a rest stop on the side of the road. "Come on, Vaultie. Let's see if this one's occupied."

They both pulled out their guns, Cooper kicking the door open and peering inside. Already water was soaking through her clothes, and she started shivering as soon as she followed him into the dark, cool room. There were some old metal benches lining two walls, and what had once been a vending machine, the glass long ago broken, the food long gone. There were two doors on either side of the room, and he jerked his chin towards one, taking the other.

Lucy pushed the door open as quietly as she could, Dogmeat ready to pounce beside her, but as far as she could tell, it was just an empty bathroom. She checked each of the stalls anyway, pushing the two stall doors open and peering into the other two since the doors had been removed.

“All clear?” Cooper asked, appearing behind her. It was hard to see him in the dark...the only windows were high on the wall with frosted glass, so he was more of a shape than anything.

“All clear,” she confirmed, holstering her gun. “It’s freezing in here.” Less than an hour ago she’d been sweating, but now she shivered as she ran useless hands over her arms. The rain poured on the roof, a sudden clap of thunder seeming to shake the building. She froze at the sound of it, wide eyes shooting to the frosted window.

“Don’t worry. Thunder ain’t dangerous, and the lightning can’t hurt us in here. Get changed before you freeze to death.”

She nodded, yanking her shirt off, then pausing when he jerked his head to the side.

“Jesus fucking Christ, Vaultie,” he muttered, shaking his head. “You strip for just anyone or am I special.”

Lucy laughed. “I didn’t strip. I’m in my bra, and you’ve seen me in my bra before.” She dropped her sopping wet shirt on the floor, putting her pack on the remains of a sink and digging for her Vault suit. Cooper didn’t answer, just left the room, still shaking his head and grumbling about dime store novels again.

“What’s a dime store novel?” she called.

“My fucking life apparently.”

Shrugging to herself, Lucy pulled her feet out of her boots, glad her socks were at least dry, then changed into her familiar Vault suit. It was warm from sitting in her pack and she smiled at the feeling as she gathered her wet clothes and went back to the main room.

He’d changed too, his usual clothes thrown over the back of a bench and dripping on the floor. She did the same with hers, placing her hat on top of the pile, then walked over to where he sat on a metal bench on the other side of the room.

“How long will it rain?” she wondered, sitting right beside him. He was warm, and that helped chase away the lingering chill.

“Do I look like a meteorologist, sweetheart?”

She blinked at him. It was a little brighter in this room, with two actual intact windows and three boarded up ones, so she took a moment to study him. “I’m not sure...what is that?”

That got a chuckle out of him, and almost before she’d realized what she was doing, she leaned against his side, chasing that warmth and wanting to feel his laughter. She loved it when he laughed...because he was her friend and...

And who was she kidding? Closing her eyes, she bit down on her lip as he lifted his arm, draping it around her in a practiced motion. That wasn't all there was to it and she knew it. She'd had so many friends in her life, and she'd even been attracted to some of them, but she'd never felt this way about any of them.

"They predicted the weather, back when it was predictable. They were scientists."

"Oh," she whispered, trying to focus. It was better, she thought, to talk about the weather. That was easy. That wouldn't make him uncomfortable. "Then, I don't know because scientists don't all look like one thing," she told him, head on his shoulder. He didn't push her away, just rested his warm hand on her arm and she wondered if he knew. She'd never minded before if people knew about her interest in them...hadn't worried about asking Max for sex or minding when he'd said no, because sex and attraction were simple. Seeking pleasure as simple. But this...this didn't feel simple. "Why did it get so cold so fast?"

"Weather out here changes fast. You'll be too hot again in a couple of hours."

"It was always the same temperature in the Vault."

He grunted.

This would be an opportune time to ask if he wanted to have sex. The thought had occurred to her more than once over the last few days, mostly when she'd slept in his arms...they were safe here. They were under a shelter. It was dark and quiet, and she knew that she would enjoy it and hoped he would too. She didn't though. For reasons she didn't want to examine, him saying no to her would hurt so much more than Max.

Besides, she'd already made him uncomfortable once, and he'd been upset when she'd taken her shirt off in front of him. So he probably wasn't interested. Maybe ghouls couldn't have sex. Or maybe he just didn't want to.

"You sure are thinking awful hard over there, Vaultie," he remarked, voice soft, and she made herself smile.

I think I'm falling in love with you. The words that came to her were so sudden and so true that she had to bite her lip to keep them inside. Friends. That's what he'd give her. That was more than enough. It had to be. "What was this place?"

"Rest stop. A place for people to stop on long car trips. They built them every few miles on major roads like this one. Usually they had vending machines and brochures for local places. Bathrooms. No dogs inside though," he told Dogmeat who'd shaken herself off and had plopped down in the corner for a nap.

"Did you ever come here?"

"Probably not to this one. I've stopped at them before, though. They were all about the same."

"Where were you going?"

For a moment, she thought he wouldn't answer. He didn't always like personal questions and she had been trying not to ask them too often. Had she gotten too comfortable? Would he push her away now? Put that wall up between them once more?

Then, "my wife and I, we took Janey up the coast to San Francisco. That's a long time to spend in the car with a toddler."

Lucy closed her eyes as he went on, telling her in a soft, almost gentle voice about a road trip he'd taken in another lifetime. She could almost imagine it if she thought about the movies and books she'd consumed growing up, the landscape she'd never see flying by in a car she'd never ride in. A man and his wife and their daughter, a perfect family. Two people who had chosen each other and a child they'd decided to have.

The rain poured down for another hour, and when it finally slowed, Lucy hated it for stopping. It felt like they were under a spell, and that at any point it would be broken and Cooper would clam up again...he didn't like talking about his past and she understood that, but there was a little smile in his voice as he told her about pulling over for the fifth time so that Janey could get out of her car seat. His hand still rested on her arm, thumb rubbing back and forth against her skin, and she wasn't cold anymore but she didn't want to say that lest he stop.

In the end, though, they couldn't stay there forever. They had to get to New Vegas...had to find her father and his family and get her brother out of Vault 33. And all of those things were more important than her feelings. So she sat up.

He moved his arm, letting her get up. "Sounds like it finally stopped," he told her, lifting himself slowly to his feet. She followed suit, the two of them opening the door and peering out. The ground looked muddy in places, with water pooling in low spots, but the sky was clearing up.

They made it another few miles before the sun started to sink towards the horizon, and then went through the routine of setting up camp by some boulders that sat a few feet away from the road. "We ain't too far from the canyon...we'll cook our food and put it out."

"What's in the canyon?"

"People, most likely. People I don't feel like wasting bullets on."

"They could be nice."

He lifted an eyebrow as he lit the kindling. "Yeah? How often does that work out for you, sweetheart?"

She sighed, biting into a carrot. "I still have to try."

"I know you do," he told her, sounding fond as he opened a can of Cram and split it into two of the tin cups that he nestled in the flames. Lucy passed him some tomatoes, finishing her carrot and tossing a piece to Dogmeat who had sat down by Lucy's leg.

She didn't eat it.

Lucy leaned over to kiss her head, then scratched her back, fingers digging into her fur and gently scratching the skin, which she usually loved. There was no response, the piece of carrot sitting untouched by her paw as she stared out into the darkness, head on her paws. "Do dogs not like carrots?"

He'd been watching her, but at her question, he glanced back down at the dog, frowning. "Not sure." He poured some water into a bowl, placing it in front of her, but she didn't drink. Lucy felt a twinge of worry, eyes shooting back up to Cooper who caught her eye and leaned over, ruffling the dog's fur.

"Don't worry, Vaultie. She's fine. Probably just..."

That's when Lucy saw it, the shape moving out in the desert. It wasn't close enough for her to make out individual features, but she knew...

Cooper must have seen the change in her face...how her breath caught and her eyes went wide just as Dogmeat stood, teeth bared, hackles raised, because he spun around and then went still.

"Cooper...Cooper...Cooper..." Lucy breathed his name over and over like a prayer, involuntary and desperate, until he got up, moving slowly until he was crouching behind her, a hand wrapping around her mouth.

"Shh," he whispered against her ear, and his breath smelled like whiskey and chems. "Shh," he urged again, his other hand giving her arm a quick squeeze. When she glanced back at him, he put a finger to his lips, pulling her to her feet and taking a step back. She moved with him, hands shaking. "Quiet," he ordered, voice barely a breath.

"Is that..." she breathed from behind his hand, even though she knew...even though she recognized the shape of the thing from the last time she'd seen one...only it had been dead then.

"Deathclaw."

She nodded, shaking hand going down to her holster, but his other hand covered hers.

"Hold on, little killer. It might not see us."

But his shotgun was at the ready, one arm still around her. Beside them, Dogmeat crouched, teeth bared, but remained silent. The thing was moving parallel to them, heading in the direction they'd come from, and Lucy wished suddenly that the rain had never stopped...that they'd never left the rest stop.

A low, deep growl came from Dogmeat before they could get around the boulder behind them where Lucy had assumed he was heading, and that's when it turned to them, standing on its back legs. She could see the outline of the horns and the long claws on either hand and

just the sight made her shudder, the only sound for a moment the fire crackling and her racing heart.

“Run. Now. Go,” Cooper told her sharply as it took a step toward it, pushing her behind him. “I’ll hold it off...go.”

“What?” she choked out, shaking her head, rooted to the spot. What was he talking about?

It was running towards them then, making a noise that sent shivers down her spine as she yanked her gun out of her holster.

“Now! Run!” he ordered again, voice louder this time. He aimed the shotgun and fired once then again, both shots making the monster rear back, screaming in pain.

She wouldn’t run. She didn’t care how afraid she was, she wouldn’t leave him! Instead, she scrambled up the boulder as the Deathclaw charged, digging her fingers into the rock and pulling herself up. Lifting her pistol, she took aim and fired, but her bullets didn’t even make the thing flinch as they seemed to bounce off its scales.

“Lucy! Get out of here!”

“I’m not leaving you!” She emptied the clip into the monster, but it just roared and kept coming. It was nearly to the edge of the camp and then to the edge and then just on the other side of the fire as she fired again and again. It just shook its head like Dogmeat shaking away flies.

Cooper didn’t look away from the thing, gun firing and making it take a step back. “Lucy!”

It leapt at them then, huge arms swinging, and Lucy screamed as she fell back, hitting the ground and then scrambling back to her feet, barely feeling the place where the claws had torn through her shirt, just managing to scratch her side. She ran then, but only a few steps towards the road, putting some distance between them before she turned and shoved her second clip into the gun, then fired again and again, hitting it in the leg and making it stumble and scream in pain.

There. Everything had a weak spot.

“Lucy, get the fuck...” Cooper shouted from behind the boulder she’d been standing on, attention caught between the approaching monster and her as she fired again and again, aiming for its legs and hitting 7 out of 10 times. If they could get it on the ground, they could kill it!

It kept coming towards her despite Dogmeat lunging from the sides, then jumping away as if trying to distract it, and Lucy kept backing up, not daring to spare a glance behind her to make sure she wouldn’t trip. Dogmeat kept out of swiping distance, snarling and barking, and Cooper fired his shotgun right as she fired her last shot, making the thing turn to him and lunge again, claws catching him in the chest and throwing him back.

“Cooper!” she screamed, immediately realizing how stupid that was when the Deathclaw turned back to her. She kept moving back, grabbing her rifle from her back. This was all new to her, shooting a target that moved so erratically and running backwards while she aimed, but she’d been traveling with Cooper for weeks now...she could do this. She took aim, taking deep breaths as it made its way toward her, matching her speed. She fired once then twice then three times, one of her shots catching it in the head but even though it screamed it still kept coming until her foot caught on something and she went down hard, back slamming into the dirt.

“Lucy!” Cooper fired twice, his shout as loud to her as the blood roaring in her ears...it was right on top of her and she held her rifle up, taking aim and firing, refusing to close her eyes...

And the monster dropped onto her, taking her breath away and slamming her head into the ground.

For a moment, the world went dark and hazy, and she couldn’t tell if her eyes were closed or if it was just dark outside. It had been dark, right? Or...almost dark. Blinking slowly and deliberately, she tried to focus...Deathclaw. There had been a Deathclaw and it had attacked them and now...now it was on top of her.

“God fucking damn it, Lucy!”

The words jolted her back to attention, and she wondered if she’d blacked out for a moment. Her ears were ringing, the world spinning around her as she gasped for air. She was wet... her shirt was wet and it was hard to breathe and she could barely move. It felt like she was being crushed as the thing on top of her rocked back and forth, shifting just a little off of her and making it easier to breathe for seconds at a time.

“Lucy!” The scream was hoarse and terrified and it took her a second to place it.

He hadn’t said her name this many times since they’d met. The thought was fleeting, appearing and disappearing in a second. “Cooper!” she gasped, and she heard him cursing some more, and the Deathclaw wasn’t killing her so it had to be dead, right? Otherwise *she’d* be dead.

He kept up a steady stream of cursing as the weight of the monster rocked back and forth, letting her gasp for air a few seconds at a time before the weight on top of her crushed her once more. Finally getting her wits about her again, Lucy reached out and dug her fingers into the sand, dragging herself sideways until she managed to escape, collapsing beside it on her back and gasping from exertion. Her rifle was still underneath it...she’d need that back. And she’d dropped her pistol. But all she could do was stare up at the dark sky, the sun nearly to the horizon.

Suddenly Cooper was there, jaw set and eyes wide as he grabbed her zipper and yanked it down, his hands pressing to her bloody stomach and chest, only it wasn’t her blood. Then his gloved hands moved on to her side, nearly ripping the suit as he yanked the fabric out of the way, and she was pretty sure *that* was her blood, but not much of it. The thing had just scratched her.

They'd done it. They'd killed it! She sat up, using his arm to help her...he was stock still though, other than his heaving breathing, and when she met his eyes, she realized he was angry...no...furious. He was furious. At her?

Why would he be angry at her?

"I told you to run," he told her, voice so oddly soft and calm that it set her teeth on edge.

"Are you..." That thing had scratched him...his shirt was torn, huge gashes across his front, but something about his posture made her afraid to reach for them.

"I told you to run!" he interrupted, voice even louder...practically shouting.

"I couldn't...it would have...Cooper..." she felt like she'd just run a race, her whole body shot through with adrenaline, and now she was left weak and shaky. What was he talking about? How could she have run?

"I told you to get out of here!"

"It...you..."

"Do you..." His hands were clenched in fists and she had the wild thought that he might just hit her. He stood abruptly, taking a step away from her, then spun back around when she scrambled to her feet behind him. "Do you have any fucking idea..."

"I couldn't leave you!" she finally cried, managing a whole sentence. "It could have killed you!"

"I don't know if you've noticed this, but of the two of us, I have a fucking inhuman ability to heal from shit like that! You don't!"

"But...no! Cooper, I couldn't..." How did she explain? She couldn't have left him to fight that thing alone any more than she could shoot him herself. It would be the same thing! What if it had killed him? What if it had hurt him so badly he couldn't recover? What would she do then? How could she live with that? "I couldn't leave you!"

"When are you gonna learn, Lucy? If I tell you to do something, its for a good fucking reason!"

He was yelling in her face and she felt her throat go tight with anger. He didn't get to talk to her like this! "Why are you yelling at me!" she snapped. "We killed it!"

"Why the hell can't you just follow a command?"

She leaned in, feeling that same anger from earlier rise up in her chest. "You don't get to give me *commands*, Cooper ! I told you, I'm not a dog!"

He jabbed his stolen finger into her shoulder hard enough that it hurt, forcing her back a step. "I'd be better off with just the goddamn dog! At least she ain't stupid! You're a fucking liability!"

Lucy went cold then, the blow hitting her like a slap in the face, and she had to bite down on her lip to keep it from trembling. It might have hurt less if he really had hit her.

A liability. A stupid liability.

She'd thought he was her friend. She'd thought he liked her. She'd thought...

She felt a tear running down her cheek, curving to land on her lips, and she hated herself for it. She hated her weakness. She hated how much she cared. She hated the monsters that seemed to wait around every corner, making life feel impossible. She hated that she had no choice but to remain.

She hated that his anger hurt her so much...that he couldn't understand. What had she been thinking? Why had she thought...

But she couldn't stand to think about that. Not now. Turning on her heel, Lucy left him standing in the middle of the field. She didn't go far...she couldn't. It would be dark soon and to wander on her own into the wastes at night would be suicide. Hell, for all she knew, there was another Deathclaw nearby. So he was stuck with her at least until the next settlement...unless he just up and left. The thought of that...of waking up in the morning to him gone, hurt so bad she could have screamed.

Instead, she walked past their packs and the fire, not bothering to put it out, then to one of the boulders at the edge of their camp. There, she sat down in the dirt, not daring to turn back for her sleeping back. She didn't want it...didn't want to risk looking at him and falling apart. So, refusing to look back, she lay down on the ground, curling up on her side, knees to her stomach, not caring that the temperature was already dropping or that she was covered in blood.

It wasn't a full minute before Dogmeat approached, curling up by her head and licking her cheek where another tear had fallen. Lucy didn't push her away...didn't wipe her face. It didn't matter. She just let the dog lick her until she rested her muzzle against Lucy's hair, sighing softly and seeming to settle in for the night.

Behind her, Cooper was silent.

But Lucy didn't care. She couldn't *let* herself care. She just closed her eyes and tried to sleep.

The Ghoul's Interlude

Chapter Notes

I have been agonizing over this chapter...it's the first time we're seeing Cooper's POV and even though I've been planning this for a while, and even though a lot of it was already written (I actually rewrote most of it today because I wasn't happy with it) I'm still worried that it will be a let down. But I can't tweak it forever, so I hope you enjoy! Thank you again to everyone who has been commenting! It means so much to me and makes me so happy to know that people are enjoying reading this story as much as I am writing it.

Cooper Howard was in trouble.

Of course, he'd known that for a while now...from the first moment he'd laid eyes on this woman, he'd been intrigued. You just didn't see Vault Dwellers around much, and this one had stood up to him with her tranq gun and her 'you must be the primary aggressor.' Beautiful and smart...though beautiful women hadn't interested him much in a long time.

No, Cooper had a plan. It was a plan developed during the first couple of years after the bombs fell...after he'd lost his home and his daughter and everything that made him feel human...after his hair had fallen out and the radiation burns had stopped hurting so much, but had left him looking like a monster. After his nose had rotted away and he'd stopped even trying to act like a human anymore.

Find his family, or what had happened to them. Make Vault Tec pay. In the meantime, make enough money to keep himself alive and kill anyone that got in his way.

And Lucy MacLean had put herself right in his way. She'd tried to stop him from taking the scientist. She'd broken the vials he needed to stay alive. She'd bitten his goddamn finger off.

And then she'd saved his life.

That's when his troubles had started.

Caring about this woman had not been a part of the Ghoul's plan. It hadn't been part of Cooper's either. Hell, he'd dragged her through the wastes with a rope around her neck and if he'd felt even a twinge of guilt over that, he'd smothered it. He'd learned a long time ago that if he was going to keep himself safe and sane, he'd do whatever it took to survive, and if that meant selling a beautiful, smart woman to organ harvesters...well, then that's what he'd do.

But there he'd been, in the ruins she'd left behind in that old grocery store, taking every chem he could find, and still, he hadn't been able to get that woman off his mind. Mercy wasn't a thing in the wastes...not anymore. He didn't show it and he certainly never got it. But every time he'd closed his eyes, he'd seen her crouching there like a fucking angel, gun in hand as she'd placed those vials by his head.

Golden rule, motherfucker.

She'd plagued his thoughts for days, haunting his dreams with her big eyes and those glimpses she'd given him of who she really was... a fierce survivor. A smart, sheltered woman who, despite everything, was actually good. A woman whose whole life had been a lie, only she hadn't known it yet.

Then when he'd run into her again, a gun pointed at her daddy...a real one this time.

And that was all before he'd started traveling with her. From then on, it had been one blow right after another.

Her smile when he'd given her those caps...she'd still been afraid of him, but she'd been so stupidly grateful. Her laughter in the stream while Dogmeat had bounded around her and he'd sat guard, not letting himself so much as turn his head. The story about her mother and her soft smile in the firelight driving him to walk away before he said or did something stupid. She was too good for him and he was the Ghoul and the Ghoul didn't care about people...didn't fall in love with sweet, smart, fierce women.

A bottle of cola held out to him, one for each of them. A gift of expensive whiskey given without a second thought. "It's none of your business who I'm fucking" as if the thought of touching him wasn't repulsive. Her little hum of happiness every time she curled up beside him, her head on his chest, like she *wanted* to be near him. No one ever *wanted* to be near him.

A bullet through the throat of a raider who'd threatened him. "I like it when you smile." Words that had nearly killed him there on the spot.

Carrying her through the desert, feeling his heart stutter every time she'd gone too long between wheezing breaths, tears running down her cheeks, skin burning in the sun. Him not caring that they were losing time because he couldn't lose *her*.

Her crying because she didn't know his name...didn't know how to call for him. His own name on someone else's lips for the first time in over two hundred years.

Nine raiders dead, one with her knife through his throat. She'd come to save him. She'd been afraid for him. She'd wanted him to be okay.

So many nails in a coffin he didn't want out of.

The Ghoul had a plan. A purpose.

Thou shalt get sidetracked by bullshit every goddamn time. Well he was sidetracked all right. And Lucy MacLean was his bullshit.

The thing was, he was finding he didn't mind at all...didn't mind detours to save random kids or to swim in impossible lakes or to hold a bag of RadAway in the air while she rested on his lap because all of those detours involved *her*. He'd once told her that she wasn't following him around forever but fuck, he couldn't think of anything better.

But then, as she'd sat across from him worrying about their dog (*our family*), he'd watched her face change, a fear like he hadn't seen before making her breath catch, and she'd whispered his name again and again...he'd known in that second that he'd do anything to protect her.

He just hadn't known she felt the same way. Because as afraid as she'd been, she hadn't hesitated to go for her gun, even after he'd told her to run. She didn't have a gun powerful enough for this type of creature and she wasn't experienced enough...even if she was a good shot she still tended to root herself in one spot like a tree.

She hadn't listened to him, though. She'd stood her ground, and he'd barely been able to focus on shooting the damn thing for trying to keep an eye on her, all between urging to her run because what the fuck did she think she was she doing? He couldn't remember the last time he'd been so afraid. He'd been sure that it was all over. That he'd lost her before he'd even...

Not that he could. Not that he deserved this woman. Not after everything.

But his anger had disappeared the second he'd seen that tear running down her cheek, that look on her face like he'd broken her heart, and only then had his words caught up to him. For a second, when she'd turned and walked away, he'd been afraid that she'd keep walking. That he had just driven her away for good. That she'd walk out into the wastes and leave him behind.

He'd follow, he knew. He'd follow her like a loyal dog. He would protect her even if she didn't want him to. Just the sight of her laying there, curled up on her side, her back to him, felt worse than the Deathclaw cutting him open. *He'd* done that.

So fix it, he told himself, willing his legs to move. He'd done a lot of bad shit in his long life but hurting her wasn't something he could live with.

Still, part of him wanted to leave. Part of him wanted to turn around and walk into the desert. It would be safer. It would be smarter. Caring about this woman could only hurt him, and he'd learned a long time ago how to protect himself from getting hurt.

But he was afraid losing her would hurt even more.

Besides, who would protect her if he left? Who would finish teaching her to swim and watch her back and hold her at night to keep her warm? Who else would know when she needed a break or answer her questions or buy her the corn muffins she liked?

And who would look at him the way she did, with a fondness and affection he hadn't seen in over two hundred years? Who would touch his ravaged skin with gentleness or tend to wounds that would heal on their own?

One foot in front of the other, he forced himself to her side under Dogmeat's watchful gaze. She didn't move, not when he lowered himself to the ground or when he rested a hesitant hand on her shaking shoulder. In fact, she went still like she was holding her breath. She had been afraid of him at first. Those first few days, she'd flinched every time he'd gone for his gun, and for some reason, he hadn't been able to stomach it.

"Lucy?" he asked, voice sounding too loud in the sudden silence. It would be dark soon. He needed to put that fire out before something else saw it and then they really were shit out of luck because he sure as hell couldn't concentrate right now.

She didn't respond. If anything, she curled up tighter, and Dogmeat's gaze was reproachful.

"You scared the hell out of me." The words were almost impossible to get out, but he forced them out anyway. He couldn't lose her...couldn't let this be the reason she walked away from him. They were friends...that's what she'd said. And he would take whatever she would give him. "I thought that thing had killed you. I..." he swallowed, squeezing her shoulder. "I'm sorry, sweetheart."

Slowly, she sat up, red-rimmed, tear filled eyes meeting his own, and damn it, that sight was worse than the Deathclaw. He'd never been able to stand it when the people he loved cried.

"I'm sorry," he told her again, the unfamiliar words easier the second time. "I shouldn't have said any of that shit, Lucy. I didn't mean it. None of it."

She just looked at him for a moment like she was afraid to believe him, and he couldn't stand that. He couldn't bear the thought of her being afraid of him again...of losing the easy camaraderie they'd build up. Of never again getting to hold her at night, her head resting over his heart.

Whatever she saw in his face must have convinced her because she leaned in, resting her head on his shoulder, and he wrapped his arms around her before he'd decided to do it, like they were magnets and he couldn't help himself. Immediately, his body remembered what it was like to hold someone he loved...to comfort them. He wanted to press his lips to her hair but she wanted friends and he didn't even deserve that but she deserved whatever she wanted.

Mine, he thought, the word so sudden and fierce and true in his mind as he squeezed her, her hands gripping the back of his shirt. Mine to protect and mine to hold and mine.

But this wasn't a fucking wedding. If he didn't deserve her friendship he sure as hell didn't deserve her love.

He was hers regardless.

Every day with this woman was like a reminder of who he'd been. He'd changed so much since he'd been Cooper Howard...slowly and steadily, a character had taken over for him. That character had kept him safe for a long time now...had kept him alive. But it was like spending time with Lucy was changing him again, reminding him of who he'd been once. Lucy, who needed him but, more importantly, who wanted him. Who chatted with him like he was a person, and who snuggled up beside him at night, first because he hadn't wanted her to freeze to death and then because she seemed to want to, and now he wouldn't trade that time holding her in his arms for anything. She found comfort in him. When was the last time anyone had found comfort in him?

He wasn't going to lose that. Not over some stupid, shitty things he'd said because he'd been scared...because watching her disappear under that Deathclaw had nearly destroyed him.

"I didn't mean it," he told her again, shaking his head and hating the feeling of her tears on his shirt. "I was..."

Scared. Terrified. In despair at the thought of losing her.

Too much, he told himself. He was going to scare her off if he didn't reign it in.

"I'm used to having you around, sweetheart." Cooper made his voice light, feeling like a coward and resting his chin on her head. "I haven't had a friend in a long time. Sometimes I forget how to do it. And it would be a shame if a Deathclaw ended our friendship before we even made it to New Vegas."

"I can't just sit back and let you protect me, Cooper," she whispered sharply, voice hoarse against his shoulder, and that was almost worse than her tears. "Not when you're in danger too!"

"I don't think you've ever once, since the day I met you, sat back and *let* anyone do a thing, darlin'." He stroked a hand through her soft hair, wishing he'd taken his gloves off so he could feel it. "But I've been traveling these wastes for a long time. I've been a soldier for even longer. So you've gotta trust me when I tell you to fall back. I'm not ever doing it because I think you're stupid. You're a lot of things, sweetheart. You're stubborn as fuck, and you're a hell of a shot with that rifle for someone that spent their whole life in a hole in the ground. Apparently you can use a sword...that I'll believe when I see it. You're a young pipefitter, whatever the fuck that is."

She huffed out a laugh, and it was like he could breathe again...like she'd breathed air right into his lungs. "You forgot cousin-fucker."

"Of course. Can't leave that one out." For some reason, the thought of Lucy fucking *anyone* else didn't feel quite so funny anymore, but he made himself smile anyway. She liked it when he smiled. She liked it when he laughed. "You are a lot of things, but I know for a fact you aren't stupid, Lucy. I shouldn't have said that."

He pressed his hand to her back, holding her closer and wishing he could go on...wishing he could tell her that it felt dangerous, how much he cared about her. That he felt intertwined with her now, like he couldn't leave her if he wanted to. And he did not want to. That he

hadn't felt actual happiness in so long that at first, he hadn't recognized it, and that it was all because of her. That she was never going to be him because she was better than him, and maybe she made him want to be better too.

"I won't ever run, Cooper," she whispered. "Not if it means leaving you behind. I just won't."

He wanted to be mad about that...wanted to argue. But she was looking up at him with tears on her face, and Cooper couldn't find it in himself to fight her on it. Not yet. "We can argue about it later, how about that?"

She nodded, burying her face in his chest again. "Okay."

"And the next time we run into a Deathclaw..."

She went stiff in his arms, but he just rubbed circles on her back and went on.

"You did exactly right. Aim for the head and the legs. The body's covered in armor plating so thick your guns won't be able to penetrate it."

"Then it sounds like I need stronger guns."

He nodded against her head, smiling. He didn't think he'd smiled this much in over two hundred years. "Sounds like it."

"Cooper, I..." Lucy swallowed, voice solemn, and when she pulled away, her face was serious. "I understand that you have not had a friend in a long time. But yelling at your friend is not a healthy way to solve conflict."

"Well, I certainly can't argue that," he agreed softly, lips quirking. He wondered if this was the speech she gave to the kids in her class when they fought...it sounded rehearsed.

"So in the future I would prefer open, respectful communication," she finished, eyes boring into his.

"I will do my level best," he promised, meaning it. There had been a time in his life when he'd followed that rule, at least to the best of his ability. For her, he thought he could do it again.

"That is all I can ask." She nodded decisively. "And I, in return, promise to be more careful and to find better weapons so that I am better equipped to defend myself."

His lip twitched, but he fought the smile. "I think I can help with that."

"And...will you tell me? If you decide that you don't want to travel together anymore?"

"Sweetheart, I can tell you right now, that's never going to happen." Finally giving in, he plucked his glove off and wiped his thumb over her face where the ghosts of tears left trails on her cheek. Lucy closed her eyes, leaning in to the touch, and it took every ounce of restraint not to tell her the truth...that he was so fucking in love with her even though he'd

half forgotten what that meant or how to love someone or how to let another person in...that he didn't deserve her but that she was welcome to travel with him for the rest of his life.

She wanted to be friends. He was lucky to get that much.

Still, he couldn't help himself from taking just a little more. It was all he'd been able to think about in that hotel room when he'd been driven to cleaning his guns over and over like an idiot, or just up and leaving, wandering around the settlement because he knew that if he spent one more minute with her in a confined space, his self control, which hadn't been a problem in a very fucking long time, might just snap like a twig underfoot. So he leaned in, his thumb stroking her cheek as he pressed a kiss to the top of her head.

It felt like kissing a live wire...his whole body seemed to light up at just that contact, and Cooper wondered what it would be like to kiss her...to really kiss her. To touch her bare skin. To taste her. To be inside her.

So much for friends.

He forced himself to pull away after what felt like too long, but Lucy didn't seem the least bit bothered. No, her smile when he met her eyes again was as bright as the sun, and he wanted to look away lest he get burned, but it was too late for him anyway.

This, he thought. This was what he wanted.

And then Dogmeat whined, making them both jump as she wormed her way into Lucy's lap. She laughed, wrapping her arms around the dog and kissing her on the head. "We didn't forget you," Lucy soothed, and the dog wiggled in happiness, laying half on her back in Lucy's arm, tongue lolling.

Cooper took that as his cue. "Alright, sweetheart, unless you want some more Deathclaws showing up, we'd better put out this fire."

Her eyes went wide. "I don't want that."

"Me either." He dumped sand on it until the flames were smothered, carefully pulling the cups of Cram they'd been making for dinner out of the way. Handing her the less burned one, he took a bite. Not terrible...then again, his taste buds were fairly fried anyway.

"I dropped my gun," she told him after she'd swallowed her own first bite. "And my rifle... it's underneath that thing."

"Alright. Let's eat and we'll find them."

Trying to move the Deathclaw's corpse just reminded him of earlier...of throwing all his weight behind pulling it, sure that he was about to uncover her bleeding, broken body...sure that it had killed her. Now, though, Lucy was there to help him, and together they managed to drag the corpse just far enough that she could grab her rifle. Miraculously, it didn't seem to be damaged. She was able to retrace her steps and find her little pistol, and then he pulled out his knife.

“Alright, Vaultie, looks like we’ve got just enough light left...ready to make tomorrow’s breakfast?”

Her sigh, audible and exhausted, made him chuckle. She’d consistently impressed him with how quickly she’d taken to wasteland survival skills, including eating every manner of insect they could find. That didn’t mean she enjoyed the process, he knew, but he also knew that she had to know how to do it. If he couldn’t be with her, he needed to make sure she’d still be okay.

Plus it was pretty funny watching her pretend not to be disgusted.

“Sorry, darlin’, we take whatever food we can get out here. This one’s high in rads, but with you taking that RadX, it ought to be okay.” He’d need to make sure he got plenty of RadX along the way...needed to make sure he didn’t turn around again one day only to find her on her knees in the middle of the road, too weak from radiation poisoning to get up.

“Okie dokie,” she mumbled, taking out her own knife and kneeling next to him in the sand, close enough that their shoulders touched. Giving him the smile that meant ‘I refuse to let you see how gross I think this is,’ she held up the knife. “Step one?”

He grinned. “Step one. Cut here, all the way across, and try not to cut too deep or you’ll hit organs. If those rupture, you’ll get the juices all over you, and that smell is a bitch to get out.”

The smile only intensified and Cooper chuckled as she got to work, mind wandering to settlements and safety and hotel rooms and all the cake and apple pie she could eat. One day, he thought...one day he’d give her all those things. But first, they had to get to Vegas.

Chapter 22

Lucy woke in the same way she always woke now, to Cooper's soft, steady heartbeat beneath her ear and his hand on her back. This morning, though, her cheeks flushed as she remembered the night before...the way he'd cupped her face in his hand...how she'd leaned in without even meaning to. Then his lips against her skin and the way he'd lingered there, breathing in. She'd felt like she just might combust.

She'd felt like she never wanted him to stop.

Was that something friends did? Never once had she kissed a friend that way or inhaled with her nose against their hair or held their face in her hand...maybe it was different on the surface. Maybe it had been different before the war. He'd told her that he'd never want to stop traveling with her and her brain had short circuited for a moment, and that had been *before* the kiss. It had already been difficult, reminding herself over and over that he hadn't shown an interest in a romantic relationship with her. They were friends and friends were wonderful and important and she loved being his friend.

But this wasn't the way friends behaved. Surely his actions had to indicate he felt *something* for her. Right? Surely she wasn't reading this wrong...her whole life she'd been taught how to interpret the actions of other people and how to know what was appropriate in any given situation because behaving considerately and appropriately were the bedrock of a good community.

And Cooper Howard had kissed her.

For just a moment, she allowed herself to picture it...it would be so easy to roll over on top of him and straddle him. To lay on top of him and press her lips to his...to cup his face in her hands...to run her hands down his chest...

Romantic or sexual contact required explicit and enthusiastic consent. No one should ever feel coerced into any type of relationship. And she thought that Cooper cared a lot about her and he saw her as a friend and he seemed to like her. He'd apologized for yelling at her, and he'd explained that he'd been afraid...but he'd also turned away when she'd gotten changed like she'd burned him and when she'd had a bad dream and tried to curl up against him, he'd grumbled about it...then that morning, he'd seemed so uncomfortable. It didn't make sense...sometimes he looked at her and the way she felt about him was mirrored in his eyes and sometimes it was like just looking at her was painful.

Everything was so complicated on the surface. Had they been in the Vault, Lucy would have expressed to him that she was developing feelings for him and then asked if he was interested in a romantic relationship. Never in her life had she been nervous to have this type of conversation with someone. But Cooper wasn't like anyone she had ever known...he might not take it well. What if it ruined their friendship? What if he never wanted to hold her again, or what if she never got to hear him laugh or see him smile again? What if he really did decide that they shouldn't travel together?

But Lucy had asked him for open, respectful communication, and he'd agreed, so she owed it to him to be honest, no matter how nervous she was.

Maybe not just yet, though. Later, she told herself. She would talk to him later. For now, they had a job to do...find her father and find his family and get her brother out of the Vault...maybe get everyone out. Maybe convince them that living in a Vault was wrong and that they needed to change now. It all seemed too big...too much and too impossible. She sighed, closing her eyes. One step at a time.

"You losing air?"

It took her a second to decipher that before she huffed out a laugh. "Don't you sleep?"

"Not nearly as much as you." His thumb traced patterns on her back, which was more distracting that she'd thought it would be. "What's got you sighing this early in the morning? You haven't even had to gut any bloatflies yet."

"Just thinking about all the Deathclaw jerky we're going to be eating."

When he laughed, she could feel it rumble through her, and her fingers tightened in his shirt reflexively.

"How are we going to find my dad in New Vegas?"

"The same way I always find my bounties."

When he was silent, she looked up at him curiously, chin on his chest. He had one arm bent behind his head, propping him up so he could look at her, hat shading his face.

"Sorry, sweetheart, trade secret. If I told you, I'd have to kill you."

She rolled her eyes, dropping her head back onto his chest, and once again she could feel his laughter.

"We'll talk to the locals. See if anyone's seen him around. Most people are happy to talk for a few caps, and he's not going to be hard to describe."

That was true...a man in power armor without a helmet would probably be easy to track.

"We're over halfway there," he continued. "But there are some mountains up ahead. That's going to be the hard part. Not to mention the tribes in the canyons. We'll have to be on the lookout."

She remembered him mentioning people in the canyons, but not that word. "Tribes? Like... Indigenous people?"

"That's just what they call them. No idea where they're from. They moved out to the canyons a century ago and they still live there...they're not always friendly to people passing through. Some keep to themselves. Some are raiders. Some of them will see you as an easy meal."

“I understand eating whatever is available when you don’t have access to food, but the wastes seem to have a concerningly high rate of cannibalism.”

He was grinning when she sat up, finally giving in to her bladder and also knowing that if she lay there for any longer, she might actually be tempted to kiss him, especially if he kept smiling at her. “Is there a rate of cannibalism you don’t classify as ‘concerningly high?’”

“Zero percent,” she told him, deadpan, as she walked away to pee behind a boulder.

They broke down the camp and ate jerky for breakfast, along with more fried Cram and a RadX for Lucy. According to the map on Lucy’s PipBoy, they wouldn’t run into any prewar cities for a while, and those seemed to be where settlements had popped up.

“That doesn’t mean we won’t find more settlements,” Cooper told her as they walked. “Just that it’s not real likely.”

“There’s a place called Beacon Station...”

He glanced at the screen, pointing. “Baker’s probably going to be the next big one. They’ve got a reservoir under the city...biggest one around. Unless raiders have taken it.”

“It’s less than 30 miles from here. It looks like we’ve been averaging about half that...a little more some days. So...two days? Maybe? Do you think they’ll let us in?”

He kindly didn’t remind her that it was *him* they didn’t tend to let in. “Maybe. We can get more supplies there, at least.”

“From there, only about 80 miles to New Vegas! So...in a little over a week? Do you think my dad is just walking?”

“The suit was damaged, so I doubt it flies too well, but if he’s managed to keep it in the air, he can cut a straighter path.”

“So...who is in New Vegas? You said a decrepit old asshole ran it?”

“That’s right. Robert House. Old pre war billionaire. Tech guy. My ex wife knew him. Last I heard, he was the ruler of New Vegas, complete with his robot army. Instead of living in a Vault, he built up the city’s defenses. Kept it as close to prewar as he could. He had a couple of gangs working for him too.”

“But you said he was fighting with the NCR and the...Ceaser guy?”

“Yeah. They all fought at the Hoover Dam for control of Vegas...the dam produces enough electricity that the city might as well be a Vault. It had casinos, restaurants, hotels...and I mean real ones. Running water, elevators, neon signs, the whole nine yards.” He pressed his inhaler to his lips and took a deep breath. “I haven’t been out this way since before Caesar's Legion took an interest...haven’t paid much attention to what happened.”

“Does it matter?”

“If Caesar took Vegas, your daddy won’t want to stay for long. I’ll bet it’s House he wants to talk to.”

“We can ask someone in the next settlement we stop in if they know what happened?”

“We can try,” he agreed. “News don’t travel like it used to, though. People might never leave their settlements, and travelers don’t always talk much.”

“So...we might not know until we get to Vegas?”

He nodded. “You got it.”

While they walked, Cooper changed the subject and told her about filming A Man and His Dog, and about Roosevelt. “One of the best costars I ever had,” he told her with a grin. “Smartest, too.”

“Not smarter than you,” Lucy stage-whispered to Dogmeat who wagged her tail, then went to find a stick for them to throw for her.

She split her time between throwing the stick and listening to Cooper talk about things she’d never thought about...auditions and trailers and costars. Directors and writers and producers and the sheer number of people it took to make a movie. He told her about the hair and makeup department, and long hours spent in rehearsal and shooting the scenes and reshooting the scenes and sometimes reshooting them again. Still, he was smiling a little as he talked, eyes far away as he remembered. He told her about people he’d enjoyed working with and the ones that got on his nerves, and about how quickly Roosevelt had picked up acting.

She wondered what had happened to the beloved dog, then realized she didn’t want to know...didn’t want that smile to leave his face.

They stopped for lunch, Lucy building the fire and Cooper cutting up some Cram to fry. “I’ll get bread next time we’re in a settlement,” she told him, taking a bite. “I didn’t see any at the last one.” Then again, she hadn’t wanted to linger for long.

He tossed a chunk of meat to the dog who was practically drooling as she watched them eat. “At this rate, we might reach Baker tomorrow night...maybe the next morning.”

“Maybe they’ll have more of those cornbread muffins.” Never before had she thought about food like this, salivating like Dogmeat at the thought of it. But now that her only options were dried meat, canned meat, and whatever slightly wilted vegetables she could find, she spent what felt like half her day imagining it.

“We can stay there for a day or two. Get some rest,” he told her casually, making her perk up. “No use running you and the dog ragged.”

“In a hotel?” she asked, hopeful. “With a bed? And a bathtub?”

“I’ll see what I can do, sweetheart.”

That, at least, was something to look forward to. If it hadn't been such a horrific waste of water, she would have dumped her canteen over her head in an effort to get clean. As it was, her hair felt lank and greasy, even tied back in a ponytail, and her clothes smelled like she'd been wearing the same three outfits for days, which she had been. The night before, she'd changed into the pants and shirt since her Vault suit was bloody from the Deathclaw, and the last thing they'd done that night was look at her side, Cooper dumping a splash of whiskey on her skin to disinfect the scratches just in case. Still, these clothes weren't much cleaner, and she'd have killed for a bathtub to soak in for a while.

They made it to Beacon Station about two hours before dark. It wasn't much...an old Red Rocket gas station rusted away by the road, along with a couple of brick buildings whose roofs had mostly caved in. There were a few rusted cars on the side of the road, and Cooper pulled out his gun, holding it casually as he walked, eyes darting between the cars. Dogmeat didn't seem worried, just keeping her nose to the ground as she wandered off, probably chasing after her dinner.

"What were those buildings?" Lucy wondered.

"Probably a couple of shops. Maybe an office or two. This was basically just another rest stop. No one lived here."

Lucy's whole body was tired...she was tempted to just pick a spot and sit down...tell Cooper that's where they were resting for the night even though there were still a couple of hours of daylight left, and they could make it a little closer to Baker. She desperately wanted a bath and to clean her clothes and sleep in a real bed, but at the moment, laying down in the street sounded equally good. In the distance, something screeched and then there was a crunch...probably the sound of Dogmeat finding her dinner.

Maybe, she thought, they could make another soup for their dinner. Put the carrots in and some jerky. It wouldn't be the best, but it would be better than just the jerky on its own. She'd been snacking on the cherry tomatoes, holding out the bag for him every once in a while. She missed food. Good food. And her kitchen. And Norman. And..

She grunted when she ran into Cooper's back, blinking and looking around in confusion. He glanced back at her, brow raised.

"Why did you stop?" she asked, rubbing her eyes.

"I don't like this place," he told her simply, gazing around at the cars and the old buildings. "Doubt there's much worth taking here..." His hand rested on his gun and Lucy did the same, suddenly a little more awake.

"Oh...should we keep going?" She wasn't sure what exactly he didn't like about it...it seemed exactly the same as every other abandoned place they'd passed through, but he was the one who'd survived up here for two hundred years, so she trusted his instincts.

Cooper looked at her again, thoughtful. Then, "we'll stop for a minute. Eat something."

Lucy could have kissed him...or at least hugged him. He must have seen the relief on her face because he smiled to himself, looking away.

“Should we see if there’s anything in the gas station? Food or ammo? Caps?”

”That’s the spirit. Come here, girl,” he called, and Dogmeat came trotting over, part of a roach in her mouth. Cooper poured some water into a cup, putting it on the ground over by the gas pumps in the shade, and Dogmeat dropped onto her side, panting before lapping up the water, tail thumping. “There you go. Stay here,” he ordered.

“Is she okay?”

“She’s fine. Just needs to rest.”

The front of the station was all glass with an opening for a door that must have been broken at some point. Cooper poked his head inside, then shook it, gun in hand. “If there’s anything here, I’m betting it’s hidden somewhere. Doesn’t look like raiders have used this place as a base recently, and it doesn’t look like there’s ever been a settlement here.”

“Maybe the back door?”

He nodded, following her around the building. There were pieces of scrap metal laying twisted and rusting on the ground along the side and in the back, as well as some broken glass bottles and a few piles of tires, all stacked three or four high. Lucy grabbed the handle to the red metal door on the back wall. It said ‘Employees only’ on a silver plaque, but when she yanked on it, it gave with a reluctant groan, only sticking for a second.

“Not locked,” she told him, unnecessarily.

“I’m guessing it’s already been picked over, then. But it won’t hurt to look upstairs. Or the basement, if there is one. That’s where storage would have been.”

The room inside was dark, the only light coming from the doorway, and she held her PipBoy up to illuminate it. There were lockers along one wall, and she thought she saw a table. Lucy took a step. “So why don’t you...”

She heard a click...felt something strange under her foot.

Before she could comprehend what that could mean, Cooper had her by the arm in a bruising grip, spinning her around and dragging her for two steps before shoving her so hard the air was forced out of her lungs when she slammed into the ground. The door slammed, and then there was an explosion that sent a wave of heat searing across her, a sharp pinprick of pain hitting her arm when she curled up on her side instinctively.

Ears ringing, Lucy gasped for air, staring dumbly at Dogmeat who sprinted towards her, the soft, wet tongue licking her face several times before she managed to gather her wits and gently push her away. Still, the dog pawed at her, and she might have been whining but Lucy could barely hear. “It’s okay...I’m okay,” she gasped out, blinking and trying to orient

herself. At least, she thought she was okay. She could barely think around the ringing in her ears and her head hurt and...

"Cooper?" she asked, head spinning. "Cooper?" If she was hurt, he'd come to her. She could just imagine his hands on her arm, gently wiping blood away...could imagine how he'd help her sit up. How he'd call her sweetheart in the way that sounded like he meant it. He'd pushed her out of the way so he'd known about what must have been a landmine so... where was he?

Her whole body hurt as she pressed herself upright, arms shaking, legs refusing to respond for a moment before she finally got them under her and turned around. The red door was hanging by a single hinge, several of the lockers dented and burned...and right in front of the door, flat out on his stomach, Cooper lay unmoving, one arm reaching out towards her, his hat discarded a few feet away.

"Cooper? Cooper..." she cried, although her voice sounded warped and far away. Half crawling, half stumbling to him, she dropped to her knees and grabbed his coat...he hadn't repaired all the tears in it yet but there were new ones, blood darkening the fabric of his vest and shirt. The gash on the back of his head was the worst though, dripping blood down the side of his head and onto the dirt beneath him.

For a moment, all she could do was stare, breaths coming in pants as she tried to make sense of it. "No...no, no, no...Cooper..." she whispered, putting a shaking hand on his back.

She had to think. She had to fix this. He had an inhuman ability to heal, right? That's what he'd told her. So...so he'd be fine. He'd been shot lots of times and had been stung by radscorpions and she'd shot him with a tranq dart! He would be fine! This was nothing! Two fingers pressed to his throat told her his heart was still beating and he was breathing...so he was fine!

Yanking her pack off, Lucy pulled out her first aid kit. She knew what to do. First water to clear away debris, then alcohol to sterilize. Gauze to protect. Tape to keep it in place. She'd taken first aid courses in the Vault every year since age four! She knew how to help someone who was hurt! And Cooper was hurt right now. But he'd wake up and he'd be fine and she'd get to have that conversation with him and...and either way, she'd be okay because *he* would be okay.

"Cooper?" she asked, shaking his shoulder, but he didn't even flinch. Sighing, she rested her shaking hands on his arm, looking around and feeling the weight of how alone she was crashing down on her. What was she supposed to do? What if he *didn't* wake up? What if...

No. Lucy closed her eyes, taking a deep breath. She would not panic and she would not freak out. She lived on the surface now and Cooper had taught her how to survive. So she would survive until he woke up.

"Step one, get out of the open," she whispered, imagining it was his voice speaking to her. They were vulnerable out in the open, and that explosion had been loud enough that anyone or anything wandering by might hear. So they needed to hide, at least until he woke up.

Lucy took his shotgun out of the holster across his back and rolled him over, grunting at the effort while Dogmeat pranced around, panting and looking anxious. He was a lean man, but he was still surprisingly heavy. Shoulder burning, she got him under the arms and pulled, leaning all of her weight back so she could drag him over to the wall where it was at least shaded. "Sorry," she whispered, sure this couldn't be comfortable for him either, especially with the cuts on his back. Her own arm was wet, and when she glanced over, she saw the growing red stain on her shirt.

She'd have to deal with that later.

Cooper's face remained lax even as she dragged him. She could barely stand to see it, looking anywhere else instead as she finally maneuvered him to lay against the far wall, away from the fragments of shrapnel and glass and out of sight from the road. Pulling her Vault suit out of her pack, she folded it up and propped it under his head, then put his hat back on, tilting it over his eyes. Then, because she couldn't resist, she rested her hand on the side of his face, thumb brushing over his cheek as she felt her lip start to tremble.

He was breathing...he would be okay. And hopefully he'd be comfortable when he woke up...the sun wouldn't be in his eyes and the Vault suit would make a decent pillow. And he'd have his medicine and she'd be there and...

Lucy wiped a hand over her face. He was fine. She was fine. She just had to wait. Grabbing his saddle bag, she tucked it between him and the wall so it would be safe. The last thing she needed was a mole rat or a radroach grabbing it. She did the same with his shotgun, placing it carefully by his leg.

Then she got to work on the tires.

There weren't that many, so she just stacked them in piles in front of him, rolling them around the building and doing her best to hide him from view. Dogmeat followed her back and forth, nudging her arm with her nose occasionally, and when she had constructed enough piles that would hopefully look natural and also hide him from anyone passing by, she crouched and threw her arms around the dog, breathing in deep as she held her.

Deep breaths.

"He's okay," she whispered into Dogmeat's fur. "We're fine. We just have to wait for him to wake up, okay? We'll rest here tonight."

Her only response was a tongue licking her from chin to forehead.

Lucy couldn't manage so much as a smile.

Moving back behind a tire tower beside his head, she pulled out her canteen and took a long drink, head resting against the tires behind her. She wasn't sure if she should try to give him a drink, or if she should give him some of the medicine from one of his vials. Did it heal him if he was hurt? Or just keep him from turning feral? She hadn't asked...had been too afraid of upsetting him. It felt too personal...but he'd been sharing personal things with her lately. So maybe it would be okay.

“We’re hidden,” she told him softly, glancing over at Dogmeat who rested with her head on his stomach. “I got your bag and your guns. And I’m fine. But I might need your help getting a piece of shrapnel out of my arm so...please wake up. Please.” Reaching out, she took his hand, squeezing gently and rubbing her thumb over his wrist. Closing her eyes, she looked up at the wide blue sky. “Cooper...sometimes I hate it up here.” Tears ran down her cheeks as she spoke, and she pressed a hand to her mouth as if that could stop them. “I hate it. I fucking hate it. It’s like we can go more than a day without something trying to kill us. I just want to be safe again.” She wiped her face again, roughly this time. “I’m safe with you. Please...”

She drew her knees up, face pressed to the rough denim.

“Please, Cooper.”

“You said there were two of them?”

Dogmeat’s hackles rose, head snapping up, ears pricked, and Lucy jerked her head around towards the unfamiliar voice.

“That’s what Lou said, but he’s had four already. Said he saw two of them heading for the Red Rocket...”

“If he don’t quit drinking while he’s supposed to be on guard duty...”

“Take it up with Tara. Come on...one of them might have lived.”

“Think Tara will be happy with just one?”

“Fuck if I know. They might have StimPacks though. She said we’re running low.”

She drew her gun without conscious thought. Two voices...raiders? People from a tribe that wanted to eat her? They were looking for them...looking for two people. So probably not friendly, as much as she wished they were. Negotiating rarely got her anywhere on the surface. Lucy still believed that you should treat others the way you want to be treated...the golden rule was still important. But...if they weren’t friendly...if she let them find her and Cooper...what if they killed him?

She needed to move...if they found her they’d find him.

Her thoughts ran in circles as she looked down at her gun, then placed it on the ground by Cooper’s hand. Instead, she reached for his, mouthing ‘sorry’ as she pulled it out of his holster and checked the clip. Full, thankfully.

“She thinks Caesar’s still buying. I figure we’re better off killing them and selling the meat to the Jackals.”

So not friendly. No moral qualms about shooting them, then. She’d promised to be more careful, but she had a gun and a plan...so that was about the best she could do.

What if they captured her? That was a possibility. She couldn’t discredit any possibility.

“You check upstairs,” the first guy said, voices approaching.

They were getting closer.

Heart pounding, she unholstered her knife and stuck it down in her boot. They probably wouldn’t take her boots, right? She took another long drink of water, hoping this wasn’t her last drink...hoping this wasn’t the last time she saw him. It couldn’t be...not before they talked!

That was just wishful thinking, though. Lucy knew that as well as anything now. Thus the backup plan. With her only slightly gray finger, she dug into the sandy dirt, gouging out the word ‘raiders.’ If they took her, he needed to know. He’d have her pack and her water...he’d be fine.

And if they killed her...

Placing her mostly full canteen by his arm, she hesitated for a moment as she looked down at him. Lucy had never seen him sleep. Usually it was her sleeping and him holding her. Him watching out for her and him protecting her. Leaning down, she removed his hat, wishing against all hope that his eyes would suddenly open...that he’d look up at her and lift a brow. *Can’t you let a man sleep, sweetheart?*

A tear ran down her cheek and dripped onto his face, then another, and she leaned down, knowing she shouldn’t do this and knowing that it might be for nothing, but regardless she cupped his cheek in her hand and pressed her lips to his forehead. His skin was warm and textured and it shot a jolt of heat through her, making her tingle all the way to her fingertips.

Lucy wanted to do it again. She wanted to taste his lips and feel his hands on her and she wanted *him*.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered against his skin. “I’ll be back.” She hoped that it wasn’t a lie.

The footsteps were closer, boots crunching over glass.

“I don’t see any bodies...they triggered the mine, though. Nestor, check around back!”

Lucy looked at Dogment, then pointed to Cooper. “Stay. Guard him,” she ordered in a whisper. She could have sworn the dog wanted to argue...that if she could have spoken, she would have told Lucy what a stupid idea this was.

As if she didn’t already know.

She got up anyway, watching to make sure Dogmeat stayed. Reluctantly, she did, standing over Cooper, ears forward. Ready.

“Good girl,” she whispered, then stepped out from their hiding spot.

She was pretty sure she’d only heard two raiders...one upstairs, one coming around the side. She’d been up against worse. She could handle two.

Gun held out in steady hands, Lucy hurried away from Cooper, sneaking along the side of the building towards the approaching footsteps in the back. She didn't hesitate...the moment she came face to face with a man she barely took in the features of, she pulled the trigger, arms aching from the recoil that was so much more powerful than her own gun's. His whole face turned into a bloody pulp, blood exploding and spraying her face as he dropped.

One down.

"Nestor!" Footsteps pounded on stairs inside and she hurried to put more distance between her and Cooper, moving around the other side of the building and pressing her back to the wall. "Goddamnit, Nestor! You..."

She fired the moment he was in sight, once and then again when her first shot only clipped his shoulder, throwing herself to the side when a bullet whizzed by her. The second man went down, wide, unseeing eyes staring up at the fading light of the sky. There, she thought, hands on her knees as she tried to catch her breath, heart pounding in her ears. She'd done it. She honestly couldn't believe it had been so easy. But there could be more of them, so she needed to loot the bodies, take their guns and ammo, and...

Lucy barely had time to register the sound of a footstep behind her...barely had time to lift her head before the explosion of pain in her head and the feeling of her knees hitting the dirt before the world went black.

Chapter 23

This time, when Lucy woke, it was to pain. Pain in her wrists, rope tied too tightly around them, and pain in her head, pounding and ever present. Pain in her chest...she was hanging upside down, someone's shoulder digging into her, making it hard to breathe. Pain in her shoulder...she'd never checked that place where shrapnel had probably gotten her. Weakly, she tried to push herself up to relieve the pressure on her chest, but quickly found herself dropped to the ground instead, landing on her hurt shoulder and groaning.

"Good. You're awake. Walk," the woman who'd been carrying her ordered, gesturing lazily with her gun.

Lucy blinked up at her, taking a moment to process that before looking around. Her head felt strange and fuzzy, so it took her a moment. Raiders. The gas station. Cooper. It all came back to her in seconds. Had they found him? She couldn't ask...had Dogmeat listened to her? They weren't by the road...she couldn't even see the road or the gas station...she had no idea which direction they'd been walking or how far...panic threatened to consume her as another thing occurred to her...her PipBoy. It was gone.

The gun smacked against her shoulder, making her wince, and the woman gestured again. "Up. Now."

She struggled to her feet, stumbling a little as she tried to balance without the full use of her hands, head swimming. Glancing back over her shoulder, then around at the horizon, she tried to spot anything she recognized. They were probably walking away from the road. East, maybe? She looked up at the sky...nearly dark. The sun rises in the east, sets in the west. That's what Cooper had taught her. So they were going east.

Just knowing that helped a little. She couldn't panic. Couldn't lose her head, as much as she wanted to. She still had her boots on, so her knife was still there. She wasn't helpless. She knew which direction she was moving in. Cooper was waiting for her. She had to get back to him. Or maybe...maybe he would wake up. Maybe he would come find her. He was a bounty hunter...a tracker. If anyone could find her, it was him. He'd found her after Filly, after all, and at the Observatory.

So she would be fine.

Deep breaths.

She stumbled forward, walking in front of the woman who had been carrying her. There were three of them...the woman who'd been carrying her and two men, all wearing similar clothes to the other raiders she'd come across in the wastes. How had she missed them? Had they just been too quiet? Why hadn't she stayed hidden...waited behind the tires and took them out one at a time. At least then, she'd have had a better chance of getting them all. "Who are you?" she asked, voice slurring a little. She swallowed dryly, reminded suddenly of the last time she'd had to walk through the wastes with no water, rope tied around her wrists.

No answer. While not surprising, it wasn't exactly heartening either. Neither of the men so much as turned and looked at her.

"My name is Lucy. I was just passing through. What do you want?"

"Just passing through?" the woman asked with a snort. "You killed two of our men."

"So I should have just let them capture me?" Lucy asked, incredulous as she glanced over her shoulder, but the woman just smirked, unmoved. She was taller than the two men. Broader too, with defined muscles in her arms and her hair cut short. "Where are we going?"

No response.

"What do you want with me?"

"Trust me, honey, you're better off not knowing," one of the men told her with a laugh, and Lucy closed her eyes, biting down on her lip and focusing on breathing. She was not going to panic. She'd gotten herself out of bad situations before. She could do it again. She had a weapon. She just had to wait.

With every step, her mouth seemed to grow drier, and her mind kept going back to watching the Ghoul pour the water on the ground...to feeling Cooper's hand behind her head and his canteen at her lips. To the Nuka cola they'd shared, the taste sweet and sharp as it had gone down her throat.

It wasn't too much longer before they walked through a pass between two rocky hills and a settlement came into view. She wasn't sure if the formations were big enough to qualify as mountains. In the Vault, they'd learned all about various structures on the surface, but seeing it all in person made it harder to differentiate. She was doing her best not to think about Cooper...about how she'd left him, unconscious and defenseless. How she'd let her guard down and gotten herself captured and now all he had was Dogmeat to protect him...unless they'd found them. Unless they'd killed Dogmeat.

Just the thought brought tears to her eyes and she had to close them tight, taking a shuddering breath. She couldn't think like that. Not yet. Not until she knew for sure. Dogmeat was so smart...she'd understood when Lucy had told her to guard him. So she would.

Shaking her head a little, she forced herself to focus. Up ahead she could see a couple of people standing guard, and behind them, a few small buildings and houses, and...was that a lake? Cooper had said that there was a reservoir under Baker. So did it extend all the way down here? Or were they close to Baker now? She wasn't sure how long she'd been unconscious but she didn't think it had been that long. It wasn't even fully dark out. So... she closed her eyes trying to get her thoughts to stop jumbling around in her head, always going back to Cooper and Dogmeat.

Our family.

It had maybe been a couple of hours. Had they drugged her? Her head still ached from where they'd hit her, but just that wouldn't have left her unconscious for that long unless

they'd given her a brain injury, in which case, she wouldn't be walking right now. East. She tried to remember what her map had said about anything east of the I15, but she hadn't been focusing on that...she'd been looking at the direction they'd been traveling in. And now her PipBoy was gone and Cooper...

Lucy closed her eyes, wiping her face with her bound hands. "Did you drug me?" she asked, not expecting a response.

Apart from a snort from one of the men, she was right.

"This one's fucking chatty," the other guy said, seeming to address the woman. "They don't usually talk this much once we get them tied up."

"That's gonna be someone else's problem by Friday."

It hit Lucy then that she genuinely had no idea what day it was. She'd quickly lost track on the surface, and the feeling was as disorienting as not knowing where she was. "When's Friday? What day is it?"

"Val, put her with the others." The woman shoved her gun into Lucy's back, jolting her forward as she cried out. "Jim, go tell Tara what we found."

"Think I should mention the second one?"

Lucy's heart lodged in her throat, knees threatening to give.

"Lou's a drunk. She was the only one there. He's seeing double."

She could have cried in relief. They hadn't found Cooper or Dogmeat. They were still safe. Taking a shaky breath, she wiped her eyes again before the guy, Val, grabbed the tail of rope dangling from her hands and yanked her forward. She stumbled a little, struggling to keep up as he marched her through the settlement. Laundry hung over the wooden rails on the porches of the handful of houses, and a dog, not like Dogmeat but thicker and with longer fur, lay in one of the yards on its side, watching her go past without much interest as it panted in the heat. Her theory that they'd drugged her seemed even more likely when they passed an old road sign that seemed to read "Zzyzx road."

The lake was a cool blue, and she wanted to jump in...wanted the shock of cool water to wake her up and help her think. She had to get back to Cooper. How?

"Where are we?" she asked the man, voice softer. "What do you want with me?"

The man lifted an eyebrow, glancing back at her. "You'll and the others are going to get us a good price with the legion. If you're a good girl, you might even get to meet Caesar himself," he told her with a nasty grin. He looked her up and down, from her bloody white shirt to her boots. "Maybe I'll try you out first."

She ignored that. She had to. She remembered Cooper pointing a gun at the man who'd offered to have sex with her for money and wished more than anything that he was here. "Where is Caesar? New Vegas?"

He snorted. “Where are you from, anyway?” he wondered conversationally, facing forward again.

“Santa Monica,” she told him, remembering her Vault and safety and her little brother who she may never see again. Would Cooper find him if these people killed her? Tell him what had happened. She hoped he would. “What about you?”

“Right here. Born and raised. What the hell are you doing all the way out here?”

“I’m on my way to New Vegas. I’m looking for my dad.”

He nodded to himself.

“So...Ceasar?”

“Got pushed out of New Vegas. Again. I wouldn’t bring it up. Not if you don’t want to end up on one of those crosses.” They crossed a street, heading past the lake and to a bigger building. She could make out the word “University” on the crumbled sign that was mostly just scrap metal at this point, but nothing else. He yanked on the rope, half dragging her up the stairs under an overhang with a plaque that said “Main Bldg”.

Inside it was several degrees cooler and so dark it took a full minute for her eyes to adjust, stumbling blindly behind him in the meantime. Several of the interior walls had crumbled, three toilets lay on their sides in one corner, all cracked with chunks of porcelain missing. She could smell other people...human waste and sweat and something sickly sweet...decay? Rot? Fighting the urge to put her hand over her nose, she took a deep, steadying breath instead. They weren’t going to kill her...they were going to sell her. And they’d mentioned others.

Lucy learned who the others were almost immediately. He led her down a short hallway, up a flight of stairs, and then through a door. Val pointed his gun lazily through the opening, but none of the inhabitants of the room so much as stirred as she was shoved through the doorway, just glanced up at her without much interest.

“Brought you a new friend,” he called with a chuckle, then slammed the door behind him.

For a moment, the only sound was the click of a lock.

There were three other people in the room, all women as far as she could tell. Two were around her mother’s age, and the other had to be a teenager. The teenager was the one that looked at her the longest, eyes lingering on her bound wrists before dropping her eyes again.

There were no chairs. No beds. No blankets. Windows lined the wall, and one of them was propped open to let in a little air. Two buckets sat in opposite corners. And the women all sat scattered around the room, all with their hands bound like hers.

“That’s the drinking bucket,” one of the older women, her blond hair shaved close to her head, told her, pointing with both hands. “That’s the shitting bucket. Don’t get them confused.”

Swallowing hard, Lucy nodded. “Oh...okay. Thank you.” She didn’t even hesitate to go to the drinking bucket, kneeling down and hovering for a moment. She was so thirsty...but there was no cup. No ladle.

“Just stick your face in like a dog, honey. That’s what we all do,” the same woman told her, a little gentler.

Lucy didn’t ask if the water was irradiated. She was pretty sure her last RadX had worn off, but she had no choice. Lowering her mouth, she sucked up a few swallows of the lukewarm water, then brought her head up, gasping in relief before struggling back to her feet.

“Where’d they catch you?” the other older woman asked. She sat cross legged, head back against the wall, long braids cascading over one shoulder.

“A gas station by the I15. A Red Rocket.”

“That’s where they got Mindy here. She’s lucky she didn’t set off one of their landmines.” She gestured towards the younger girl who didn’t look up.

“They put the landmine there?”

“Yeah...they’ve got all the buildings booby trapped. Anyone that dies, they sell to the Jackals for meat.”

Lucy moved over to a free spot and lowered herself to sit, wincing as every ache in her body made itself known as she rested her head against the wall. “I’m Lucy.”

“Nancy,” the blonde told her.

“Rhonda,” the other woman offered. “Don’t matter much now, though...tomorrow’s Wednesday. They’ll be selling us and whoever else they can find to the Legion on Friday. Doubt they’ll care what our names are.” She stared up at the ceiling, eyes flat and miserable, and sighed, fiddling with the piece of rope between her fingers.

So she had two days. Lucy could work with that.

“Is there a guard outside the door?”

Mindy lifted an eyebrow. Lucy noticed for the first time that her wrists were bloody around the rope, and there was a bruise covering one eye. “Why the fuck would they need guards inside? The door’s locked. Our hands are tied. What are we gonna do?”

“No guards,” Nancy told her, shooting the younger girl a look. “They don’t need them in the building. The whole town is armed.”

She nodded, thinking to herself. “How many are there?”

“In the whole town?”

“Yes.”

Rhonda snorted, shaking her head. “Do you honestly think...”

“I’d say maybe twenty, plus the dogs,” Nancy told her. “Some go on patrols though...they’re not all always here at once, especially during the day. And at least two of them are drunk half the time.”

Lucy closed her eyes, thinking. There were four of them...four against twenty wasn’t great odds, but...if they could all get weapons...

“Do they ever come in here?”

“Unless they’re bringing someone else in, just once a day. In the morning they bring food, take out the shit bucket, and fill the water bucket. Is there a reason you’re so interested in the day to day lives of the people holding us captive?”

She nodded, glancing at the door that was firmly shut. “I have to get back to that gas station.”

At that, Nancy shook her head, looking sad. “Honey, I’m sorry. I really am. But...”

Lucy reached for her boot, unzipping it just enough so that she could grasp the handle of her hunting knife, then pulled it out. The other women all caught their breath.

“I *am* getting back to that gas station,” she told them, voice quiet and hard as steel. “I’ve got someone waiting for me, and I’m not going to leave him.”

Mindy leaned in, eyes wide, and Rhonda crossed her arms. “Child, are you suggesting the four of us can clear this place with a hunting knife?”

“No. I’m suggesting we can clear this place with a hunting knife and whatever guns we can take off the corpses of the people we kill with it.”

Nancy was the first to grin. “Well...I will admit, dying in a firefight sounds a lot better than being sold to the legion.”

Lucy glanced at Rhonda who nodded. “That it does.”

She turned to Mindy last. “Do you know how to shoot a gun?”

The girl’s eyes were cold and steely as she nodded. “Yeah. I know how.”

“Good. We need a plan. First, give me your hands.”

Immediately the other women moved closer as if they’d rehearsed, the four of them forming a tight circle in the corner by the drinking bucket in the disappearing light of the sun. Lucy cut Rhonda’s bonds first, then let her take the knife to cut Lucy’s. Next was Mindy, then Nancy, and then Lucy tucked the knife back into her boot.

“How many entrances does this building have?”

“At least three,” Nancy told her. “It was a research center...it won’t be a good place to fight from.”

“We should split up,” Rhonda put in. “Two and two, once we have at least two guns. Cover more ground. And we need to keep quiet. Use that knife as much as we can. The last thing we need is the whole settlement to come down on us at once.”

“If we can sneak into one of the houses, I’ll bet we can get weapons there,” Mindy suggested. “We just have to get past the dogs.”

“What time do they come in to change the buckets?” Lucy asked.

“Early. Everyone might not be up yet,” Nancy answered, nodding her head. “So we work fast. Get as many guns as we can.”

Lucy felt herself smiling as she nodded in agreement. She was getting back to Cooper, or she was going to die trying.

By the time they’d drawn up their plan, the moon was high in the sky, and they agreed to take turns sitting up so that they could get some sleep. Lucy took first watch, her back pressed to the wall, eyes on the moon. That was another thing she’d never been able to imagine the beauty of. The moon. It was so big...so bright. She’d known about it, of course. Had seen pictures of it. But never could she have imagined how beautiful it was.

When it was her turn to sleep, she imagined that Cooper’s arm was around her...that her head rested on his chest. She imagined his hand on her back, rubbing gently back and forth to soothe her to sleep. She imagined looking up at him under the moon.

I’m in love with you. You make me feel so safe. No one has ever taken care of me like you do. I want you to hold me like this every night for the rest of my life. I want to travel with you and Dogmeat and find a home and build a life together.

When she slept, she dreamed of his lips against her head and the taste of Nuka Cola cherry.

That morning, Rhonda, Nancy, and Mindy all placed the rope around their wrists once more, sitting in their usual places, doing their best to look sullen and tired. Lucy pressed her back to the wall behind the door, knife in hand. Only one person came to change the buckets. She would need to move fast...but she knew how to do that. She knew how to kill. These people were holding them captive and intended to sell them. This was self defense.

The lock clicked and Lucy’s fingers gripped the handle of the knife, taking a deep breath as an unnatural calm fell over her.

“Well, ladies, I drew the fucking short straw this morning.” It was the man from the night before...Jim. His gun was still holstered but his hand hovered over it as he stepped into the room. “Which means I get to wake up at the fucking ass crack of dawn and...”

Lucy stepped up behind him, plunging the knife into his throat before he could finish his sentence, yanking it out and feeling herself shudder when a geyser of blood spurted from his

neck, a gurgle escaping before he dropped.

Mindy put a hand to her mouth, turning her face away and making a noise like a wounded dog, but Rhonda lunged forward, grabbing the gun from his holster and checking the clip. Nancy rolled him over, digging through his pockets and pulling out two caps, which she pocketed, and a switchblade, the two of them not seeming at all disturbed as Lucy tried not to look at the blood on her knife.

Self defense. Even if he didn't have a gun on them, it was still self defense.

"I guess another gun was too much to ask for," she muttered.

They all took a drink from the new bucket of water before they left, Lucy splashing a little on her face before clutching her knife and following Rhonda out of the room. They walked single file down the stairs, all of them silent as they made their way to the ground floor. Once there, Lucy hurried to the nearest window, ducking down and peering through the dirty glass. There was a man sleeping on the porch of the house closest to their building, a bottle of alcohol lying on the ground by his hand. The early morning sunlight hadn't even made it to him yet, leaving most of the town in shadow. Lucy pointed. "That house first."

Rhonda nodded, taking the lead.

It seemed that no one had expected the prisoners to escape, and Lucy wondered if that was hubris or stupidity. Either way, no one stopped them as they hurried out through the front door and up to the porch where the man slept. Lucy felt a twinge of guilt now...he wasn't trying to hurt them. He wasn't threatening them.

But he was complicit. He lived here.

Was that enough?

Nancy reached out, slipping the knife out of her hand, and unceremoniously stuck it through his throat in the same way Lucy had killed Jim, and Lucy couldn't look away from the blood for a second...couldn't stop hearing how the man gurgled, or how his wide eyes stared up at them, mouth opening and closing but no sound escaping.

"We haven't got time for your conscience, honey...not right now," she told her, not unkindly, as she grabbed the gun from his holster. Rhonda opened the door to the house, gun drawn as she looked around, then gestured for them to drag his body inside, leaving it in the middle of the kitchen as Mindy shut the door behind them. Immediately they spread out, Mindy finding a revolver in the bedroom.

If there were about twenty raiders in the settlement, Lucy thought, that left eighteen. With every body, their odds got better.

They got lucky one more time. The next house they slipped into, crossing between the two in a crouch one at a time, had a shotgun that went to Nancy. Lucy combed the place but didn't manage to find a gun. But she had her knife, and maybe, she thought, they could just leave. Sneak out while most of the residents were asleep and...

“Goddamn it!”

The cry came from outside and they all looked to each other before creeping to the window, all of them crouching to look outside. The woman from the night before, along with Val, was running out of the research building. She pointed a pistol at the air, firing, the gunshot echoing through the entire settlement.

“We’ve got a prison break!” Val shouted, a smile in his voice. “First one to bring me one of those bitches gets all Jim’s caps!”

“Fuck,” Rhonda whispered, and Lucy had to agree.

Outside, raiders poured from their homes and flooded the streets, some heading straight for the entrance of the settlement, others running into the research building like they might still be hiding there.

“Split up,” Rhonda whispered. “Mindy, come with me. Nancy, you and Lucy. Kill anyone you see.” She directed that last part at Lucy.

She nodded, heart pounding as she and Nancy slipped out the back door first. The back of the house was quiet, and they crouched down, edging along the back wall. There was a line of strange, thick trees, and a rusted car sitting between this house and the next one, so they ducked around that, keeping an eye out for anyone wandering close enough to be a threat.

They were all complicit. They were all fine with kidnapping and selling innocent people.

A gun went off and Lucy and Nancy both froze, only to hear more gunfire and screaming and from then, Lucy’s brain seemed to shut off, instinct taking over.

Later, she would remember stabbing a boy no older than sixteen who aimed his gun at Nancy, her knife going through the soft skin of his stomach when she tackled him. She would remember sticking her knife back in her boot and taking the gun from his hand while blood still trickled from his lips, his eyes wide and desperate and so afraid.

She would remember hiding behind a house and feeling a bullet graze her thigh, then turning and shooting a woman through the nose, barely taking in the way her head snapped back or the sound of her body hitting the ground. She was wearing a green dress.

She would remember Nancy’s hand on her shoulder as they leaned around a strange tree, their bodies pressed close as they hid, and the man on the ground at their feet, although she wouldn’t remember which one of them had killed him.

At one point, Mindy screamed but then there was more gunfire and she was quiet, and Lucy didn’t know if she was dead or alive. She didn’t know if Rhonda was still alive or how many people they’d killed or how many were left.

And then, for some reason, she and Nancy split up. Or maybe Nancy spotted Mindy and ran to her. Or maybe Lucy walked away from her when she saw the woman who’d carried her

part of the way here, their eyes locking from across the road. Before the woman could fire, Lucy's bullet went through her chest, exactly where she'd shot Cooper the first time.

Another gun fired at the same time, the woman's head exploding like an overripe melon, and Lucy spun. She was hiding behind a car, she realized...it was like she'd been on autopilot, her body taking over while her brain shielded itself from the bead bodies and the fear that threatened to drown her when she thought about the other women she'd escaped with and whether or not they were okay and Cooper and Dogmeat and...and then she was back in her body, hands shaking, because in the middle of the street...there he was.

Cooper.

And it was like she could breathe again.

He stood like a cowboy, gun out, scanning the area with Dogmeat pressed to his leg, looking so angry it rolled off him like the blast from that landmine. Dogmeat's muzzle was covered in blood, her teeth bared, and at their feet, three more raiders lay dead, one missing his leg from the knee down. The town was quiet, suddenly, no more gunfire echoing through the hills, and she wondered how much of the gunfire had been him?

"Coop..." she started to scream for him, and he and Dogmeat spun to face her as the word was cut off.

A hand fisted around her ponytail before she could make it more than a step, yanking her head back so hard she saw stars, and the scream that tore from her was involuntary as the gun dropped from her hand. One arm wrapped around her, pulling back back against a man whose sour breath hit her face as he whispered in her ear, "where do you think you're going?"

Val.

Then something sharp pressed against her throat.

"Leah should have killed you when she had the chance, you little cunt," he snarled. Cooper took a step closer, pistol aimed right at them, face twisted in fury. But when he met her eyes, he softened.

"There you are," he told her, sounding for all the world like she'd just wandered off for a few minutes. If she hadn't known him, she wouldn't have noticed how his voice shook. "I thought we talked about notifying one another in the event we decided to travel separately?"

"Sorry. I got kind of tied up," she whispered, the relief of seeing him making tears run down her cheeks. He was okay. He was here.

"Huh." He glanced at the man holding her, eyes going from the knife to the arm wrapped around her. "I can see that."

"Fuck off Ghoul. I'm taking this one to the legion myself. Might even try her out first if..."

Cooper ignored him, not breaking eye contact with her. "Deep breath, sweetheart."

Lucy nodded and closed her eyes, breathing in and going perfectly still.

“What do...” the raider started as the knife bit into her throat, but she still didn’t move and then there was the explosion of the gunshot and the bullet seemed to pass so close, she could have sworn that the heat from it singed her. The man holding her dropped, a spray of hot blood painting her cheek as the knife clattered to the ground.

Then Cooper was there, wrapping her in his arms, and she gripped the back of his jacket, hands fisted in the fabric as he took a shuddering breath. Her knees buckled, but he held her up, arms firm around her. “Didn’t you just promise to be more careful?” he asked, his voice hoarse.

“I’m sorry...I didn’t see the landmine and then...I...I...” She was crying too hard to continue, her whole body shaking. He was okay. He was here.

Cooper’s hand pressed to the back of her hair, his lips pressing to her temple and sending heat flooding through her before he breathed in deep, his cheek to hers. She couldn’t catch her breath...couldn’t stop shaking, but he just held her, rocking her a little as his hand rubbed up and down her back. “It’s alright,” he finally murmured. “You’re alright, Lucy.”

Beside her, Dogmeat whined, her paw brushing at Lucy’s leg until she finally let one hand fall, resting on her head and petting her as best she could.

“I have to admit,” he finally told her, pulling away just enough to smile down at her. “You are getting pretty adept at shooting yourself out of bad situations. I barely had to do any work. You cleared this place out.” He brought a hand up, brushing her tears away with his bare thumb.

“You found me,” she whispered.

“Course I found you,” he scoffed. “Those idiots left a trail a mile wide. I left your pack by the entrance...figured you might want it.”

She nodded, still shaking. “Thank you.” Her breaths came in pants and Dogmeat whined, nudging her hand with her nose. “I...I was afraid they’d find you...”

“Nope. Guess they didn’t look too hard. That was smart, with the tires. And the note.”

“You know,” Rhonda spoke up, and Lucy jumped when she spun and found all three of the women standing a few feet away, Mindy’s arm wrapped in a makeshift bandage. “You could have told us your husband was on his way to help when you suggested we take this whole place with a single hunting knife.”

“He sure took his sweet time,” Mindy put in, her bloody arm held to her chest.

Lucy couldn’t help it...she laughed, dropping her head against Cooper’s shoulder. He just huffed a little, one arm wrapping around her, holding her up. “I was a bit incapacitated,” he told them dryly, patting her back.

“They were planning on selling us to the legion,” Nancy put in, eyes cutting to the horizon. “They might show up early, so unless you’re looking to meet them...”

Cooper nodded, squeezing her. “You heard your friend. We’d better get the hell out of Dodge.”

“Is that what this place is called?”

He chuckled, releasing the sound like a sigh. “Just an expression, sweetheart. Let’s hit the road.”

“Wait...where will you go?” Lucy asked the women. Rhonda had specks of blood on her face, and Nancy’s shirt was soaked through but she didn’t seem hurt. Mindy seemed more irritated with her injury than anything.

“Don’t worry about us, honey. We’ll get Mindy back to her folks and go back home.”

Lucy nodded. “Thank you. For helping me.”

“It’s us that ought to be thanking you, honey.” Nancy put a hand on her shoulder, squeezing gently. “Every one of them would have seen us sold as slaves, Lucy. Even the boy. Remember that.”

Just her words brought back the feeling of her knife cutting through a teenager’s stomach, the memory appearing in flashes, and she made herself nod as Cooper held her tighter. “I know,” she whispered.

“Maybe we’ll see you around. We’ve got a farm a few miles west of Baker. You’re welcome if you want to stop by.”

“Oh...Baker. We’re headed that way...” Lucy told her, eyes wide. “The settlement...we were going to stop there for a few nights”

Nancy nodded, glancing at Cooper. After a moment, she seemed to make up her mind about something. “Well, like I said. You’ll both be welcome. We’ll be sure to tell everyone what you did here today. They’ll all be glad to have a safe road to travel again.”

“There’s a hotel there. They’ll heat some water for you to have a bath, too. Or, if you don’t find Baker to your liking, you’re welcome at our farm,” Rhonda put in.

“Much obliged,” Cooper told her, nodding as Lucy ran her fingers through Dogmeat’s fur and tried to smile.

“Thank you.”

“Hopefully we’ll see you around.” Nancy gave Lucy one last pat on the shoulder before taking Rhonda’s hand, Mindy throwing them an awkward wave as she turned to follow.

“Okay...bye.”

As if from outside herself, Lucy felt her lips turn up in amusement, her own hand coming up to wave. “Bye, Mindy.”

And she stayed there, leaning against Cooper, one shaking hand still on Dogmeat’s head as they watched the three of them walk away.

Chapter 24

Lucy had thought that Cooper would want to leave the moment the three women were out of sight...after all, more raiders could come, or the legion could show up early. That's what he and Nancy had said. Instead, he glanced down at her, watching her as she watched the disappearing silhouettes of the women who'd escaped with her, then, his arm still wrapped around her shoulders, guided her over to the lake. She forced her gaze to stay on the water, not wanting to look at the bodies all around them. She was fairly certain Dogmeat was eating one of them and the sound made her sick.

"Don't we have to go?" Her own voice still sounded strange to her...hoarse and so tired. She wanted to lay down. She wanted to sleep. She wanted Cooper to keep his arm around her, tight enough to hold her together.

"We've got a few minutes. Go ahead. Get cleaned up." He pulled out a RadX and held it out to her, along with his canteen. Lucy stared at it for a moment before her brain caught up and she took it, drinking his water almost desperately. She was so tired and thirsty and she couldn't believe she'd survived this...that he was actually here.

"Your gun," she told him then, remembering abruptly. "They took it. I...I'm sorry..."

"I'm pretty sure your buddy over there has it," he told her, jerking his chin towards where the woman they'd both shot lay. Lucy didn't look.

"I thought there were only two of them. I'm sorry..."

"Stop apologizing," he ordered, voice gentle as he knelt in front of her, undoing the clasps on her boots when she made no move to. He paused when he must have found the knife, and she felt him grab the handle, pulling it carefully away from her calf. "You knew they were going to take you."

"I knew it was a possibility."

He was silent.

"I couldn't let them find you. I...I had to make sure they didn't find you but I thought there were only two of them. I didn't check. I should have checked before I...my PipBoy. They took it. I have to find it. I can't get back into the Vault without it."

He straightened, hands landing on her shoulders, and she met his solemn gaze with her own wide-eyed one. "Don't worry. We'll find it. It's got to be around here somewhere."

"I don't want to be here anymore," she admitted in a whisper, her whole body shaking, and the hands on her shoulder squeezed hard enough to ground her, his already gentle eyes softening.

“Alright, sweetheart,” he murmured. “One step at a time. Get cleaned up. I’ll go see what I can find.”

Lucy did as he’d asked the moment he walked away, wading into the lake and kneeling down, cupping the cool water in her hands and scrubbing her face. She couldn’t see herself but was determined to get all the blood off...there was so much blood. It felt like she had bathed in it. Wishing for her soap, she scrubbed frantically at her arms and face until her skin was raw, her denim pants and shirt soaked through, but that was good because there was blood on those too. She thought about stripping them off, but Cooper could come back and she didn’t want to make him uncomfortable and she also didn’t want to risk anyone else stumbling upon her.

It wasn’t long before Dogmeat leapt into the water with her, tail wagging as she jumped around, splashing water with every step, and the moment she got close enough, Lucy wrapped her arms around her, face hidden in her neck, not caring about the blood on her muzzle. “You’re such a good girl,” she whispered, closing her eyes against hot tears. “You did so good.”

She allowed it for a moment, wiggling happily at the attention, then jumped up, paws on Lucy’s shoulders as she knocked them both into the water. Lucy managed to take a deep breath right before she went under, closing her eyes and letting herself remain there for a long moment, the only sound the water rushing around her. It felt so good, even with Dogmeat’s heavy paws on her stomach as she pranced around her.

When she surfaced again, it was almost like Dogmeat was grinning at her, mouth open as she bowed, tail whipping back and forth. Then she was off, racing into the deeper water, and Lucy wanted to follow her...to float on her back in the middle of the lake and forget. Maybe Cooper would join her...maybe they could just rest for the first time in so long.

Instead, she looked around, making sure she was still alone, then waded back to shore, rubbing at the place on her ankle where the knife must have nicked her. Every part of her body seemed to hurt, but her shoulder was tied with her head for the worst, and she remembered the shrapnel and the landmine...that felt like so long ago. She would need to take care of that. Peeling her socks off, she lay them out in the sun, sure they’d dry fast, then sat beside the lake to dry out herself, staring out of it and feeling strange. Far away. Like she couldn’t quite inhabit her body.

When she closed her eyes she saw that boy and felt her knife drive into his stomach and heard the woman’s head explode and...

Dogmeat emerged from the lake and crawled over her legs, plopping down in her lap, and just that pressure brought her back a little. She blinked down at her, resting a shaking hand on her side and stroking her wet fur, clumps of it coming off in her hand. “Good girl,” she whispered again, bare feet resting on the dirt. She’d taken her hair out of the ponytail and it hung in wet tendrils around her face, the sun beating down on her and drying it. She needed to brush it. Or...she thought about the hand fisted in her ponytail and brought a shaking hand up to the back of her head...it was still tender from the knot there...maybe she wanted to cut it off.

It wasn't long before footsteps approached. Dogmeat just thumped her tail on the ground even harder, so Lucy didn't bother looking up until Cooper dropped a duffle bag onto the ground then sat beside her, taking her arm and strapping the familiar device back in place. The weight of it was comforting, and she leaned her shoulder against his once she was done. "Thank you."

"Found some more things too...bandages, some pills we can sell. None of the guns are any better than what you've got, but I grabbed a couple to sell. Plus some ammo for both of us. A few other things." He placed her own gun beside her on the dirt. "You can have that back. Clip's full."

"Thank you," she whispered again, staring down at it but making no move to return it to her holster.

He wrapped an arm around her, letting her lean on him even though she was wet. They were quiet for a moment, Dogmeat content to dry off on Lucy's lap, Cooper's hand absently trailing up and down her arm. Then, "Lucy, why didn't you take the dog?"

"I thought there were only two of them. I told her to guard you."

The arm around her tightened.

"The other three raiders were quiet...they didn't talk and I didn't see them...one of them hit me in the head. I think they gave me something to knock me out. I didn't wake up until we were almost here." Her voice was flat now...flat and far away, and he brought a hand up to rest on the back of her hair where the knot was, brushing his thumb over the raised skin, then pulling away when she flinched.

"You sleep last night?"

"A little. We took shifts."

He huffed a little, almost laughing. "You, two other women, and a teenager broke out of a raider prison with one hunting knife."

"Plus the guns we found on their corpses," she reminded him, stomach twisting uncomfortably at the reminder.

"Lucy MacLean, you are a fucking force to be reckoned with, you know that?" Cooper shook his head, a little smile on his face, and part of her went warm at the thought that he was impressed with her.

But then she remembered the teenage boy again and closed her eyes. "I was scared," she admitted, voice weak. "And...I didn't want to have to kill them."

"If you and the others hadn't killed them, I would have," he told her simply, resting the side of his head against hers. "I'd have killed every one of them to get you back. They were dead the moment they took you, sweetheart."

She closed her eyes, swallowing hard and nodding against his head. She couldn't have stopped him. Wouldn't even have tried. It was self defense. It was justified.

"They sell women to the Legion as sex slaves. Every one of them in this town knew that. You did the wastes a favor...made it safer for people to travel. And now we've got a place to stay even if the fine people of Baker don't want to see my ugly mug around town."

There was a smile in his voice but she couldn't take it. "Don't." She shook her head, eyes hot. "Don't. You aren't..." Lucy closed her eyes, turning and burying her face in his shoulder. "You're good, Cooper. I don't know what I would do without you. You're..."

She didn't have words for it at the moment, but Cooper didn't seem to need them. He just squeezed her and pressed his face to her hair, breathing in deep. "It's alright, sweetheart," he murmured, rubbing her back. "You don't have to find out. I'm not leaving you."

"One of them...he was just a teenager!" she choked out, and the arm around her tightened. "But he was going to kill us! They all...they..." She couldn't stop the tears and couldn't stop her hands from shaking, but he just held her for a long time, arms so tight around her it almost hurt but she didn't think she'd be able to stand it if he let go.

He didn't.

When the tears finally stopped, she felt worse than before...so tired and wrung out that she could have fallen asleep sitting up with his arm around her beside that lake, surrounded by corpses. The sun was too hot as it beat down on them, even though it was still early, but still...she thought she could have slept for days. Cooper seemed to notice, squeezing her one last time before removing his arm, and despite the sun, she still felt cold.

"We'd better get a move on. There might be more of them, and I for one, don't feel like getting in another shoot out right now."

She nodded, more out of habit than because she agreed. She didn't know if she agreed... didn't know how she felt as she pulled her socks on and holstered her gun. She felt like she was in a daze as she climbed to her feet, only to pause when he caught her arm.

"Are you bleeding?"

"Probably."

He pulled at the place in the fabric of her shirt where it had been torn open with practiced fingers. She wondered absently if he'd ever thought about being a doctor, the thought making a smile tug at her mouth.

"The landmine," she told him, staring at the pattern of wear on his leather jacket and thinking about his bedside manner and general grumpiness. But maybe, she thought, he wouldn't be so grumpy if circumstances were different...if they weren't traveling across the wastes, constantly surrounded by danger.

“Alright...we'll take care of that soon. Come on, let's get your stuff. We're gonna head north and meet up with the road that way...it should save us some time.”

Lucy followed, staring at his back as they walked, eyes stubbornly refusing to leave his jacket or the back of his head. She didn't want to see the bodies...didn't know if she could stomach it. Not right now. Cooper kept glancing back at her, and she wondered if he could see in her face that she felt ready to shatter...if he could tell that one more thing might break her. If he did, he didn't comment, just kept his eye on the horizon and on Dogmeat who trotted at Lucy's side, brushing against her leg every few steps.

Her pack was sitting propped up against a tree, partially hidden from the trail leading to the town, along with her rifle, and she felt herself smile when Cooper placed her hat back on her head. “You dropped this.”

“Thank you.” It felt like she'd said it so many times now but it still wasn't enough. He'd come for her. He'd saved her. He was taking care of her.

He always took care of her.

She put her arms through the straps of her pack, then slung her rifle onto her back. There... she was armed again. She had Cooper and her weapons and she was safe. So, she told herself, she should stop shaking now. Stop feeling like her knees might buckle, or like someone was waiting behind a tree to attack her.

Walking was easy...she'd been doing it so much recently that it was almost possible to shut her brain off while she followed him, only thinking about her steps or Dogmeat's fur under her hand when she absently petted her or the throbbing headache she was developing. Even that was almost a comfort...it made her feel like she was actually in her body...like she wasn't just floating somewhere above herself, untethered.

Cooper waited until they'd left the town behind to speak again, his voice pulling her back to the present. “When was the last time you ate?”

Lucy had to think about it for a moment, noticing suddenly that he'd slowed down enough to walk beside her. “Um...” she shook her head. “I don't know. Whenever you and I ate last.”

He didn't answer, just pulled out a couple of pieces of jerky and passed them to her, giving Dogmeat a look when she crouched, ready to jump for a piece. “You've already eaten,” he reminded her, as if she could understand. Thankfully, he didn't remind Lucy of what exactly the dog had eaten.

The second the jerky touched her lips, she realized she was ravenous, and once she'd all but inhaled the two pieces he'd given her, he gave her two more.

“Not too fast, or you'll get sick,” he warned, and she tried to slow down. “We'll sit down and eat once we're back to the road.”

She took a drink from her canteen, nearly emptying it. Deathclaw wasn't her favorite, but she was hungry enough not to care...but not so hungry as to be able to resist tearing off a

piece and tossing it to Dogmeat, who was practically drooling at her, when Cooper wasn't looking.

Thankfully it only took a little more than an hour to reach the I15 again, and Lucy never thought she'd be so happy to see four lanes of asphalt. It felt safer, somehow, being on the road. Familiar. Of course, Deathclaws and raiders could find them there, but they could see for miles. Cooper started building a fire right there in the median, using scraps of paper, surrounding the fire with little what rocks he could find, then nestling their last can of Cram amongst the growing flames.

Lucy took a seat beside him once she'd placed her pack and rifle on the ground, staring out at the distant hills from under her hat which she'd missed, and Dogmeat plopped down on her other side, stretching out and resting her head on the dirt. Absently, she reached over and scratched her belly, smiling when the dog rolled onto her back to give her better access. After a while, Cooper turned to her.

"Alright, Vaultie. Let's see what we're working with."

She pulled her shirt over her head but kept it clasped to her chest, remembering how uncomfortable he'd been when she'd taken her shirt off before. He only hesitated for a moment before scooting closer, gentle fingers probing her shoulder.

"I don't know why I feel like this," she whispered, staring into the fire and at the can heating there.

His hands hesitated on her arm, but then he went on, pouring whiskey over his knife with practiced efficiency. "Sweetheart, you were kidnapped by raiders, almost sold into slavery, and you had to shoot your way out of that place. You're in shock. You're probably dehydrated. You're exhausted. I'd be worried if you didn't feel a little strange." He spoke so casually, but when she glanced over at him, she could see the way his mouth tightened, brow furrowed with worry.

"Oh," she whispered, nodding. "Right." That made sense. Traumatic things caused changes in brain chemistry. She knew that. And the last 24 hours had been very traumatic.

"So, first, I'm going to get this out of your arm before it gets infected and falls off. Then you're going to eat something, drink more water, and then we'll get to the next settlement so we can rest for a while. Sound like a plan?"

He didn't cut into her until she nodded, wincing when he used the knife to pry her skin open, teeth clenched against the pain. It wasn't nearly as bad as the bullet, but she still had to squeeze her eyes shut, taking deep, deliberate breaths as he gripped the piece of metal and pulled it out of her. He was working fast, one hand gripping her arm to help her stay still. Then, before she could even look, he doused her arm in alcohol, the pain so sharp she had to bite off a scream.

He braced her, a hand moving to her back supporting her, then stuck a StimPack into her shoulder. "There. That ought to do it."

“No ass jerky for you,” she tried to joke...tried to sound normal.

He huffed. “Not yet. Here.” He used his glove to grab the can, then scooped most of the mean into a tin cup for her along with what had to be the last of their carrot. She didn’t even argue that he had less than her...couldn’t do anything other than try not to inhale the soft, salty Cram and the slightly sweet carrot. He ate what was left from the can, keeping an eye on her as she ate. Then he reached into her pack and pulled out a bottle of water that he pressed into her hand, and she drank so much that her stomach sloshed uncomfortably, but she didn’t care because it tasted so good.

“Better?” he asked when she was done.

Lucy nodded, resting her head on his shoulder for a moment and trying not to notice how his breath caught. “Thank you, Cooper. Really.”

“Don’t mention it, sweetheart.”

She wanted to argue...to remind him that he’d saved her life and that he was going out of his way to take care of her and that she cared about him so much and...

Not right now. That wasn’t a conversation she was equipped to have just yet. So she sat up, focusing on Dogmeat instead as she napped beside them. She thought about curling up next to her...resting her head on the dog’s soft flank and going to sleep herself...she was pretty sure she could do it. The sun was high overhead...it must be about noon, she thought. Her eyes were dry and gritty and so heavy and she had to blink several times to keep them from staying closed.

“It’s alright,” Cooper told her then, his arm moving around her once more, and she couldn’t help letting her head drop onto his shoulder. “Rest for a minute. We’re less than 10 miles from Baker. We’ve got some time.”

Lucy wanted to. She wanted to sleep on his shoulder despite the heat and the blood staining her clothes and the sweat dripping down her neck. But she wanted to get to that settlement more...wanted a bath and a bed, no matter what she had to pay. So she shook her head, sitting up. He let her, his arm dropping the second she pushed against him, and for just a second, she wished she could grab his arm and put it back.

“No...we should go. Let’s go,” she told him, nodding as if trying to convince herself despite how heavy her eyes felt...how heavy the rest of her felt too. “I can rest when we’re there.”

He regarded her for a moment, thoughtful, then nodded, pulling himself to his feet and kicking some dirt over the fire before holding a hand out to her. “Alright then, sweetheart. Let’s get a move on.”

Chapter 25

It took almost three hours to reach the wall of the settlement in Baker, although Lucy barely noticed the time passing. All she could focus on for most of the trip was one foot in front of the other, keep walking, keep her eyes open. Don't trip. Stay awake. They saw the smoke from their fires long before that, and with every step from then on, Lucy could feel her heart start to beat a little faster. What if they didn't let them in? What if they didn't let Cooper in? She didn't know what she'd do...she had a crazy vision of herself pulling out her gun and pointing it at the guard. Or dropping to her knees and sobbing into the dirt until they either took pity on her or closed the gates.

But Nancy and Rhonda had told them that they'd tell everyone what had happened...were they already there? They'd gotten a head start, since Lucy had gotten cleaned up and since they'd stopped to eat. Where did Mindy live? Was she somewhere on the way? Should they just sleep outside for the night? Wait another day?

"Here. Might as well," Cooper told her, pulling her from her thoughts, and she stared down at the little package he was offering her.

"Oh...the snack cakes!" They hadn't actually gotten to eat any yet, first because the rads, and then they'd been a little distracted. She managed a smile, taking the package of two brown squares, rubbing at her eyes with her free hand. "Are these chocolate?"

"They are. You ever have chocolate in the Vault?"

"Once a year," she told him softly, her voice reverent. "It was a treat...even more than alcohol." Lucy tore the package, plucking one of the cakes and holding it out to him. There were two...one for each of them. He took it, lips quirking into a little smile.

"None for you. Sorry, Dogmeat," he told the dog whose whole head had snapped up at the sound of paper crinkling, somehow knowing instinctively that they were eating treats.

Lucy grabbed her own, the chocolate already soft and sticking to the plastic and her fingers in the blinding sun. Bringing it to her lips, she bit down, closing her eyes, and humming with pleasure. It was a little stale, of course, but whatever preservatives they'd used had done the job because it was still so good. Creamy and sweet. Even that little bit of sugar made her feel better. She ate the other half, chewing slowly, then ran her tongue over her lips to catch the crumbs, opening her eyes again just in time to see Cooper turn away and pop his own cake into his mouth. "That's really good."

He grunted, nodding a little, and she wondered how much he could taste...if he knew how sweet and rich it was, or if it was just memory at this point. What must it have been like, to be able to have these things anytime you wanted?

"When did you get chocolate?" he wondered.

“Christmas. Everyone got a few pieces in their stockings. We didn’t really observe religions...I mean, we knew the origins of Christmas, but for us, it was a secular holiday. We put a tree up, and families decorated them together. We had a special dinner...ham or turkey with mac and cheese and mashed potatoes. We had oranges to snack on.”

“And jello cake?”

She laughed, nodding. “Yeah. And jello cake.”

Cooper shook his head, huffing to himself.

“And we all exchanged presents,” she went on, feeling a little lighter. “Little things. Norman and I made each other cards, and cards for our dad. Homemade toys, things we swapped... older kids passed down toys to younger kids. And the council passed out enough chocolates so every family could have some.”

She couldn’t help thinking about Jen and her family...about the ham dinners and a table full of sides...she’d only gone hungry once, and that had been during a famine. How often did people up here go hungry? Children? Families? Did they ever get chocolate?

The gate came into view then, and memories of Christmas and chocolates suddenly felt irrelevant as her heart started pounding again. Cooper paused before they reached the guards, two men this time, and turned to her as they stood a little further than a stone’s throw away. “Wait here. Dogmeat, you too. Stay.”

“What? Why?”

“Because I’m asking you to, sweetheart.”

Lucy opened her mouth to argue, then shut it. He’d done a lot for her...and he hadn’t even been angry that she’d borrowed his gun and had gotten herself captured...or if he had been, he hadn’t said anything which was a definite improvement after the Deathclaw. Besides, she was so tired, she wouldn’t have had the energy to argue if she’d wanted to. So, to his apparent surprise, she nodded. “Okay.”

He narrowed his eyes, immediately suspicious. “Okay?”

“Yes. Okay. I trust you, Cooper.”

His lips twitched a little, a soft smile appearing and disappearing in seconds. “I’ll be right back. Don’t run off.”

This time, she brought her hand up for a salute. “Yes, sir.”

That got a snort and an eyeroll out of him as he turned and walked over to the guards.

From where she stood, she couldn’t hear what they were saying. Dogmeat sat right on her foot, leaning her whole body against Lucy’s leg, and that, along with the fact that neither the guards nor Cooper had drawn their guns, made her think that things might be okay. Cooper

spoke softly, his voice measured, and she caught the guards glancing over her. Hesitantly, she lifted a hand and waved with the best smile she could muster.

One of the guards looked at Cooper, saying something else, but then the other chimed in, and then the first one nodded, waving back.

When Cooper turned and made his way back to her, he was grinning. “Well, Vaultie, you ready?”

“They’re going to let us in?” she asked, scarcely able to believe it. After so long, they’d finally found a settlement they could actually enter? If this was a cruel joke, she might just lose it.

He nodded, and of course it wasn’t a joke. He wouldn’t do that. “They sure are. Turns out your friends beat us here, and everyone is eager to meet the famous woman that single handedly took out the Zzyzx raiders.”

It took her a second to understand. Then, “is *that* how you pronounce it? I thought I was hallucinating when I saw the sign.”

Cooper wrapped an arm around her, leading her to the front gate and shaking her head. “Not hallucinating.”

“Wait...Cooper, I didn’t single-handedly...” He was smiling to himself, that glint in his eye that meant he was messing with her, so she just snapped her mouth shut. It didn’t matter, not really. For the moment, she just wanted a room. A dark one, preferably. A dark room and a bed or a sofa or even just the floor and a few hours to sleep.

The guards both nodded to her in greeting, one muttering ‘Miss’ respectfully as she passed, and she shot Cooper a look the second they were out of earshot.

“What did you say to them?”

“Nothing,” he told her with a chuckle. “Just told them you were one of the women that took the base. Now, your friends may have embellished some, but there’s nothing I can do about that.” He shrugged, amused.

Once again, that was a problem for later. Her brain felt too scrambled to worry too much about it.

Much like the last settlement they’d been in, the center of town was an open area surrounded by shops, all with signs advertising what they were selling. She saw a dentist and a doctor, a place where Cooper could sell the stuff he’d stored in that duffle bag he was still carrying, several vendors selling food that smelled so good it made her stomach rumble, a pharmacy and...

“Is that a grocery store?”

“This is a nice settlement, Vaultie. They’ve got generators, see,” he told her, jerking his chin towards an alley where she could see a generator, just like he’d said. “Electric lights,

refrigeration...it ain't Vegas, but still."

"Running water?" she asked, eyes wide. Was it even possible? But if this was a nice settlement...maybe?

He shrugged, lips twitching in a smile. "One way to find out."

He led her to the first building they saw that said 'Hotel' on the sign, the two of them walking through a glass door and into an office where a tall man with shockingly bright red hair stood behind a counter, writing something in a notebook. When he first looked up at them, he was smiling, friendly and professional, but the second he took them in, his jaw dropped, eyes going so wide it would have been funny if her heart hadn't been dropping. He took a step back, gripping the counter.

"You..." he started in a near whisper.

"We're just here for a room," Cooper told him, a warning in his voice. "There won't be no trouble if you don't start none."

"But you..."

Lucy felt frustration build in her, her jaw tightening. They'd made it so far...they were in the settlement! And now this guy wasn't going to let them stay in a room? But before she could even open her mouth to voice those frustrations, the man lifted a hand, pointing his finger right at her.

"You're her! Right? You're Lucy?"

She deflated, anger fleeing and confusion taking its place as she glanced at Cooper. A slow understanding was growing on his face, along with amusement. There was no way he could be behind this...even if he'd said something to the guards, word couldn't have made it here in five minutes. Still, he seemed to be enjoying himself all of a sudden.

She decided to go with polite. That was usually best. "Yes, I am. How do you..."

"You saved Rhonda and Nancy Johnson!" he blurted, looking at her with a reverence that made her a little uncomfortable. "You took out a whole raider's camp with a hunting knife!"

She was so tired...so ready to drop onto the nearest soft surface, that all of this felt suddenly like a dream. "How do you know who I am?"

"They said to look for the woman traveling with her ghoul!"

"Right..." She glanced at Cooper again who was watching with his arms crossed like he was at a show, grinning in amusement. "Okay. Um...can we get a room please?"

"Of course! You can have any room you want!" He gestured to a wall of keys, each with a number on the tag.

"Thank you. Um...any room will be fine. Do you have running water here?"

“Yes! All the rooms have showers!”

That was enough to make her want to cry in relief. “That’s great. Thank you. How much?”

He shook his head, incredulous. “You saved Rhonda and Nancy!” He repeated. “Those raiders have been taking people for years! I should be paying you to stay here!”

“Now there’s an idea,” Cooper muttered, grunting when she elbowed him. The man followed the gesture with wide eyes.

“That’s really not necessary. And they helped me escape. And Cooper helped too. He…”

He nodded frantically, gesturing to Cooper. “Right. Your husband! They told us about him too! You’ll both have to come down to the bar and tell the story! Everyone’s dying to know how you did it!”

She opened her mouth, then closed it, shaking her head a little and trying to smile. “Maybe we will. Thank you. Can we go ahead and get that key?”

He jumped, practically lunging for the keys and picking the last one. “Of course! Sorry! This is our best room! How long are you staying?” he asked as she took the keys.

“A couple of days,” Cooper told him.

If anything, the guy’s smile seemed to brighten, but Lucy didn’t think she could keep up with this conversation for any longer. “Thank you again,” she called, already backing away, and Cooper followed her right out the door again.

Back outside, Cooper was smirking to himself. Lucy kept her eyes strictly forward as they made their way to…she glanced at the key for the first time. Room 15. But he wouldn’t be ignored, his shoulder bumping against hers as they walked. “Looks like you’re famous around these parts, Miss MacLean.” He chuckled when she rolled her eyes. “Soon they’ll be asking for your autograph.”

She closed her eyes, but when it was almost too tempting to keep them closed, she forced them back open. “They will not,” she muttered, knowing it wasn’t great as far as comebacks went, but she was too tired to care. “Did a lot of people ask for your autograph?” she wondered.

“Oh sure. All the time. I signed so much shit my hand damn near fell off.”

“Why did they want you to write your name down for them?”

He shrugged. “Lots of people wanted celebrity autographs. Big athletes too. Authors. Autographed things could sell for a lot of money.”

She opened her mouth to respond as they reached their room, but a yawn escaped instead, and she belatedly covered her mouth, not protesting when Cooper plucked the keys from her hand and unlocked the door.

“Come on before you fall asleep out here.”

Inside was a lot bigger than she'd expected it to be...then again, she hadn't really paid much attention to the outside of the building. When they stepped inside, Cooper shutting the door behind them, they found themselves in a kitchen straight out of her own Vault apartment, although the appliances were a little rusty, complete with a table and two chairs. Further into the room was a sofa with a coffee table, and on the back wall, two doors.

“This was an apartment building,” Cooper told her. Suddenly, the whole place was illuminated, an overhead light turning on, and she jumped, turning to stare at him, his finger on a light switch. “Well, what do you know,” he murmured.

Lucy walked over to the kitchen sink, a hand hovering over the handle before turning it. Clear water spluttered, then ran down the drain, and she felt her breath catch. Not wanting to waste it, she shut it off, still staring at the water pooling in the sink. She remembered how Monty had done the same...how he'd stared at the running water and she'd thought it was so strange. Now she thought she could do this for hours if she weren't so tired.

“Take a look!” he called from the other side of the room, and she left the sink to join him at one of the doors, which he'd opened, Dogmeat trailing behind her. A bedroom, complete with a double bed and quilt. It was so dark, the curtains pulled over the single window on the back wall. And then, next door, a bathroom with two doors, one leading to the bedroom, the other to the main room. The bathroom had a shower and a tub all in one, and for a moment, Lucy wondered if those raiders had killed her and this was some sort of wonderful afterlife.

Cooper patted her shoulder. “Alright, Vaultie, knock yourself out. I'm going to go see if I can get some caps.”

Before he'd even left the apartment, she dropped her pack in the bedroom by the wall along with her PipBoy, grabbing the stuff she'd need before heading for the bathroom and closing the door behind her. She eagerly stripped out of her dirty clothes, which were already gritty and dusty again despite her swim that morning, leaving all of it in a pile in the corner to be dealt with later. There were two robes hanging on the wall, a luxury she was surprised to have run into twice in the wastes, but she didn't dwell on it, instead placing her toothbrush kit on the sink, then stepping into the tub, soap in hand. There was a wooden sign on the opposite wall with “7 minute hot water maximum” carved into it that disappeared from view as she pulled the green plastic curtain shut, then turned on the water.

She started with cold water, which was more lukewarm thanks to the heat outside, scrubbing every part of herself with the washcloth they'd left for her, then scrubbing again, and then going in a third time for good measure. She lathered her hands and scrubbed her hair again and again, letting the soap sit on her scalp before rinsing it out. She didn't even care that the water wasn't hot. It was pouring down on her from the showerhead, the pressure massaging her back and shoulders, and it was the most wonderful feeling in the world.

Then, when she was finally clean and the water at her feet ran clear what must have been at least thirty minutes later, she turned on the hot water.

Almost immediately, tears started to run down her face as she tilted her face upwards, the hot water stinging every cut and scrape on her body but she didn't care...it felt so good. God... she'd forgotten what a hot shower felt like. Dropping her head back, she wiped shaking hands over her face and breathed in the steam. She never wanted to leave this little bathroom...or this hotel room. They could give up. Forget about her father and Vault Tec and live in this hotel forever. It would be so much easier...all she'd ever wanted was a small life. The life of a mother and a wife and a member of a community. That's what she'd been raised for. Bred for.

Lucy leaned against the wall, shoulders shaking from the sobs that hit her out of nowhere. She'd been bred for a life in a Vault. She'd been lied to her whole life and her father had betrayed her and her mother was dead and a teenage boy had died because she'd stuck her knife in his stomach to keep him from killing her first and an old man who would have sold her as a sex slave had been stabbed in the throat in his sleep and it was all so heavy, it seemed to crash down on her, making it hard to breathe for a second as she cried.

She cried because she'd forgotten what a hot shower felt like and because some people died without ever experiencing one, all because her father and Cooper's ex wife and Vault Tec and maybe the Enclave had made the world the way it was now...and because they *couldn't* stay in this hotel room forever. Because she had to *do* something about it.

But she was so fucking tired. And they hadn't even made it to Vegas yet.

Lucy got out before the water ran cold...she couldn't stand the thought of the hot water disappearing. Instead, she let it wash away her tears, then turned off the tap at the five minute mark, taking deep breaths and reminding herself that she was just tired. That her brain wasn't functioning normally because something terrible had happened and because she was exhausted.

She dried off, wrapping her hair in a towel and brushing her teeth twice with the running water, then drank straight from the cold tap with her mouth under the faucet. Unable to bear even the thought of putting her dirty clothes back on, Lucy wrapped herself in the robe, ran a brush through her wet hair, wrapped it back in a towel, and then dropped onto to bed, barely noticing when Dogmeat leapt up beside her and curled up at her back.

Lucy didn't wake until she heard a door open, and even then, she didn't open her eyes. Beside her, Dogmeat stretched out and dug her paws into Lucy's back, and when she went to roll over, she realized she was right on the edge of the bed. Deciding to just go back to sleep, she ignored the noises in the other room, figuring Dogmeat would protect her. She was so comfortable and warm and so clean...she didn't know when she'd last felt this clean. Probably the last settlement they'd stopped in.

Another door opened, this one closer, but she still didn't open her eyes until she heard the rustle of cloth, and then someone sat on the bed by her hip, a hand landing on her shoulder.

"Cooper?" she asked, eyes still closed.

"Still asleep?" His voice was so fond and so gentle, and she smiled in response, her hand coming up to rest on his. He wasn't wearing his gloves, and his skin was so warm.

“Mhm. What time is it?”

“Almost eight. Come on, I got us some dinner. You can go back to sleep after.”

She wanted to argue...wanted to roll back over and sleep some more, but he'd gone to the trouble of getting her something to eat, and it sounded like he was smiling.

“I got you some clothes. You can wash yours tomorrow. No laundromat, but the tub should do.”

“What's a laundromat?” she mumbled, blinking out into the darkness.

He huffed out a laugh. “Get dressed and I'll tell you.” Cooper took his hand back, shutting the bedroom door behind him when he left, and she reluctantly climbed out of bed, stretching and yawning and then rubbing a hand over her face. She felt better...human again. Still tired and suddenly hungry, but okay. Pushing herself to her feet, she flicked the lightswitch, unable to help from smiling at the way the room illuminated.

She could get used to this again.

On the edge of the bed, she found a pair of soft black pants and a blue tank top, along with some underclothes, which must have been the clothes Cooper had gotten her. Never in her life had she owned so many different clothes...and it wasn't lost on her that he'd been the one to buy most of them for her. Still smiling, she got dressed in the fresh, comfortable clothes, then stepped into the main room, leaving Dogmeat snoozing on the bed.

Cooper was standing by the sofa, apparently waiting for her. He had left his hat on the coffee table, and he was in the same clothes he'd bought at the last settlement...he must have washed his other ones. She realized he must have taken a shower too since he looked cleaner, and was surprised she'd slept through it.

He held out a hand that she took, a little puzzled. “Close your eyes,” he ordered.

She did, letting him lead her forward. “Are you going to show me what a laundromat is?” she joked.

He chuckled. “It was just a place where you could pay to do your laundry. They had washers and dryers there for people that didn't have them in their own place.”

“Oh...that's nice. Do you think they have one here?”

“We can investigate that later.” He came to a stop then, turning her by the shoulders, then taking a step back. “Alright.”

Lucy opened her eyes, then immediately gasped. They were by the kitchen table, and it was covered in a spread of food the likes of which she hadn't seen since Vault 4. Two bottles of Nuka cola, one with less soda inside than the other. Both bottles had frost on the glass...they were cold! Two plates of what looked like stir fry, full of noodles and vegetables and chunks of meat that might actually be chicken, all of it covered in a sauce and steaming, with slices

of thick toasted bread on the side. A plate of corn muffins. And in the middle of the table, a slice of...

“Is that cake?” she asked, voice hushed like she might just scare it away.

Cooper’s grin was smug. “Told you I’d find you a real cake, Vaultie. Turns out that grocery store has a bakery inside. This place really is fancy.”

It wasn’t just cake. It was a *perfect* slice of cake with what looked like a layer of frosting in the middle and pink icing on top, like it was out of a picture book from her childhood.

Lucy laughed aloud in delight, turning and throwing her arms around him, her face buried in his shoulder. He’d done this for her. All of it.

Cooper rubbed his hand over her back, chuckling softly. He was happy. He was happy when she was happy. She looked up at him, tears burning her eyes, and he was smiling down at her like she was important and she loved it when he smiled and when he held her and when he looked at her like that. And then, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, as if they’d done this a thousand times, Lucy put her hand on his cheek, stood on tiptoe, and kissed him.

Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

So this is another chapter I have agonized over. I have deleted and rewritten the majority of it over and over, so I think this is as good as it's going to get lol. Hopefully its not a disappointment after all the build up! Thank you so much to everyone who has been taking the time to comment. I appreciate you so much and you motivate me to keep writing as much (and as fast) as I can!

His lips tasted like Nuka cola and of something chemical...maybe the vials he inhaled, and it was like every nerve in her body lit up all at once. With her eyes closed, it was all the more intense...his cheek was textured under her fingers, skin warm and rough as she cupped his face in her hand. His lips were soft and sweet and her chest pressed to his in a way that made her whole body ache so wonderfully, heat searing through her. His shoulder was stiff like he was holding his breath...

And that's when she pulled away with a gasp. He was staring at her, wide-eyed, lips slightly parted in what she was sure was genuine surprise...

What was she doing?

"Oh, gosh...I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have done that," she whispered, taking a full step back, guilt flooding her, a hand coming up to her mouth. She could still taste him and she wanted to do it again...wanted to wrap her arms around his neck and kiss him...wanted his hands to explore every part of her. She ached for it like she'd never ached for anything before. But she hadn't taken his feelings into consideration...

Only...hadn't she? Did friends look at each other the way he looked at her?

No. She had to be reading this right. She *had* to be. He cared about her! He felt *something* for her! She could see it in the way he looked at her and the way he took care of her! But something shuttered in his face at her words, jaw tight as he shook his head, eyes sliding away from hers to stare at the wall. "No. You probably shouldn't have."

That made her stomach drop, but she went on. "I mean...consent is very important. Before attempting any sexual or romantic contact with a...a friend or...a companion, it's very important to receive explicit and enthusiastic consent. And I didn't do that. I'm sorry."

Cooper just stared at her like he was trying to parse the words, eyes narrowing in confusion.

Bravely, she pressed on. Because there was no way in hell she could let this pass. She would not be misunderstood. Even if...even if he rejected her, which he was well within his rights

to do, it was time she made her feelings known. She'd asked for open communication and she was going to give it too. "So, um...as you are a...friend, and because I would like to... initiate romantic contact, I am now asking if that is something you would be interested in."

This had been so much easier with Max, and she wanted to kick herself for talking like a Vault Tec etiquette manual. Max had rejected her at first, sure, but then he'd asked *her* for sex (kind of...hopefully his cock would have exploded in the process...and maybe she could have given him a course on sex education while they were at it) and then they'd kissed and it had been perfectly pleasant...but it hadn't been anything like kissing Cooper. And he hadn't even kissed her back!

He hadn't kissed her back.

Cooper's eyes went to the wall again, his face almost blank. "Sweetheart, that's a bad idea."

"Oh," she breathed, the word escaping like he'd just punched her in the stomach, faint and involuntary. He was within his rights, she reminded herself as something inside her crumbled. She respected him very much and she would respect his boundaries and...and maybe she would go back to the bedroom for a moment because her eyes were hot all of a sudden and she really didn't cry this much usually. She must still be tired. That was it. She was still tired and her brain was still not functioning quite right because of recent traumatic events. She swallowed hard, making herself smile as best she could as she nodded. "Okay," she whispered through trembling lips. "Um...I..." she pretended to scratch her nose, using a knuckle to wipe away a tear that stubbornly escaped. "Okay."

He did look at her then, and she wished he'd go back to staring at the wall because she usually took rejection much better than this and it was sort of embarrassing how badly she was taking it now. His jaw tightened, hands forming fists at his sides, and this time, it was her that refused to meet his gaze.

"I'm going to, um...I'll be..." She pointed at the bedroom door with a hand that shook, turning to flee, but his hand caught her wrist before she'd even made it a full step.

"Lucy," he all but pleaded, voice so soft it nearly killed her.

"I just...I need to...just give me a minute. Please," she begged, voice cracking.

He didn't let go. "Sweetheart, it's just...there is quite an age difference here, for one."

That brought her up short. "Yes. That is true," she told the bedroom door, struggling to keep her voice as even as she could get it. "Although I am a consenting adult. And I have been married before."

"For less than 24 hours," he reminded her.

She rolled her eyes, bringing the hand he wasn't holding captive to wipe under her eyes again, unable to believe he was arguing with her right now. "It still counts."

The smile in his voice was wry. "And the two of us didn't exactly have the best start."

“That is also true,” she allowed, taking a shaky breath and wishing he’d let her go cry in peace. “But, I would argue that you have more than made up for that. And I think we’ve moved past it.”

“I seem to recall selling you to organ harvesters.”

She spun then, not caring if he saw her cry because she’d thought they were past this and she didn’t want to argue about it...she wanted to go cry in peace. “I seem to recall forgiving you.”

He paused at that, jaw tightening. Then, “I’m a *ghoul*, Lucy.” He said it like it was some kind of trump card...like something she’d been foolish to forget.

Lucy scoffed. “So what? People already call me a ghoul-fucker. Half the people we meet think we’re married. I don’t care. You’re still a person.”

Cooper shook his head, using his free hand to rub a thumb under her eye, brushing away a tear, only for it to immediately be replaced by another one. “I very much doubt I’m what you’re looking for.”

“What are you talking about?” She’d thought he was rejecting her but...she’d told him she was romantically interested in him and he sounded more like he was trying to convince her not to be. “Cooper, you’re exactly who I’m looking for,” Lucy told him firmly. Even if he didn’t feel the same way, he had to know. “I don’t know what I would do without you. And I don’t want to find out. Ever. No one has ever cared about me the way you do or taken care of me the way you do. You’re a good person. You’re so smart and...and you’re funny and...” She gave him a weak smile. “And I know that I’m not as good at finding my own food or following orders as Dogmeat but...I think I’d like to travel with you forever. But...only if you want that too. And...no pressure. Because you’re my friend and if consent isn’t enthusiastic...”

This time it was him that pressed his lips to hers, his hand cupping her cheek, tongue brushing against hers the moment she opened her mouth in a way that shot a bolt of desire right through her. He kissed her like it was all he wanted, tasting her...devouring her, and all she could do was hold onto him, pressing the full length of her body against his. And this...nothing had ever been like this. Nothing had even come close.

She had to gasp for air when he finally pulled away, pressing his forehead against hers. “I shouldn’t do this,” he whispered, closing his eyes. “Goddamn it, Lucy, I shouldn’t be doing this.”

“Why not? I am fully consenting to this,” she whispered back. “Enthusiastically.”

“I am not someone you should want to be involved with. I’m not good for you.”

Lucy shook her head, swallowing hard. “You don’t get to decide that for me. My whole life, everything has been decided for me, but not anymore. You’re good and I...I care a lot about you and I want to be with you.”

“It’s not safe.”

She scoffed, giving in and bringing a hand to his cheek again. “Of course it is. I’m safe with you. You always keep me safe.”

He just stared at her, naked longing like she’d never seen in his eyes, and Lucy tilted her face up, moving slowly closer. He had time to move away...time to tell her no. But she knew that he wanted this too...she’d felt it in the way he’d kissed her and the way he held her every night and the way he constantly showed his love for her.

“This is what I want, Cooper. You. A life with you. Whatever you’ll give me.”

It seemed he was out of arguments.

He kissed her again, exhaling as if in relief the moment his lips touched hers, their bodies pressed together, her arms around his neck, and this...this was what she wanted. And it was what he wanted. She moved her hand back to his face, brushing her fingers along his cheek. She wanted to keep going...could have done this for even longer than she could have stared at the water running out of the tap, but he pulled away, and when she finally opened her eyes again, he was smiling down at her, that look in his eyes she loved.

“So,” she whispered hopefully, “is that a yes on you being interested in romantic or sexual contact?”

She could feel his laughter in her chest as she shook his head. “Sweetheart, is there a Vault Tec manual on relationships somewhere that you’ve memorized?”

“I mean...I didn’t memorize the whole thing...”

“Of course not. Memorizing the *whole* thing would be ludicrous.”

She had to smile at the teasing. “I just...it feels like I made you uncomfortable sometimes,” she admitted. “And I don’t want to do that. I want to make sure...”

A knock on the door startled them both before she could finish her sentence, his arm tightening around her for a moment before his hand flew to his gun. Lucy watched the motion, blinking and trying to refocus. “I doubt anyone that wants to kill us would knock,” she told him, heading for the door. She glanced longingly at the food as she passed, stomach growling, and wished she had time to snag a cornbread muffin between the table and the door.

“You’d be surprised,” Cooper muttered, leaning against the wall beside the door, not looking any happier at the interruption than she felt.

On the other side of the locked door, Lucy was surprised to find Nancy, her smile warm, her hair even shorter than it had been just that morning...had it really only been that morning? Her sense of time felt off, like she’d just lived a whole week in a single day. Disoriented, she tried to smile normally and like she hadn’t just been having a serious, relationship defining conversation with the man Nancy thought was her husband.

“Long time no see, Lucy.” To her surprise, the woman pulled her into a hug, and Lucy brought her hands up to rest on her back. She was strong, Lucy could tell by the way she hugged her, almost so tight she couldn’t breathe for a second.

“Hi,” she practically wheezed, trying not to be too obvious about catching her breath when she let go. “Did you already get Mindy home?”

“That’s what we’re doing now. Her folks live here. Turns out she ran off with some boy. Those raiders killed him. She got lucky. Hell, we all got lucky you came along.”

“I assume we have you to thank for the warm welcome,” Cooper drawled behind her, hand moving away from his gun.

“We just told everyone the truth.” Nancy hesitated. “Well, Rhonda and I did. Mindy, on the other hand, might have embellished a little. Lucy made quite the impression on her.”

Lucy felt her cheeks heat up, and from the corner of her eye, she saw Cooper grinning. “It really wasn’t anything...”

“Of course it was. If it hadn’t been for you, we might never have gotten out of there.” Before Lucy could remind her that all three of them had fought the raiders as well, she looked up and down critically. “You look a lot better. Those hot showers sure are something, huh? Apparently they’ve improved the infrastructure since the last time we’ve stayed here. How are you feeling?”

“I’m fine.” She wasn’t sure if that was completely true, but she was willing it to be so. Then she realized she was blocking the doorway and stepped aside a little, feeling rude. “I’m sorry...did you want to come inside?”

Nancy glanced past them into the room where the food still sat, untouched, then met Cooper’s eyes for a moment. Whatever she saw there made her smile just a little to herself. “I didn’t mean to interrupt anything. Rhonda and I heard you were staying here and we just wanted to invite you to the bar for a drink. There’s plenty of folk in town that would love to meet you. Rhonda and I can only tell the story so many times. I’m sure they’d like the perspective of the hero herself.”

Lucy glanced at Cooper who was still smiling down at her, but he gave no indication as to whether or not he wanted to accept. He did like drinking, she knew...but they were sort of in the middle of something. She also knew that her new friends were probably the only reason they’d been allowed into the settlement, and she didn’t want to be rude.

“We were just about to eat dinner,” she told her. “Maybe we could come by after?”

Nancy nodded, affable. “We’ll be there for another couple of hours, at least. If not, we’re not leaving until tomorrow night, so we can catch up tomorrow. I’m sure you’re tired. It’s been a long day.”

Lucy agreed with that wholeheartedly. It had, quite possibly, been the longest day of her entire life.

The moment she closed the door, Cooper held out a corn muffin to her. She leaned against him, taking a bite and closing her eyes. He didn't seem to mind, just wrapped an arm around her, holding her close.

"It's a yes, by the way," he murmured against her ear, making every nerve in her body light up, reminding her abruptly of their previous conversation. "To the...how did you put it? Ah yes. Romantic contact."

She looked up at him, his hand cupping her cheek as she swallowed her bite of the muffin which, while not quite as good as the one she'd had in the last settlement, was still really good and made her realize how hungry she was. As if on cue, her stomach growled, demanding more.

"But first," he murmured, resting his forehead against hers, smiling when she tipped her face upward. "We should eat before the food gets cold." This kiss was shorter, just a brush of his mouth on hers, before he was steering her back to the table where she took a seat.

And she had to admit, he had a point.

The second he sat down across from her, she took a bite of the stir fry, eyes closing as a groan of appreciation escaped her. Vaguely, she was aware of Dogmeat entering the room, laying down under the kitchen table, tail thumping the floor as it wagged. Next was a slice of the toasted bread, then more noodles and vegetables and chicken in the sweet, nutty sauce. When she glanced up, Cooper was watching her, the bottle of cola in his hand, and he brought it up for a sip. She followed suit, tearing her eyes away from his mouth...the soda was still cold and sweet and bubbly...

"What do you think?"

"It's so good. All of it. This is the best food I've ever had."

That got a chuckle out of him. "Glad to hear it. This is the nicest place I've been in a while. They've got a bona fide restaurant here." He was still watching her, expression turning contemplative, and she decided to risk a serious question and continue their conversation.

"Do I? Make you uncomfortable?"

"No," he told her without a second thought, speaking with such assurance that for a moment, she had to doubt her own memory.

"But sometimes..." She dropped her eyes to her plate, strangely self conscious. "Sometimes you act like you can't stand to look at me. We'll be talking and you just...you won't look at me."

His hand caught hers where it was resting on the table, thumb brushing across the back of her knuckles, then resting on the finger that wasn't hers, only it was now...it was nearly the same color as the rest of her hand. "That's because I wanted to look at you too much," he told her softly, and when she glanced back up at him, his gaze was so intense she couldn't look away again...didn't want to.

The words hit her then. Every time...he'd wanted to look at her too much? So all this time...had he felt the same way as her? For some reason, that made her feel warmer than the hot food she'd been eating. "You can look at me as much as you want."

"Is that a promise, sweetheart?"

Her lips tilted into a smile. "Only if I can look at you too. An honest exchange."

"I think we might have a deal."

Dogmeat's paw on her leg jerked her abruptly out of the intimate moment, her hand still in Cooper's as they both turned to the dog who sat up, whining a little.

"Can we help you?" Cooper asked dryly, making her laugh.

The dog just whined again, wiggling a little, then sitting down.

"You need out?"

Another whine, then she ran over to the door.

He sighed. "Yeah, alright. Do me a favor and don't shit on carpet, alright? I'm not paying to replace it." He brought Lucy's hand to his face, and in a gesture she'd only seen in movies, he pressed his lips to her knuckles, eyes locked on hers. She felt her breath catch at the contact...at the feeling of his lips on her skin. At the wish that there wasn't a table between them. "Keep eating. I'll be right back."

Lucy had nearly finished her plate by the time he returned, Dogmeat going right back to her spot under the table where Lucy realized she was looking for crumbs. She seemed to find some, licking a spot by Lucy's foot as Cooper sat back down.

"Where were we?"

She smiled. "I believe we were discussing the terms of looking at each other."

"Ah yes." He nodded, mock serious. "Of course. Honest exchanges." He took a bite of his noodles and she ate the last of her bread. "Very important. Any other terms and conditions you can think of?"

"Not at the moment, but I'll let you know if that changes."

"Sounds like a plan."

They carried their dishes to the sink when they were finished eating like a married couple at the end of the day...like this was their apartment. Their home. Their life. And it was so close to a life Lucy had always imagined for herself...but also so far away. The Lucy she'd been in the Vault never could have imagined a dog lying on the kitchen floor, eating a piece of chicken she'd tossed her, or a window to the settlement outside covered only by a pair of curtains. She never could have imagined hot showers being such a luxury that they would

make her cry, or whole towns of new people to meet who wanted to hear the story of how she and some friends had killed a whole town of raiders.

And she never could have imagined Cooper.

She left her plate in the sink to be washed later, turning and finding him back by the table, finishing up his cola in one long drink, the bottle tilted up, head thrown back.

“Do you want to have sex?”

Cooper choked, spluttering and making her jump back in alarm, then reach for him, her hand gripping his arm.

“Are you okay?” she cried, about to try and find his inhaler.

“Goddamn Vaultie,” he laughed, putting the bottle down and wiping his face. “Buy a man dinner first, won’t you?”

Lucy tilted her head in confusion, glancing at the empty plates in the sink. “We just ate dinner.”

Cooper caught her hand and pulled her close, giving a tug that made her laugh, her hands coming to rest on his chest, and oh, she wanted to take his shirt off...feel the skin underneath. “It’s an expression. Besides, don’t we have a prior engagement?”

“We do...but she said they’d be there for a couple of hours...so we have time?” she suggested, voice going up at the end to make it a question.

“Oh no, sweetheart. I’ve been waiting for this for a long fucking time.” He rested a hand on her lower back, and just that contact, so close to where she wanted his hand to be, made her ache with want. “I’m planning on taking my time,” he breathed, brushing her hair back from her face and pressing his lips to her forehead.

Lucy felt like he’d lit her on fire as his lips moved to the bridge of her nose, then finally down to her mouth. He didn’t kiss her just there, though...just hovered a breath away, his eyes soft and serious and...happy.

“Darlin’, I’m going to *savor* this.”

She wasn’t sure what he meant or how she was meant to survive that when she already felt like she might combust, but before she could ask any questions, he pulled away, a wicked smile on his face that only made her clench her thighs more tightly together.

“Alright, sweetheart. Let’s get a drink.”

Chapter 27

“There she is!” Nancy lifted her beer in the air from her spot at the bar, Rhonda’s hand bracing her as she leaned back on the barstool. The bartender, a dark skinned man with hair only a little longer than Nancy’s, shook his head with a smile, then froze when he turned and saw Lucy walk in with Cooper, his hand resting on her lower back. The bar itself was just around the corner from their hotel, and although it was dark outside, inside was bright and cheerful, with lamps on the tables that haphazardly filled the room and in corners, tucked out of the way. There was a refrigerator in the back corner behind the bar, and she could hear the soft hum of a generator under the sound of a radio somewhere.

The place was busy, with most of the tables full of people who all stared up at them, wide-eyed, and Cooper’s thumb rubbed back and forth over her shirt before he headed for the bar, and, steeling herself to ignore all of the staring like he seemed to have no problem doing, she followed him over to Nancy and Rhonda.

“Hello again,” Rhonda greeted, looking a lot better than she had that morning. Her long braids were tied back with a hairband, and she’d changed into a clean blouse and denim pants. She lifted her beer. “Lucy. Lucy’s husband.”

“Oh...I’m so sorry! This is Cooper,” she introduced, flushing a little. She couldn’t believe she hadn’t introduced him before. At this point, she was just a little too embarrassed at the fact that she hadn’t contradicted the last several people who’d thought he was her husband to bring it up...he didn’t seem to care, so maybe it was fine. Besides, it might offer him some protection, and she wasn’t willing to risk giving that up.

“Rhonda,” the woman introduced herself, nodding to Cooper. “And you know Nancy.” They’d both spun around on their barstools, Rhonda’s hand once more steadying Nancy as she swayed a little.

“That I do.” He lifted his hand to the bartender who only hesitated for a second before coming over. Then he turned to Lucy. “You want a drink?”

“Do you think they have moscato?”

“They might have something close.” He turned back to the bartender. “Whiskey, neat. You got wine?”

“We’ve got a couple of bottles downstairs.”

“Give me the sweetest one you have.”

The bartender nodded, hurrying off, and Rhonda gestured to the barstools beside her that, while Cooper had been talking to him, had somehow become available. Lucy took a seat beside her, Cooper on her other side at the end of the bar, not seeming to notice or care about all the looks he was getting. The hush that had fallen over the room when they’d entered slowly gave way to the soft sounds of conversation, and Lucy relaxed a little.

“You look better.” Rhonda looked her up and down, thoughtful.

“How’s Mindy?” She didn’t want to talk about how she looked better, because that would require her to remember how she’d looked that morning and what had happened...so much had happened.

“She’s fine. Her folks are glad to have her back...not too happy about the fact that she ran off, though.” Rhonda sipped her beer while Nancy took a swig from hers. “Maybe next time she’ll think twice about following some boy out into the wastes.” She shook her head, huffing out a sigh. “Poor stupid girl.”

“Don’t act like you didn’t run away to the wastes,” Nancy laughed, and Rhonda’s lips twitched into a grin.

“But not with a boy.”

“You have a farm, right?” The events of that morning, along with whatever conversations she’d had with them, all felt fuzzy and far away, but she was pretty sure they’d mentioned that.

“Yeah. We left my brother and his wife to watch after everything. We sent word today...let him know we were okay. I’m sure he’ll be glad to hear it. He never was much of a farmer.”

“When did they get you?”

“Three days ago. We were bringing a shipment of moonshine to Percy and picking up some supplies.” She sighed. “Fuckers.”

“Moonshine?” That got Cooper’s attention, and he lifted his brows, tilting his hat back.

“Yeah. Nancy makes it with one of our neighbors and we deliver it every couple of weeks. Right, Percy?”

The bartender had returned and he nodded. “That I do.”

“Goddamn raiders stole everything we had. We got our weapons back, but they’d already drunk every bottle we’d brought to sell.”

Lucy remembered the raiders mentioning the man who’d spotted them...the one they’d dismissed as a drunk, and couldn’t help feeling grateful.

“I’ve got a couple of bottles left if you’d like to try it,” the bartender, Percy, told Cooper, placing a bottle on the bar and uncorking it, pouring some of the pale pink wine into a glass and sliding it to Lucy. “Give that a try.”

She did while he was pouring whiskey into a glass for Cooper, and Cooper slid some caps across the bar. She closed her eyes at the sweet, biting taste of the wine, letting it sit in her mouth before she swallowed.

“What do you think?” Cooper asked.

She nodded. "It's really good. Do you want to try?"

He held up his glass of whiskey. "I'm all set, sweetheart." He threw the glass back, and Lucy had to tear her gaze away as he swallowed, telling herself that the flush in her cheeks had to be from the sip of wine she'd just had. She took another drink, a longer one this time.

"We'll take a bottle of that moonshine," Cooper told Percy, pushing more caps across the bar, and he knelt down behind the bar, pulling out a jar with clear liquid inside and placing it in front of them, then pushed the caps back to Cooper, his eyes on Lucy.

"Nancy here told us you're the woman that took out the raider base in Zzyzx."

"With a hunting knife," Nancy put in, laughing incredulously. "This girl pulled out a hunting knife, looked me in the eye while we're standing, hands bound, in a raider prison cell, and told me she *was* getting back to that gas station where they took her."

"It wasn't just me," Lucy told him, shaking her head, cheeks flushing even more. "We all worked together. And when Cooper got there, he took care of the rest of them."

"It ain't the first raider base she's taken, either," Cooper put in, and all heads turned towards him. Lucy's jaw dropped, but he was grinning, that sparkle in his eyes telling her that he was enjoying himself. "Back in the last settlement we stayed at, I was trying to clear out a bunch of them in this old General Atomics store. Got sidetracked by a fucking Deathclaw. But she went into the basement and took out every one of those assholes with seven bullets and that handy little hunting knife."

The other bar patrons all seemed to move just a little closer while Lucy finished her glass and Rhonda poured her another from the bottle. "Now this is a story I have to hear."

Cooper took a swig of the moonshine as all eyes went to Lucy who had to fight the urge to drive her elbow into him and wondered how she could love someone this much and still want to knock him off a barstool. She'd lived most of her life in what the scientist had called a 'meritocracy.' Thinking back, that was true. She'd been brought up to do her best in every situation...to achieve at the highest possible level at all times, whether it be in communicating with others, conflict management, gymnastics, teaching the children in her classroom, or even just janitorial duty. It was essential that every member of the community do the same...in fact, it was expected.

But that striving had never included bragging...that was rude. It was self centered.

Cooper, it seemed, had no such qualms. When she was quiet, he went on, telling them about the doctor who'd offered a trade...medical care for a favor, and how he'd gone on his own since she'd been hurt. He told their increasingly quiet and attentive audience how the Deathclaw had showed up, cutting his fight with the raiders short and about disemboweling him before he'd managed to kill it. He told them about waking up in the basement, tied to a chair, surrounded.

“And before I could even try to get free, here comes Lucy.” He shook his head, chuckling to himself. “This one guerrilla warfared every one of those assholes. Took out the one with the minigun and another one before they even spotted her. Hid between the shelves of old ovens and refrigerators and somehow managed not to get shot. Then, when she ran out of bullets, she comes out, bringing a knife to a gunfight, and *still* won.”

Lucy drank more of her wine to have something to do with her hands, cheeks hot. “There was only one of them left,” she muttered once she’d swallowed, making Nancy and Rhonda laugh.

“That don’t change the facts, sweetheart. Not to mention the Deathclaw she killed.”

“We both killed it!” she cried, spinning and putting her glass down. Somehow, it was empty again. “That wasn’t just me. None of it was just me! I couldn’t have done it without you.” She didn’t just mean the Deathclaw...she’d be dead without Cooper, either at the Observatory when the Brotherhood of Steel took it or somewhere between there and here... she’d had no caps, one gun, and nowhere to go.

His smile softened a little, and he took another drink of moonshine.

“Sounds like the two of you are doing the wastes a favor,” Rhonda put in, holding her glass up before taking a drink.

“Here here,” Percy nodded, pouring a round of shots and passing them around. One landed in front of Lucy, somehow, and, since everyone else was doing it, she threw it back, grimacing and swallowing reflexively so she wouldn’t start coughing. Cooper pressed his canteen into her hand and she took it with a grateful smile, drinking some to chase down the burning in her throat.

Soon, though, the burning turned into a pleasant warmth that went all the way to her fingers and toes, making it easier to smile as she sipped her own full glass of wine. Vaguely, she remembered filling it again, although she was pretty sure she’d only had two glasses.

“Alright, everyone’s heard us tell the story. What brought you to that gas station in the first place?”

Lucy found it was easier to tell the story now, with her head pleasantly light and buzzy. So, skipping over their first encounter, Lucy told them about traveling together through the desert, starting with leaving the settlement with Elliot and running into a little girl they’d escorted home. She told them about scorpions and bloatflies and feral dogs...she might have gone out of order...she wasn’t sure.

“Oh...you live on a farm!” she suddenly remembered, turning to Rhonda and Nancy. “Do you have those big cows too?”

Nancy nodded. “Brahmin? Sure. We’ve got chickens too. Even some pigs.”

“Pigs?” she gasped, turning to Cooper. “They have pigs!”

He grunted. "Don't see many of those around."

"You're welcome to come by and meet them. You have to watch out for the males, though... those tusks are nothing to sneeze at," Rhonda told them.

"Jen's family only had the cows and chickens...I think. I'd never seen them," Lucy murmured, wiping a hand over her face and struggling to focus. "But they wouldn't let us in...two more settlements...I had to go in on my own." She turned to Cooper, suddenly sad at the memory. "I missed you."

He pressed the canteen into her hand again, putting a hand on her back and leaning in. "Drink some water, Vaultie," he murmured, voice gentle, and he was looking at her like that again...like she was important. She smiled at him, taking in the familiar shape of his face, and the abrupt ridge of his missing nose...the way his skin rippled and the dark abyss of his eyes. His lips. She knew what he tasted like now and she wanted more. She thought she could look at him forever until he put his hand on hers, bringing the canteen up to her lips. "Drink," he told her again, so she did, swallowing the clean, lukewarm water.

Then a memory hit her. "Oh, we forgot about the grocery store...with the robot," she told Cooper, eyes wide. That, she thought, was a good story! She'd actually saved people!

"Grocery store?" Rhonda asked, leaning in.

Cooper chuckled. "Yeah, that one was all me," he said, just loudly enough that anyone nearby could hear. "They were running a black market organ harvesting operation. Drugs too. I took care of them and some feral ghouls they had locked up. This was before we knew each other too well...I told her about it later."

Lucy coked her head, doubting her memory for a second. "What?" That didn't sound right...they'd known each other. And...and she'd been the one to do that!

"Think she could get some of those crackers?" he asked Percy. When the bartender had walked over to the other side of the bar, he leaned in close, pressing a kiss to her temple that made her even warmer before murmuring, "not that one, sweetheart. People need to think that one was me."

She cocked her head, confused. "What?"

"I told the sheriff out there that I did it," he explained, speaking so fast...and she was so warm and floaty that she found she didn't really care, but she was still confused.

"Why?" she asked, struggling to keep up. He hadn't been her friend yet. Why would he cover for her?

"Because I didn't want your face to end up on a bounty wall," he murmured, then took the bowl of hard, salted crackers the bartender brought over. "Have some," he told her, a little louder.

Lucy did, eating a couple, but they were salty and she wanted more to drink. She went to grab the bottle of wine again since her glass was empty, but it was sitting over by Cooper and she would have had to reach over him to get it. Instead, she lay her spinning head on his shoulder, smiling when his free arm wrapped around her. All around them people were talking and laughing and it felt normal, his arm around her, his face pressing briefly to her hair before he took a drink of something and ate some of the crackers. She could hear his voice through his chest...he'd pulled his chair closer to hers at some point and was talking to Rhonda or Nancy or maybe the bartender.

She closed her eyes at some point, the pleasant, disconnected feeling making it hard to keep them open. She could still taste the wine and the bread she'd been eating which made her think of toast which led to memories of their dinner.

"I wanted cake," Lucy murmured, not opening her eyes. Cooper had placed the cake in the refrigerator, telling her that they'd eat it when they got back, and she suddenly couldn't get the thought out of her mind. "It looked so good. Like...a picture of cake. I've never had it."

"Well then, let's go eat some cake," he told her, and she heard the soft clatter of caps and Percy's deep voice, then Cooper's. He stood and she reluctantly opened her eyes, letting him pull her to her feet. Nancy seemed to be in a similar position on Rhonda's shoulder, and several people said goodbye or waved to her as Cooper wrapped an arm around her and led her out of the bar and into the darkness of the night.

Dogmeat, who had been waiting for them out on the porch, wagged her tail and hopped up, prancing along beside them, but just watching her run circles around them made Lucy dizzy.

"I believe you, Miss MacLean, are drunk," Cooper told her, a smile in his voice.

"I'm not drunk...I've never been drunk. It's bad!" she cried, incredulous.

"Is that in the Vault Tec manual too?"

"If you're drunk, you can't be a productive member of society." She didn't think that had been in a manual, but someone had said that to her at some point...right?

"Hm."

"And it's a waste of resources. You have to make sure you leave enough for everyone." Her words came out strangely, like she couldn't quite pronounce them right, but when she looked up at Cooper, he didn't look worried, just amused, so it must be fine. "I only had...two glasses."

"I hate to be the bearer of bad news, sweetheart, but you had four glasses. And two shots of tequila." He pressed his lips to her hair and it felt like she was glowing...like he'd turned a lightswitch on inside of her, and she leaned into him.

"Oh," she murmured, suddenly concerned. "I don't remember the second one. Should I not have done that?"

“I think if there was ever a day to get drunk, today is the day.”

“It feels nice,” she confided, leaning on him.

“Just wait until morning.”

“Will it feel nicer?”

He barked out a laugh. “I probably should have cut you off sooner,” he told her, like he was admitting to something. “Seemed like you were having a good time, though.”

She nodded. “They’re nice. Rhonda and Nancy. And...” she trailed off, closing her eyes and letting him guide her. “They...have cows.”

“That they do.” They reached their door, and Cooper pulled out a key, letting the dog run inside first before leading Lucy to the kitchen table and helping her sit. And then, as if by magic, that perfect slice of cake materialized in front of her. He pulled the other chair over to her side, taking a seat and handing her a fork.

Lucy didn’t hesitate, using her shaky, uncoordinated hand to slice through the tip of it, bringing it to her mouth. She almost dropped her fork at the taste...the icing was so sweet it was almost too much, the cake soft and buttery. She leaned against Cooper, closing her eyes. “This is so good,” she whispered, like just talking too loudly might make it disappear. “It’s so much better than jello cake. You were right. That wasn’t cake.”

He chuckled, tucking some hair behind her ear.

“Can we get more?”

“Sure, Vaultie, I’ll get you some more.”

“Here! Try some!” She cut more off, too much to fit on the fork, although she wasn’t sure how to fix that at the moment, then held it up to his mouth. He had to catch her wrist to steady her hand, and Lucy couldn’t have torn her eyes away from the sight of his mouth closing around that cake if she’d tried.

Together, they finished the slice, Lucy savoring every moment until it was gone and she could no longer hold her head up. The sugar made her feel a little more grounded, but she still felt like she was floating...like everything was okay and she was happy and she’d just had real cake and Cooper was here with her, an arm around her as he pulled her to her feet.

“I’m sleepy,” she murmured.

“I’ve got a solution for that.”

He didn’t tell her what it was, just maneuvered her into bed, then climbing in beside her. He cared about her. He wanted a romantic relationship with her, whatever that entailed in the wastes. Love before marriage. A relationship between people who chose each other and had nothing to do with repopulating the world. It was a strange thought.

“What about the sex?” she wondered, struggling to keep her eyes open as she nuzzled her face against his chest, his arm wrapping around her. He chuckled, the sound making her smile, and pulled the soft quilt up around her. He’d helped her take off her boots at some point, and her arm felt light, so her PipBoy wasn’t there...neither was her hat. She couldn’t recall him doing any of those things.

“Is this how you usually proposition someone?”

She nodded, pretty sure she was answering a question but not sure if she was giving the right answer. Did she proposition people?

“Well, it is direct, I’ll give you that. But I think we’d better wait until you sober up, sweetheart.”

“Oh...right. I’m drunk.”

“That you are.”

“Cooper?”

“Hm?”

“I like it when you hold me,” she whispered, clutching his shirt in her hand.

He took a deep breath, his arm tightening around her before he resumed rubbing her back. It felt so nice...she felt so safe.

“I’m tired,” she whispered, the words barely making it out. Already, sleep was pulling her under.

“Maybe you should try going to sleep,” he suggested, a smile in his voice.

She nodded. That sounded like a good idea. “Cooper?”

“Hm?”

“I really love you,” she whispered, not sure if she’d told him before and needed him to know before the darkness of sleep took her.

If he answered, she was asleep before she could hear him.

The next time Lucy opened her eyes, it was to light streaming in through the curtains that hung on the window behind the bed. Her mouth was so dry her tongue felt stuck to the roof of her mouth, and her eyelids felt glued together. She blinked a few times, her eyes gritty, head aching as she slowly sat up. Her head had been resting on a pillow...so where, she wondered, was Cooper? Or Dogmeat? More importantly, why did her head hurt?

Then she remembered...the bar. Stories about their travels and Rhonda and Nancy’s farm and...something about tequila. Groaning, she rubbed her eyes. She’d gotten drunk. She’d never been drunk before. It was bad. Well...Vault Tec had told her it was bad. That’s what

she'd been taught. But other than the headache, she felt okay. And she'd been with Cooper the night before while she'd been drinking. He'd taken care of her like he always did. Surely he wouldn't have let her hurt herself, right?

When she stood, she hesitated for a moment, making sure she was steady on her feet, before stepping out into the living room where she found Cooper on the sofa, Dogmeat laying beside him on her back. One of his hands rubbed absently at her belly, the other held *Great Expectations*. When she stepped through the door, though, he looked up, dropping the book on the coffee table and grabbing the glass of water there, holding it out to her.

She took it, draining it in one long gulp.

"Is it nicer?" he asked, grinning.

"What?" she asked, panting to catch her breath when the water was gone.

He just chuckled. "Nothing. How do you feel?"

"Fine." She rubbed a hand over her face and sat on his other side, head dropping against the back of the sofa. "Mostly. My head hurts."

"Yeah...I remember those days."

"You drank a lot too."

"Takes a lot more than that to get me drunk these days, Vaultie. You're a lightweight."

"I'm going to take a shower," she told him with her eyes closed, making no move to get up.

"Your friends stopped by."

Lucy tilted her head towards him, opening one eye.

"Rhonda. Asked if we wanted to join them for lunch before they head home. We're going to have to employ a social calendar for all the friends you're making."

"What did you tell them?"

"That I'd ask you when you woke up."

"What time is it?"

"Nearly twelve. They said they'd be at the noodle place at 1."

"So I have time for a shower?"

"You do," he confirmed, and she leaned over, her head on his shoulder. She wanted to kiss him again...she was almost 100% sure it had really happened...that he'd said yes to some kind of romantic relationship. Granted, she wanted to get cleaned up and brush her teeth first, but still. She remembered bits and pieces of the night before...how he'd given her

water and crackers...how he'd wrapped his arm around her...his lips pressed to her temple...and then how he'd murmured in her ear...

Lucy sat up, spinning around to face him fast enough that Dogmeat raised her head. "What did you mean?" she asked. He just tilted his head. "When you said I shouldn't tell people about what happened at that grocery store. With the feral ghouls. You said something about a sheriff?"

"Ah. Yes. Well, after you cleared the place out and saved my ass from losing my mind, the idiot sheriff's deputies took me to him for a chat. Apparently he was involved in that particular operation and didn't take too kindly to whoever ended it."

"But...you told them it was you?"

"I did. Figured I owed you that much."

"Oh," she murmured, sitting back against the sofa and leaning on his arm again. Then, taking a chance, she turned and kissed his cheek, letting her lips linger against his skin. "Thank you," she murmured, wishing she had already showered so she could climb into his lap... maybe find out what he meant by 'savoring this.'

He turned, his eyes flickering down to her lips before meeting hers again. "Any time, sweetheart." The kiss he gave her was short and sweet, his fingers brushing gently over her cheek. "Is that a yea or a nay to lunch?" he asked, pulling away just a little.

She *was* hungry despite her headache...and she *did* want to see more of the settlement, especially if he would be with her. "Yea," she told him, nodding. "It'll be fun."

"If you say so." He kissed her one more time, soft and casual like he'd been kissing her for years, then climbed to his feet before she could give in and climb onto his lap after all. "Your clothes ought to be about dry."

That brought her up short, but she still took the hand he offered to pull her to her feet. "Wait...did you wash my clothes?"

"Washed mine too. I had to do something while you were sleeping. You need to get some better books, Vaultie."

She snorted, heading to the bathroom and feeling happy and light and so wonderfully domestic. "I'll get right on that."

The Teen's Interlude

Jimmy Lark had been the love of Mindy's life for a whole year before they'd decided to run away together, and despite what his shitty father surely thought, it had been Jimmy's idea, not hers, to leave Baker together. Sure, Baker was boring as hell, and yeah, she'd wanted out one day, like Nancy and Rhonda...wanted a farm out in the wastes where she could raise animals and come back to the settlement to visit...but she hadn't been the one to come up with the idea to run away before she was seventeen years old, and him only a year older.

Even after he'd convinced her, the two of them whispering at night out behind the bar, sharing a bottle of moonshine stolen from behind Percy's bar as they'd plotted, she'd planned on returning. He knew a place, he'd told her...an old abandoned farm a few miles from Baker. Small enough raiders wouldn't bother them. They'd use the caps they had saved up and plant some crops. Start their lives together, away from his father. And then, once they were established, she would come home and visit. She would apologize to her friends for running...but in a year she'd be seventeen. Old enough to be on her own...too old for her parents to drag her back. And Jimmy would be eighteen. Too old for his father to take a belt to him.

Maybe by then, she'd be too old to interest him.

They'd started out early, Mindy slipping out of her bedroom the usual way (her window), pack on her back. Jimmy's buddy had been on guard duty and had promised not to tell anyone that they were gone for at least 24 hours, so they'd started walking south, following the route that his patrol duty friend had told them about. It's just a few miles, he'd told her, his pack laden with supplies, and a duffle bag with seeds and more caps to maybe buy some chickens. She'd been daydreaming while they'd walked, hand in sweaty hand, under the slowly rising sun...thinking about waking up in her own home, no parents too busy with their own lives to contend with, no maintenance duty every weekend for the handful of caps it paid, and no Jimmy's dad to hide from whenever she saw him around the settlement.

Just her own place. A home that belonged only to her and Jimmy. Chickens to take care of and plants to tend and a life where she was free to do as she pleased. Maybe a baby someday. She could be happy with that.

At least, that's what she'd told herself as she'd walked. Rhonda and Nancy had that life, minus the baby, and they seemed happy.

And then they'd reached the Red Rocket, the rusted logo beckoning to them as a place to rest. As it had turned out, the farm had been further away than Jimmy's friends from the patrol team had led them to believe, and they'd agreed to rest for the night...

They hadn't even made it inside.

Rhonda and Nancy, who she'd known from around town before they'd escaped from raiders together, had delivered her straight into the home of her parents where they'd hugged her and cried, like they hadn't all been fighting just a week ago...like they hadn't forgotten her last

birthday until the sun had nearly set, and like the only interactions they ever had weren't at the dinner table, and even then they never cared much if she didn't show up. Their neighbors had come over too, the whole neighborhood celebrating like she'd been missed...like Jimmy hadn't been lost forever.

But she'd told the story when they'd asked. She'd told them about the raiders and the makeshift prison cell...and she'd told them about Lucy. Lucy, who hadn't waited a full five minutes to start planning their escape. Lucy, who had pulled a hunting knife from her boot and told them she *was* getting back to that gas station, and that for the first time since rope had been tied around her hands, Mindy had started to think that she might just make it out alive. That she might get to see her friends and Baker again.

She'd allowed Nancy to pull her into one of those bone crushing hugs, the two of them telling her that they were staying with a friend for another night before heading home, and that she ought to meet them for lunch the next day. Mindy had promised to think about it. Then she'd endured the lecture from her parents...what had she been thinking? Didn't she know better than this? How could she do this to them?

All the while, she'd wondered how late it had been that first day before they'd realized she hadn't come back home, or if the patrols had needed to tell them.

Then they'd insisted on looking at the gunshot wound in her arm, and she'd thought about Lucy, fearless as she'd stuck a knife in that raider's throat. What a badass. Just that thought had kept her from crying when they'd poured alcohol on the already dressed wound, rewrapping it even though Rhonda and Nancy had done a fine job fixing her up.

And then, about three hours after stepping back into her childhood home, Mindy had pushed the curtains of her bedroom window aside, boosting herself over and landing on her toes on the other side. She'd held her breath, closing her eyes to listen, but when no footsteps had come from the other room, she'd been off, heading towards the junk shop, pockets full of whatever silverware she'd been able to find in that raider settlement. Injured arm aching, she'd slipped inside the shop, dropping her junk onto the counter and staring up at Miss Lilah.

"Heard you ran off." The old woman had stared down at her wrists and the bandages wrapped around them. The bandages weren't necessary...Mindy just didn't want to see the bruises there or remember that raider tying her up, or the long walk back to Zzyzx, tears blinding her to the road ahead.

"I'm back."

Miss Lilah had lifted an eyebrow. "With silverware?"

"Apparently."

"And no Jimmy."

Just the words had made her breath catch in her chest for a second, the pain so sharp she'd had to bite down on her tongue just to feel something else. She hadn't bothered with

excuses...it had been his idea. He'd been the one to believe his friends. He'd been the one to lead the way...she'd just been following.

"Do you want this stuff or not?"

Behind her, the door had opened, jangling footsteps making both of them turn. Miss Lilah had gone pale, taking a full step back. Mindy had just sighed.

"He's with Lucy," she'd told her.

"Lucy?"

"You know...the one that saved us! Killed all those raiders! Lucy..." she'd waved a hand.

"MacClean," an amused drawl had supplied from behind.

"Yeah." She'd pointed her thumb over her shoulder. "That's Mr. MacClean. Her husband. He helped." Then she'd tapped on the counter. "Come on. Twenty caps."

That had brought the old woman's attention back to her, Lucy's husband forgotten. "Ten."

"Ten?" she'd cried. "That's silver!"

"Silver?" The woman had scoffed. "It's steel."

"Fine. But it's still worth more than ten! You can melt it down."

"Do your parents even know you're here?"

She'd huffed, snatching the silverware back and dropping the spoons and forks into her pocket. Spinning on her heel, she'd stormed past Lucy's husband who was watching her with an amused smirk. "Good fucking luck," she'd snapped. "She's a tightwad." She'd let the door slam behind her just as he'd huffed out something that had sounded like a laugh.

Having failed at making any money out of her failed adventure, she'd headed to the community garden where she'd found Kira filling up a watering can at the sink in the garden shed. Her oldest friend, with her hair in tight coils that framed her face much like her own and a pink button down smeared with mud, had nearly dropped the watering can on the ground, almost spilling the precious water before righting it, then rushing over to throw her arms around her. And for the first time since Lucy MacLean had gotten them out of that raider settlement, she'd broken down into sobs, fingers clutching her best friend's filthy shirt.

Later, the two of them had sat behind Percy's bar, heads resting on the wall, eyes on the stars, sitting so close their shoulders touched. Jimmy had always been the one to swipe the moonshine from Percy...Mindy had never been very good at it, and Kira thought it was wrong. Maybe it was. Jimmy had been the one to introduce her to moonshine and to sitting out behind this bar. She'd just gone along with it.

"Were your parents mad?"

Mindy had shrugged. "Kind of."

"Have you seen Jimmy's dad?"

She'd shuddered, scooting closer to her friend in the dark. "No. Not yet."

"You want me to get you a job in the garden? I'll bet there's room. He never comes out there."

She'd nodded, letting go of dreams of chickens and crops and her own home. Maybe a community garden job would be better than the maintenance team. She never had been good with machines anyway. "Okay...yeah. That would be great. Thanks."

Her friend had leaned against her, the sides of their heads touching for a moment. "It's a good job. Not as good as your own farm, but it's more caps than maintenance team."

They'd walked into the bar when the night had gotten too cold to sit outside, taking a table in the back and trying to make themselves small so Percy didn't see them and kick them out. The 'no drinking until you were at least eighteen' rule wasn't one a lot of people took very seriously, but Percy did. She knew Jimmy's dad didn't come to this bar much...preferred to buy his moonshine right from the source and drink at home. So she'd felt pretty safe, huddled in the corner, looking through the crowd and watching Lucy and her husband talk to Rhonda and Nancy at the bar.

The woman had looked a lot better than she had that morning, with fresh clothes and her now clean hair tied back. She'd laughed at something Nancy said, talking just loudly enough that Mindy could tell she'd been drinking. Beside her, her ghoul had watched indulgently, waiting until she'd poured herself a glass of wine before grabbing the bottle while she wasn't looking and smoothly placing it on his other side.

But when she'd leaned her head on the ghoul's shoulder, his arm coming to wrap around her, face pressed to her hair, Mindy had told Kira she wanted to leave...hadn't been able to stomach the sight of intimacy like that when all it made her think about was Jimmy...Jimmy in a puddle of blood, flat on his back, eyes wide and unseeing as Mindy had been dragged away screaming.

That's the image that woke her from a restless sleep before sunrise, face buried in her pillow, tears running down her cheeks and soaking the fabric.

It was hours later, after her parents had both gone to work and after she'd washed her face of all traces of tears, that she ventured out again, silverware in her pockets, to Miss Lilah's junk shop once more. The streets were busy, with travelers who were passing through, either on their way to Vegas or leaving it, and with the people she'd known for most of her life...the people who'd been born here or had enough caps to move here. She'd heard her whole life how lucky she was to have grown up in a settlement like this one...with electricity and running water. Those things couldn't be taken for granted everywhere...hell, most places, she'd been told, did without either.

She wondered, as she stepped into Miss Lilah's store once more, what kind of settlement Lucy was from. And what about her ghoul husband? How had they met? Had they married before he was a ghoul? Or after? Mindy had never met a ghoul before. Since they weren't usually allowed inside Baker, she'd never given them much thought, but she'd seen the way he'd held Lucy the morning before, after he'd come to find her in Zzyzx. She'd seen how he'd pressed a kiss to her hair...how he'd held her up. Lucy had been so strong up until that point, but when he'd held her...she'd melted into him. And he obviously loved her...so they *could* feel love.

Once again, she dropped her silverware onto the counter, then crossed her arms, looking the old woman straight in the eye. "Fifteen caps. Take it or leave it."

Miss Lilah laughed, shaking her head. "You're shit at haggling, you know that? You've got three spoons, two forks, and a knife, honey. Not even enough for a set."

"You can melt it down! Sell the metal!"

"You melt it down and sell the metal."

Mindy dropped her arms. "Fourteen caps."

"What happened to take it or leave it?"

"Come on! Please?"

"You think I run a charity here, Mindy?"

Mindy sighed, dropping her head back. "They took all my caps," she all but whispered at the ceiling, voice weak, and she hated herself for it. She closed her eyes, remembering how Lucy had pulled that knife out of her boot, a fire burning in her eyes, and tried to steel herself. "I got some of them back, but...we didn't want to stick around. In case the legion came early. That was all I had. I'd been saving for a year."

"Maybe you should have thought about that before you ran off."

"It wasn't even my idea!" she snapped, eyes hot. "Goddamn it...it wasn't my idea! He said..."

"It don't matter what he said. You should have known better than to run off to the wastes with some boy." She shook her head. "Never took you for one of the stupid ones."

"Twelve caps."

"Nine."

"What the fuck?"

"Keep going, it's going to be eight."

Mindy slammed the door even harder on her way out, smiling when something inside fell off the wall.

She thought about going to the community garden again...maybe asking for a job herself so they knew she was serious. She knew how to grow things...the only reason she'd been on maintenance crew was because Jimmy had been on it too, and he'd asked her to join him when they'd started making out behind Percy's bar. She'd never liked working there, but it had given her an excuse to see him.

Wandering down the main street past the town square, she was just about to make a right towards the garden, the hunger pangs in her stomach making her think that she just might spend a couple of her paltry caps on lunch, when she spotted him.

James Lark.

Jimmy's dad crossed the road in front of her, face set in that permanent scowl...he hadn't spotted her yet, but he would. Swearing, Mindy stopped short, spinning on her heels and managing four steps before skidding to a stop right before she would have run into Lucy MacLean. The woman's eyes widened, hands coming up to catch her shoulders, careful of the bandage on her arm.

"Mindy," she greeted, her smile still warm despite her surprise.

She stepped away, glancing over her shoulder to make sure he wasn't headed their way before trying to smile back. "Um...hi."

Her ghoul followed Mindy's gaze, tilting his head up to look around her. She'd seen that shotgun he carried in action...honestly, she wouldn't mind seeing James get a bullet through the skull, but she had a feeling the only reason he was allowed to be in here was because he'd helped saved them, and she didn't think him killing a member of the settlement would help his cause.

"Are you okay?" Lucy asked, glancing past her too.

"Yeah. Just...um...walking."

Lucy nodded slowly, like she wasn't convinced. "Oh?"

"Yeah...I...I had some stuff to sell and, uh..."

"Mindy?" A familiar voice called, and she closed her eyes, flinching at the volume of it. The last thing she wanted was more attention. Then again, she didn't think he'd want to confront her with Rhonda around. She'd never liked him either.

"I'm just going to..." she started, about to slip past the couple, but Rhonda's voice only got louder.

"Melinda Taylor, I know you aren't pretending not to hear me."

She spun instinctively at the tone, eyes darting behind her to the street. A few people were watching their conversation, but Jimmy's dad wasn't one of them. In fact, she couldn't even see him anymore.

Rhonda's arms were crossed, expression unimpressed, reminding her that she hadn't answered her question.

"Nope. Just...I'm supposed to meet Kira."

"Kira's at work."

"Yeah. But...she was talking about helping me get a job working in the gardens."

"Don't you go to school?" Lucy wondered, and Mindy wished they could have this conversation literally anywhere else.

"Nope. She finished up her school work a year early," Rhonda told her, something like pride in her eyes.

She'd known Rhonda her whole life, but the thought of Rhonda being proud of her still surprised her. Still, Mindy had more important things to worry about. She glanced past her, keeping an eye out, then jumped, spinning around in surprise when a cold, wet nose bumped her hand. It was Lucy's dog...it was wagging its tail, leaning forward and nudging her. Telling herself to relax, she scratched her behind the ears. "Hi," she murmured.

"That's Dogmeat," Lucy told her. "She's friendly."

Mindy was pretty sure she'd seen that dog eating a raider's intestines, but she was leaning against Mindy's leg now, her whole body wagging along with her tail, so she just kept petting her. She didn't get to see many dogs in the settlement, and none of them looked like Dogmeat.

"Why don't you come eat with us, Mindy?" Rhonda asked, putting a hand on her shoulder and steering her towards the restaurant they were, she realized, only a few feet away from.

"I'm really supposed to..."

"You can meet her later. Come on. Nancy's inside. Lucy and Cooper are eating with us too."

So that was the ghoul's name.

With no other choice in sight apart from making a run for it, Mindy let herself be led into the newer of the two restaurants in town.

Nancy was waiting at a table, and the moment she saw Mindy, she had her arms around her in a painfully tight hug that Mindy did her best to breathe through. "Mindy! I was hoping you could join us before we left." She hugged Lucy next, and Mindy took a seat at the table, facing the window so she could see the street. Cooper sat at the end of the table, leaving a space for Lucy between them, but she noticed that he, too, was keeping an eye on the street.

“You sell those spoons of yours?” he wondered, lips twitching.

“Yeah,” she muttered, still disgruntled and not bothering to bring up the fact that she’d had forks and a knife too.

“How much?”

“Nine caps.”

He lifted a brow. “Price went down, huh?”

“She said that was my fee for trying to haggle.”

He snorted at that, shaking his head a little as Lucy sat down, Rhonda and Nancy following suit.

What followed was probably the strangest lunch of her entire life, although she hadn’t exactly spent a lot of time in restaurants in her life. They were mostly for people passing through. Cooper was quiet for most of it, just eating his food, which told Mindy that ghouls did, in fact, just eat normal food like normal people. Lucy asked Rhonda and Nancy all about their farm...questions anyone that grew up in a settlement ought to know. She asked a lot about the plumbing in the city too, and the generators, so much that Mindy finally had to ask.

“Did they not have running water and stuff at your settlement?”

Lucy coked her head, then seemed to realize something. “Oh...I’m not from a settlement. I grew up in a vault.”

Silence fell over the table, Nancy and Rhonda both staring at her, jaws dropping so in sync that it would have been funny if Mindy hadn’t been so shocked. “A vault?” she asked, whispering the word.

“Vault 33. I haven’t been out of the vault for that long, actually.”

“So...you grew up underground?” Mindy couldn’t imagine anything worse.

“I did.”

“But...what did you do?”

“I was a teacher,” she explained, which didn’t really answer Mindy’s question.

“Are you going back?” Nancy wondered, doing a better job at suppressing her shock than her wife. Or Mindy. Cooper just took another bite of his noodles, unbothered.

“I’ll probably visit. My brother’s still inside. But I won’t live there again.”

That, she thought, made sense. They probably wouldn’t let her bring her ghoul husband inside...at least, based on what little she knew about the vaults.

And then, before she could ask any more questions about the vault, Mindy saw him.

James was waiting outside the restaurant, scowling at her through the window, and she realized that she was eating noodles with friends while his son was dead, and he might just come inside...he looked angry enough. Pushing back from the table, she gave Rhonda her best smile. "I'll be right back," she lied. They'd be gone by the end of the day anyway, and if he was drunk, she could probably lose him on her way to the community garden, especially if she went out the back.

It felt like all eyes followed her as she walked straight into the kitchen, ignoring the cook who snapped at her to push through the back door, hurrying through the alley and...

A hand caught her wrist, making her spin around, gasping and struggling to pull away until she saw it was Lucy standing there, her concern making a furrow in her brows. "Hey... what's wrong?"

"I, uh...I need to..."

"Hey!"

Swearing under her breath, Mindy turned to find James blocking the other end of the alley, his scowl deeper than usual, eyes red-rimmed from what she was sure was his morning moonshine.

Lucy let go of her wrist, resting a hand on Mindy's shoulder instead. "Can we help you?" she asked, voice surprisingly reasonable.

"Yeah, you can fuck off," he told her, still staring right at Mindy. She had to fight to keep her feet planted...to stop herself from taking off. Ever since she'd been seven years old, she'd learned to avoid James Lark. All the girls did. But now she had double reason...it just fucking figured that *his* son had been the first boy she'd ever kissed. The first boy she'd ever seen die.

"Mindy, why don't you go back inside?" Lucy asked, voice calm and firm. Mindy could see her as a teacher just then, calm in the face of trouble, ready to protect her students.

"No, Mindy...you ain't going anywhere. You little whore."

Lucy's jaw went tight, and she pushed Mindy back a step, moving forward. "Why would you say that to her? She's a child," she told him, voice so cold it was like he was one of those raiders. Mindy stepped back, glancing at the alley behind her. She could run...only she knew James carried a gun and she'd be leaving Lucy alone with him. It wasn't like *she* had a gun, but she had a pocket knife...had put it in her boot that morning, just like Lucy. A lot of good that did her now.

"It's her fault. She seduced him...gave him those ideas."

"I did not!" she cried, eyes hot. She didn't care what he thought about her, but she couldn't stand the thought of Lucy believing him. "He was the one that wanted to run away!"

“What do you mean?” Lucy asked, voice back to soft, but she kept an eye on James.

“My boyfriend. He wanted to run away. He said there was a farm where we could live, only it was further than we thought, and...we stopped at that gas station.” She sniffed, wiping a hand roughly over her face. “It was because of him. Jimmy hated him. He’s awful.”

“This little bitch killed my son.”

“You killed him!” she snapped right back, hands clenched into fists. “You think everyone in this town didn’t know you beat the shit out of him? Or that all the little girls have to hide from you? He was ashamed of you!”

He drew his gun just a second before Lucy did, her arm outstretched to protect Mindy. She was so brave...her hands didn’t even shake as she stared him down. Mindy’s, on the other hand, shook so hard she doubted she could pull out her knife even if she hadn’t been frozen with fear.

“I ain’t gonna let her get away with saying shit like that.”

“It’s true,” Mindy whispered, needing Lucy to believe her. Someone had to believe her. “That’s why he ran. And...and I loved him. So I went with him.”

Lucy didn’t look away from James, and with her white hat and her gun out like that, she looked like a cowgirl from an old storybook...like a sheriff or something. Someone that fought for justice...for the little guy. “Put it down,” she ordered, sounding so calm, and Mindy didn’t understand how she could be so calm with a gun on her.

“Sweetheart, we’ve talked about this.” Cooper’s voice came from the shadows then, making her jump, and it was like one second the alley behind James was empty, and the next, he just materialized, that hat on his head, shotgun in hand and pointed right at James...he was like Lucy’s mirror. Dogmeat stood at his side, her teeth bared, and he had a little smirk on his face like he’d enjoy shooting James if he got the chance. “You’ve gotta invite me to these little back alley shindigs. You know I love a good standoff.”

Lucy huffed a little, not taking her eyes off James, but Mindy saw her mouth twitch into a smile.

“It’s libel,” James told him, glancing nervously back at the shotgun and at the dog too. “I’ve got a right to defend myself! She’s saying shit that ain’t true...first she killed my only son, now she wants to ruin my good name.”

“It is true! Everybody knows it!” Mindy cried from behind Lucy’s arm.

“I believe you’re thinking of slander,” Cooper told him idly. “Libel is when it’s written down. Now you’d best point that gun somewhere else if you don’t want a hole in your head.” His smile was still there, but it had gone cold.

A beat passed, James’s gun still aimed at her and Lucy, and Cooper cocked the shotgun, all mirth gone from his face.

“You are testing my fucking patience.”

Then, in what might have been the stupidest thing he had ever done, James spun around, but before he could even point his gun in the ghoul’s direction, a gunshot exploded in the alley, the sound of it making Mindy flinch. And James Lark dropped to the ground, blood pooling underneath his head.

From the alley leading to the street, Rhonda appeared, smoking gun in hand.

Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

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Lucy released a shaky breath, holstering her gun and smiling at Dogmeat who raced to her side, tail whipping back and forth as she stepped on her foot, then leaned her whole weight against her legs. “Good girl,” she murmured, scratching her behind the ear, then turning to Mindy. “Are you okay?”

The girl nodded, eyes glued to Rhonda. The older woman stared dispassionately down at the man, Jimmy’s father, then turned to Cooper who was holstering his shotgun.

“Sorry,” Rhonda told him wryly. “No way I was letting you be the one to do what someone should have done years ago. I’ve wanted to shoot that man in the head for...god, must be fifteen years now. Piece of shit.” She sneered down at the corpse.

“Will you get in trouble?” Lucy wondered, putting a hand on Mindy’s shoulder. The girl just stared at him, leaning against Lucy, one hand on Dogmeat’s head.

“I don’t know if there’s a soul in this town that would be bothered. Besides, he had a gun on you and Mindy. I’d say he had it coming.”

Lucy had known from the second Mindy had nearly run into them, turning on her heel and hurrying towards her and Cooper without seeing them that something had been wrong. She didn’t know the girl very well, or at all, to be honest, but she’d been jumpy all through their lunch, and Lucy had noticed her eyes darting out to the street every so often. She was afraid of someone.

Cooper’s eyes had followed the girl’s, obviously trying to figure out what, or who, exactly, had been worrying her so much, while Rhonda and Nancy had just looked kind of sad.

“You might as well let her go,” Nancy had told her with a sigh when Mindy had jumped up from the table. “She’s a good kid, but...”

With their backs to the wall, they hadn’t seen the man in the street. But Lucy had. She’d seen the way he’d looked at Mindy...how he’d glared at her with a hatred no one should show to a child. So, without thinking, she’d jumped up, racing after her with apologies thrown over her shoulder for the kitchen staff who’d had to jump out of her way. And now she had the whole story...or enough of it.

It wasn’t another few seconds before footsteps came running, obviously attracted by the sound of the gunshot, and Cooper joined her, not sparing James’ body a single glance as he

took out his inhaler for a puff. He stood beside Lucy, looking her over just as Nancy appeared with two men right behind her, her eyes wide as they went from Rhonda to Lucy and Cooper, finally landing on Mindy. “What happened? What’s going on?”

“James had his gun on Lucy and Mindy. He was threatening them...blamed Mindy for his son’s death and wanted revenge,” Rhonda told the men casually, holstering her gun. “So I put him out of our misery.” She turned to the older of the two. “Do you have a problem with that, Earl?”

The man in question, with his graying hair and gun in hand, sighed. Both men were dressed in khaki pants and matching shirts tucked in, but his had a star pinned to the front. “That true, Mindy?” he asked the girl leaning against Lucy.

“Yeah. It’s true.” She nodded, sniffing and wiping a hand over her face before stepping forward with the air of someone going to a sentencing. “He said it was my fault Jimmy died, and I told him it was his own fault since he used to beat him. Then he pulled a gun on me, and Lucy pulled hers too to protect me. And then Mr. MacLean had a gun too, and told James to put it down.”

Lucy frowned, looking around at the people assembled in the alley before turning to Cooper who was smirking. Then it clicked. “Wait...does she think that’s your name?” she asked in a whisper.

He moved a little closer. “Apparently.”

Her jaw dropped, a huff of laughter escaping before she could stop it, and she quickly pressed a hand to her mouth, struggling to look appropriately solemn. “I’m sorry...I can tell them...”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ve been called worse, sweetheart.” He wrapped an arm around her shoulders and she melted against his side, head resting against his shoulder for a moment. She hadn’t really been afraid...the man had been drunk, and she knew she was a good shot. But she’d still felt better the moment Cooper had shown up. He squeezed her to his side, lips against her hair, and she had to bite her lip to keep from smiling. This really wasn’t the time or place.

“You’re the one that took out those raiders?”

“That’s her,” Rhonda answered for her. “Lucy, Cooper, this is Earl. He thinks he’s the sheriff.”

The man sighed, shooting her a look, then holding out a hand that Lucy took. “I *am* the sheriff, Rhonda. Nice to meet you.” He held out a hand for Cooper as well after only a moment of hesitation. “We owe you for what you did. Please, feel free to stay as long as you like.”

“Thank you,” Lucy told him, meaning it. Just the thought of resting for a couple of days, with hot showers and a real bed and electricity, made her want to cry with gratitude. For just a moment, she’d been afraid that being involved in something like this, even though Cooper

hadn't shot the man, would be enough for a mob to run them out of town. Thankfully, that didn't seem to be the case.

"Why don't we go back inside?" Nancy asked, slipping her hand into Rhonda's, then holding out a hand for Mindy. "Come on, honey. You didn't even finish your lunch."

Hesitantly, Mindy went to her side, then smiled kind of shyly when Nancy threw an arm around her and led her back into the restaurant.

The food really was good, but Lucy wasn't sure if she loved it so much because she'd only had bloatflies and Deathclaw jerky to eat for a while, or if the chef really was a genius. Then again, she'd seen the kitchen staff, so she thought maybe it was the first one. It was simple food...ramen with vegetables and a bowl of some kind of melon that had been cut up into juicy little squares that burst when she bit down on them. She was so full by the time they finished that she almost regretted not being able to eat more. Maybe they'd be able to come back before they left.

Outside the restaurant, Mindy glanced back at the alley where James had died...there was no body there anymore, nor any other sign that there'd been a shooting other than the bloodstain in the dirt. Lucy wondered if they'd buried him, or if the sheriff had some kind of procedure to follow. Back in the Vault, a death like that would have led to investigations and paperwork and questioning of everyone involved. Here, it seemed, they just took Rhonda's and Nancy's word for it.

Nancy followed Mindy's gaze, then patted her back. "Mindy, why don't we show Cooper and Lucy around? I'm sure they haven't had the chance for a tour yet."

"Oh...um...if you want..." Mindy looked unsure, eyes darting between Lucy and Cooper, and Lucy brightened.

"We'd love that!"

"We would?" Cooper asked, voice barely a whisper against her ear, and she grinned at him, taking his hand and squeezing it.

"Of course we would," she breathed back, then leaned up to kiss his cheek before pulling him along.

So they went on a tour. They started with the main square, then took a detour down a side street where Mindy pointed out her own house. Lucy figured this place must have been a neighborhood before the war, and it seemed like most of the houses had been rebuilt from rubble, with mismatched wood and front doors that didn't always quite sit straight. Rhonda confirmed when she asked.

"Yeah, most of this place was flattened after the bombs dropped, apparently. But with the reservoir, people rebuilt pretty fast. There's not a lot of places around with water this accessible."

The community garden was the next stop on the tour, and Lucy couldn't help being impressed at how big it was, with dozens of people kneeling in the dirt and pulling weeds or filling watering cans or harvesting plants she didn't know the names of. There were things like corn and tomatoes, which had grown in her Vault, but there were other things too...melons she didn't recognize and things that were kind of like green beans.

"Kira!" Mindy called, waving, and a girl about her age straightened from her place in the dirt, her smile, already brilliant, only brightened when she spotted Lucy.

"Is this..." she started, voice pitched so low that Lucy almost couldn't hear.

Mindy nodded.

"Shit," she breathed, spinning around. "Hi...it's so nice to meet you!"

Lucy couldn't help her own smile. "It's nice to meet you too. I'm Lucy," she told her, holding out a hand.

"Kira. I'm Mindy's friend."

"And this is Cooper," she introduced.

Kira did an admirable job of keeping her smile...of not shrinking back. But her voice was a lot quieter when she said, "nice to meet you."

Lucy felt her heart twist a little, but Cooper just nodded, using that gentler voice he tended to use around kids. "You too."

"We had crops in the Vault," Lucy told her, hoping to take some of the focus off of him and somehow forgetting again that she wasn't wearing her Vault suit...that people couldn't tell just by looking at her that she was a Vault dweller anymore. Immediately, Kira lost all shyness, and she spent the next twenty minutes of the tour answering all of her questions about their own garden and what they'd grown and general life in a Vault.

Throughout it all, Cooper stuck close, his hand on her back or around her waist, eyes idly scanning the horizon like he was looking for trouble. None came, though...it seemed that with James, they'd met their daily quota for trouble. They got their fair share of looks from the other workers, but some even wandered close to listen to their conversation about the Vault. While Lucy was talking to Kira about irrigation practices and water system maintenance, from the corner of her eye, she saw a little girl, probably five or six, walk up to Cooper. Behind her, a couple of other children watched, all quiet and wide-eyed.

"Excuse me," she asked, and they both turned. "Can we play with your dog?"

He nodded, patting Dogmeat on the side. "Sure, honey. Go on, Dogmeat," he urged, and the dog needed no further encouragement, racing over to the little girl and licking her face. Soon, the kids were racing around underfoot, Dogmeat hot on their heels, while an older woman who turned out to be Kira's mother told her about their own water maintenance system.

Once they'd seen all there was to see of the garden, they looped around to the other side of the settlement. They saw maintenance teams working, and janitorial teams cleaning up. They saw the school, Mindy pointing out the man who'd been her teacher as they passed the window. All along the way, Dogmeat ran up to every kid she saw, tail wagging, and soon there was a trail of them following along, playing with the dog until they got too far from home and their parents called them back. Lucy caught Cooper watching them a couple of times, a sad smile on his face.

They were nearly back at the hotel when Rhonda and Nancy turned to them. "We're heading home pretty soon...better get back to the farm. Lucy, Cooper, it really was a pleasure to meet you," Rhonda told them, her smile soft and genuine. "We'd be dead or worse without you...I don't know if we'll ever be able to repay you."

Lucy shook her head. "You don't have to repay us," she assured them. "Really. If anything, we should be thanking you..."

"Absolutely not." Nancy shook her head. "No thanks necessary. And if you ever find yourself near our farm, you'll have to stop by. You're welcome anytime."

Cooper nodded, wrapping an arm around Lucy, his hand rubbing up and down her arm. "If we get the chance, we'll take you up on that."

"We'll let you get back to your day. Lucy, honey, I'm sure you're still tired. If we don't see you again today, I hope we'll see you soon. As for you..." Rhonda turned to Mindy who straightened. "Why don't we walk you home? We've been meaning to talk to you about a job..."

Cooper led Lucy back to the hotel, her mind spinning with possibilities. "This settlement has everything...but the thing is, it wouldn't be that difficult to set up similar infrastructure in other places," she told him, thinking of the systems in place in the Vault and the ones she'd seen here. "Even the last settlement we stayed in...they had generators and purified water."

"Mhm."

"And the brotherhood has the...battery thing...the...fusion? The one the scientist was carrying. It powered a whole city...just that little battery! And if one of those exists, then there has to be more."

Cooper unlocked their hotel door, grunting. *I'm listening*.

"So if we could find more of them, we could bring power to the settlements that don't have it! And if we could set up the water purification systems we have in the Vault, then I'll bet we could help even more places get indoor plumbing! Norman could help, and probably Chet too! All we'd need to do is..."

The moment the door closed behind them, Cooper caught her by the wrist, pulling her back to him and kissing her before she could finish her sentence.

When he pulled away for long enough that she could catch her breath, she draped her arms around his neck, smiling. “You don’t want to talk about maintenance systems with me?”

Cooper grinned. “I was thinking we might do something else to pass the time...”

“So...we’ll talk about it later?”

“Sure thing, sweetheart. You can tell me all about it.” He kissed her again and she brought her hands up to frame his face, thumbs brushing over the ridges of his cheeks, the hollows in his face, the scarred texture of his skin. “Then again, you sure you’ve got time for this?” he asked, pulling away again. “You don’t want to get dinner with the sheriff or find the mayor and meet him for drinks? Maybe get a tour of the garden again? Check out the water treatment system?”

She laughed. “It’s not my fault we’re making friends.”

“It’s very much your fault.” His arms were around her, one pressed to her back, the other on her head, careful not to press against the knot that had just started to go down. “I haven’t had this many social engagements for over two hundred years. Then you show up and suddenly I’m going out every day.” He nibbled on her bottom lip, pulling it into his mouth, but she started to step away, grinning mischievously.

“Now that you mention it, maybe the sheriff did want to get dinner...”

He pulled her right back, chuckling. “Oh no you don’t.” His hand trailed down her cheek, fingers brushing against the skin of her neck, then sliding down her arm. “I think I have a better idea for how we can spend our time.” She was enthralled as his hand molded to her waist, then her hip, staying there for a moment, his lips meeting hers once more as his thumb rested so close to where she ached for him. Then, in a move that surprised her, his hand slipped between her legs, pressing upwards over the fabric and she gasped, a broken off cry escaping as she threw her head back. He smiled against her throat, teeth nipping at the skin there before he sucked and her breath caught.

“You’re better at this than Chet,” she breathed, and his laugh against her skin was incredulous.

“Darlin’, I’m going to have to ask that you not bring up your cousin right now.”

Right...that was probably rude. She nodded, still gasping for air as his hand continued to massage her. “Sorry. You are, though.”

“Duly noted.” His lips continued their path down her throat, and even through the fabric this was better than anything Chet had ever done or even that she had ever done to herself. Sex with Chet had always been a straightforward thing...a way for both of them to seek pleasure, although Chet hadn’t ever lasted very long.

Sex with Monty had been the same...it had been nice, and she’d gotten some pleasure out of it, but it had been just as straightforward as she’d been led to believe from her practice with Chet. She hadn’t even taken her dress off. First some kissing, then she’d climbed on top of

him and he'd finished inside of her and she'd managed to finish by reaching down to touch herself. Orgasms felt good, both alone and with other people. She'd known that for a long time...had enjoyed sex since she was a teenager.

But this...this wasn't like anything she'd felt before...lips moving languidly against her skin, a hand between her legs making ragged moans escape her as she struggled to breathe normally. Cooper returned to her mouth, kissing her like she was water and he was dying of thirst. She thought she could kiss him forever. And then he adjusted the angle of the hand between her legs and kissing him became her *second* favorite thing.

"Cooper..." she begged, and he removed his hand, which was the opposite of what she wanted. "Why? Don't stop..."

He smiled against her lips, moving his hand to her back and grinding his hips against her and god, that was good too! He guided her backwards, and she hoped they were going to the sofa so she could get her pants off, but he led her past Dogmeat, who had claimed that surface as her own, and into the bedroom, which would also suffice.

She sat when the backs of her knees hit the bed, and he followed almost immediately, kneeling over her as he guided her to lay back on the quilt, his lips never leaving hers. She started to yank her shirt off and he pulled back for just long enough to let her, but stopped her from removing her bra, lips pressed to her throat again, and the suction made her back arch, hips pressing into him.

"Slow down, sweetheart," he murmured against her skin. "We've got all night. I'm savoring this, remember?"

Since he didn't want her to remove her own clothes, she went for his, fingers making quick work of the buttons on his vest. He pulled his arms back, letting it fall by the side of the bed, then let her yank his shirt out of his pants. Instead of taking it off, she just let her fingers skim over his chest, then around to his back, ghosting over old scars...but then her bra was off somehow and his mouth had found her breast and she dug her nails into his back, breath hitching.

Lucy whimpered, a hand coming to press against the back of his head as his teeth sent jolts of electricity through her, his tongue following suit. She was on fire...she'd stuck a fork in a light socket and her whole body was filled with electricity that made her arch her back, hips pressing fruitlessly up, and then he was kissing her again, his hand on her breast, the other cradling her face. She didn't understand how he could move so languidly when she thought she might just explode.

He shifted to the side, his hand trailing down and resting over the scar her husband had given her, thumb brushing gently over the puckered skin there, then moving to the one from the gunshot. She had a ghost of a memory then...his head on her shoulder, his hand on her hair...a ragged breath as she'd lay in that hospital bed. Now his hand covered that scar, his tongue moving over hers, and she mapped the topography of his skin with her fingers, discovering old scars until she reached the front of his pants and started to fight with his belt buckle.

He smiled against her lips, hand moving from her stomach to catch her wrist, thumb rubbing over her pulse. "Me first. You'll get your turn," he murmured.

With Chet, 'him first' had meant her mouth on him, pulling away in time so his sperm didn't go down her throat or on her face, or her hand on him, up and down in the way she knew he liked. But with Cooper, apparently it meant his hand slipping into the front of her pants, still over the fabric of her underwear, and her fingers digging into the quilt as she clenched her jaw to keep from crying out.

"Cooper...please..."

He pressed a little harder with the hand in her underwear, thumb circling her clit, and she slapped a hand over her mouth to smother the gasping cry that forced its way out of her mouth. Cooper moved his hand from under her head, taking her hand away from her mouth and pressing a kiss to the bruises on her wrist. "Go ahead and scream, sweetheart. I don't think we have neighbors," he told her, kissing her again, and she was going to die. He was going to kill her before they'd even had sex.

When his mouth left hers, attaching to her neck once more, she went right back to touching him...chest, shoulders, anything she could touch, the ridges of his skin soon becoming familiar under her fingertips. But then his fingers were undoing the button of her pants and he was out of reach, kissing down her chest to her stomach, stopping briefly at the twin scars to kiss those too, then further down, and she hesitated, cheeks flushing. The first time she and Chet had turned to a book on intercourse and he'd learned what oral sex was for women, his nose had wrinkled in disgust, and so she'd assured him she didn't mind if he didn't do it, not wanting to make him uncomfortable. Men, she'd thought, must not be comfortable with oral sex, although he'd seemed to love it when she'd done it to him. It hadn't been her favorite either, but she hadn't complained, wanting to do her best.

Cooper didn't hesitate, though, finally pulling her underwear off, his head between her thighs, his tongue pressing up inside her, and she was lost, hips jerking, gasping, desperate cries escaping her mouth that she couldn't have stopped if she'd tried, and she was too far gone to try. He held her by the hips, licking her until she did scream, her whole body going rigid, fingers digging so hard into the quilt that it hurt, only she barely notice the pain because the warmth that flooded her body had taken over.

She shuddered when the pleasure ebbed, his tongue still lapping at her like he had a thirst that couldn't be quenched, until she finally slumped bonelessly back onto the bed. Only then did he pull away, hands stroking her thighs, lips trailing back up her body until they met hers again. She could taste herself on his tongue which only made her ache inside, her body wanting him again already.

It was her turn to reciprocate, she knew, but before she could gather the energy to do more than open her eyes and kiss him, his hand was on her breast again, then her stomach, her hip...it was like he couldn't stop touching her, and she didn't know if she'd ever want him to.

"So fucking sweet," he whispered against her mouth. "You're the best thing I've ever tasted."

She flushed a little, another jolt going through her and making her insides clench. This time when she went for his belt, he let her, his shirt following his vest as he yanked it off. With him kissing her, it took longer than she would have thought to figure out the belt, but when she finally did, he helped her pull his pants down and off, and when her fingers wrapped around him for the first time, he went rigid, gasping into her mouth. This she knew how to do. In fact, thanks to Chet, she'd gotten really good at it.

But before she'd managed to do more than run her thumb over the tip and give two firm strokes, his hand caught her wrist. She let him pull her hand away, confused, looking up into his eyes that stared hungrily down at her.

"Now wait a second. It's still my turn, sweetheart."

"How is..."

His fingers slipped inside her again, thumb brushing against her still sensitive clit and her hips jerked without her telling them to, teeth biting down on her lower lip.

"I'm still savoring," he whispered, settling over her, but Lucy was tired of it being his turn. Reaching up, she gripped his hips, then twisted and rolled them over so he was on his back, wide eyes staring up at her before he grinned. "Yeah...you're right. This is better."

Lucy guided him inside of her, head thrown back in pleasure when she had to stretch around him. He groaned, fingers digging into her skin as she sank down onto him, then rolled her hips forward. He was pressing so deep inside her, his hips moving to meet hers, and she couldn't help the cries that were torn from her every time she rocked into him. It was so good...so much better than anything she'd ever felt, and Cooper's face was twisted with pleasure, jaw clenched as he groaned, his eyes glued to her like he couldn't look away.

"Fuck...Lucy...Jesus Christ, sweetheart..." He couldn't seem to form any more words, and she felt a rush of pride before he ground against her and she couldn't think at all anymore. One of his hands came up to her breast, pinching her nipple as his other one guided her hips, and Lucy clenched around him, nearly crying at the pleasure that ripped through her, even stronger than the first time. She was almost numb with it, brain whitening out for a second as every sense she had was overloaded. Her inner walls had him in a spasming vice grip, but he kept thrusting into her, holding her hips and moving until he finally stilled with a groan, body flush against hers, warmth filling her as he finished. Then it was his turn to slump onto the bed, fingers relaxing on her hips as she lifted herself off of him. Dropping down at his side, she rested her head on his chest, her whole body buzzing with pleasure.

Somehow, he found the strength to drape an arm around her, which was almost more impressive than the sex because Lucy didn't think she'd be able to move for at least an hour. Beneath her ear, his heart pounded, and even though both of their legs hung off the bed, she couldn't even imagine scooting up. Cooper's hand trailed up and down her back and she smiled, nuzzling closer.

"You're really good at that," she breathed, smiling wider when he chuckled breathlessly. "Monty didn't even take my dress off."

“That man was a fucking idiot,” he murmured, sounding almost drunk.

She hummed in agreement, feeling drunk herself. For what felt like a long time but must have only been a few minutes, they lay there together, his hand stroking her back as she listened to his heart. It was beating faster than usual, all because of her. She loved him...she loved him more intensely than she'd ever loved anyone.

The knock on their door startled her, jerking her out of her daze. In the other room, she heard Dogmeat hop off the couch, and Lucy started to sit up, but Cooper shook his head, arm tightening around her before she could manage it.

“No,” he said simply, making her laugh. His eyes were still closed, but the corner of his mouth had tugged into a smile.

“But what if it's...”

“Sweetheart, it could be your daddy himself out there and I still ain't leaving this bed.” He pressed a kiss to her hair. “Let them think we aren't home. Social calendar's all booked up.”

Lucy dropped back onto his chest, glowing with warmth when he kissed her hair again. Just like she'd wanted to several times now, she tilted her face up, meeting his lips with her own, and when she pulled away, he was smiling at her, eyes so soft it almost hurt. She loved it when he looked at her like that.

“Still savoring?” she asked, lips so close to his that they nearly touched as she spoke.

“Sweetheart, I don't know if I'll ever stop,” he murmured.

She scooted up just enough to kiss his forehead, then his cheek, and finally his throat, and she immediately saw the appeal. Here, she could feel the way his breath caught...could feel the beating of his heart through his skin. “That's fine,” she whispered, lips against his pulse. “As long as I get a turn too.”

Chapter 30

Lucy stood under the hot spray of her second shower of the day, eyes closed as it poured down on her. It was one of the best feelings she thought she'd ever experienced...made her already loose muscles even looser. She had gotten her turn with Cooper, as promised, her lips and hands covering every part of him they could, driving him exactly as insane as he'd driven her, and she'd been enchanted by the noises he'd made...gasps and moans and his fingers digging into the quilt or her skin, whatever they could reach.

Savoring, as it turned out, had its benefits. She'd gotten to taste his skin, warm and salty and rough, and to run her fingers over his scars, kissing each one, which had taken a worryingly long time, until she'd finally made it down to his stomach. He'd been hard again by then, breaths coming in pants as she'd kissed around his stomach and thighs.

"Come on, sweetheart. I didn't torture you," he'd groaned, hips jerking when she'd pulled away.

"Yes you did," she'd told him with a laugh before grabbing him, running her tongue over the head of his cock, and he'd jolted like she'd electrocuted him. They'd moved up on the bed, his head resting on the pillow, so it wasn't the best position, her kneeling over his thighs and squeezing him firmly at the base, mouth still working, but she hadn't complained...mostly because the look on his face, the agony of pure pleasure, had been just as enchanting as the noises.

His hips had jerked again when she'd enveloped him in her mouth, doing her best to open the back of her throat and breathe through her nose. He was bigger than Chet, which she would have told him if he hadn't asked her not to bring up her cousin and if her mouth hadn't been kind of full at the time, but she'd still done her best. She could tell he was holding back, shaking hands gripping the blankets while his hips had twitched, and she'd gone slow...savoring.

He hadn't lasted long, with her spit coating him, her mouth bobbing up and down, taking him as deep as she could, gasping praise pouring from his mouth.

"Jesus, sweetheart...yes...fuck...Lucy you're so fucking good..." One of his hands had found its way to her hair, hips finally jerking and pushing himself deeper into her throat. Tears had sprang to her eyes but she'd kept going, ignoring his breathless apology and fighting not to gag when he'd finished. He hadn't tasted much different than Chet, surprisingly...she'd done her best not to grimace when it had filled her mouth, even though he hadn't been looking at her...his head had been thrown back, a guttural cry torn from his throat, one hand dropping from the back of her head to grip the quilt instead.

She'd cleaned him off, pulling her mouth slowly off him until he'd grunted, teeth gritted, an arm flung over his face. "Fuck...goddamn, Lucy..."

Smiling, Lucy had crawled back up to lay beside him, lips against his cheek before laying her head on his shoulder.

“Jesus, little killer,” he’d murmured, laughing a little to himself, eyes closing. He’d looked so relaxed...calmer than she’d ever seen him, and she’d grabbed the edge of the quilt and pulled it over him. Lucy hadn’t been able to resist watching him for a moment...she never got to watch him rest...never got to watch his breathing go soft and even. She’d rested a hand on his chest, nuzzling closer, and his head had leaned against her. “So fucking perfect.” His breathless whisper had made her glow, and she’d pressed a kiss to his arm.

It hadn’t been long before, to her surprise, he’d seemed to drift into sleep, and she’d been tempted to join him...to take a rare nap in the middle of the day. But then she’d become all too aware of how sticky she was, and had eased herself off the bed, sneaking off to take a shower.

Part of her really wished she could go back in time and tell her starry eyed teenage self that she would one day get to have sex with Cooper Howard...but even in her fantasy world, an explanation would have been too complicated. Laughing a little to herself, she leaned against the wall, cleaning herself and then just standing there until the hot water started to run cold.

Changing into her soft, clean clothes, Lucy was about to rejoin him in bed when Dogmeat whined in the other room. Frowning, she closed the door and found the dog at the door, tail wagging, paw scratching at the door.

“You need to go out?”

The dog whined again, her whole body wiggling, and Lucy scratched her behind the ears.

“Okay, let’s go.”

Lucy only made it a few steps outside, Dogmeat racing over to a patch of dead grass to use the bathroom, before the front desk man appeared from around the corner, his smile just as bright as the first time they’d met.

“Lucy! There you are!” he called, waving.

“Hi...um...I’m sorry...I didn’t catch your name.”

“Oh!” he flushed, laughing sheepishly. “I’m so...I mean...Walter. I can’t believe I forgot to introduce myself,” he cried, holding out a hand that she shook.

“It’s nice to meet you.”

“You too! I mean...we’ve met but...I still can’t believe you’re staying here!”

“We really appreciate the room. It’s been so long since I’ve had a shower,” she admitted with a self conscious laugh. “None of the settlements we’ve stayed in have had running water.”

“We’re lucky here. And now that we don’t have to worry about those raiders...the sheriff was even thinking about sending a group of people out to Zzyzx to see about setting up another settlement since they’ve got the lake there. Actually...I mean, I knocked on your door earlier. I wasn’t sure if you heard.”

“Oh...sorry...we were taking a nap. We’ve been on the road for so long...” She forced a smile, hoping he didn’t ask any more questions about that.

“Of course! I hope I didn’t disturb you.”

“Not at all.”

“So, I was wondering...I know you and your husband have been traveling for a long time...but...if you’re looking for a place to settle down...”

Lucy wanted to say yes. She could see it...could see a future here! She could see visiting with Rhonda and Nancy, and working on the maintenance team. She could see taking trips to other settlements to help them set up their own infrastructure...fighting raiders along the way and making the wastes safer for everyone. And Cooper...he’d be right there with her. He could still be a bounty hunter...they could travel together but this time they’d have a place to come home to!

“That...um...that’s so kind of you. And...maybe someday, we could.”

Walter nodded, and Lucy was surprised to see understanding in his eyes. “But not just yet?”

“Not yet. We...we’re trying to find someone. My father.”

“Any idea where he’s headed?”

“New Vegas, we think.”

He didn’t seem surprised. “Lots of people are. Ever since the legion got pushed out, plenty of folks want to try their luck there. What’s waiting for him there?”

“I’m not sure.” She lied a little, reaching down to stroke Dogmeat’s head when the dog trotted back over to her, her body leaning against Lucy’s leg. She didn’t exactly want to bring up his ties to Vault Tec.

“What’s he look like? Maybe he passed through here?”

She debated with herself for a second, then decided there was no harm in it. “Maybe...his name is Henry. He goes by Hank. A little taller than me.” She held up a hand to show him. “Graying brown hair. He might be wearing power armor, no helmet. It has a scratch...” She faltered at the look on his face. “Walter? Have you seen him?”

Slowly, the man nodded. “He stayed a night here...about a week ago. He didn’t talk much. Just paid, got some supplies, and left.”

“Oh,” Lucy whispered. They were still on the right trail...just a week behind him.

What would they do when they found him? Cooper had asked if she wanted to meet her makers...she still wasn’t sure what exactly that would entail. Would more Vault Tec people be in Vegas? Why? What would they be doing there? Did they have anything to do with the

scientists? The Brotherhood? If the Brotherhood wanted to keep technology for themselves...and the little fusion device had been from the Enclave...what did it mean?

Back in the bedroom, Lucy crawled into bed beside Cooper once more. His soft, wheezing breaths hitched a little, but she just curled up beside him under her half of the blanket, staring at the blank wall, her back pressed to his side.

Could they give up? Just stay here? Live out the rest of their lives in relative safety?

No. Of course they couldn't. Cooper had to find his daughter...or find out what had happened to her. And her father still deserved to pay for what he'd done. All of Vault Tec did. That didn't mean she wasn't tempted though.

Cooper shifted behind her, and she closed her eyes, smiling when he rolled over, his arm wrapping around her. She scooted back against him, him still on top of the covers, her underneath, the quilt between them. His hand came to rest on her stomach, his lips against the back of her head. Turning over, she kissed him and wished this could be their whole life.

"You're good at that too," she murmured, a hand coming up to rest against his neck.

"Better than your cousin?" he asked, smirking.

Lucy wrinkled her nose, Walter and her father momentarily forgotten. "I didn't kiss Chet."

Cooper just stared at her, blinking a few times like he couldn't have heard her right, then shook his head a little. "What?"

"What?"

"Lucy...even you have to hear how insane that sounds."

"Why?" she asked, laughing. "Why would I kiss him? He was my cousin."

"Sweetheart, you fucked him!"

"Well...yes." She guessed she could understand how this seemed strange now that she thought about it. "But we were seeking mutual pleasure, not emotional intimacy. It was just practice for when we got married." She shrugged. "Sex with him never meant anything. That was the problem, actually...he started to want emotional intimacy too."

He huffed, dropping his head onto the pillow beside her. "You Vaulties are something else," he told her with a laugh.

"I kissed Monty," she offered. "And you're better than him. If that helps."

"Yeah, well Monty was a moron and I'm glad he's dead."

Her lips twitched as she scooted closer. "I took Dogmeat out."

Cooper grunted.

“It was Walter knocking on our door earlier.”

”Who the hell is Walter?”

”The man who works the desk here at the hotel. He might be the owner too...I don’t know.”

She could feel his eyes on her, but she just stared at the ceiling, knowing she wouldn’t be able to hide her thoughts from him...he knew her too well by now.

“And what did Walter want?”

”My dad came through here. About a week ago. Stayed at this hotel. Which makes sense... it’s the closest hotel to the entrance so...it would have been the first one he came to. And... it’s good. Right? Because if he passed through here, you were right...he has to be heading to New Vegas. There isn’t really anything else in this direction.”

”That’s what Walter wanted?” Cooper asked after a long pause, his eyes still on her.

Lucy shook her head. “He wanted to ask if we wanted to stay here. Maybe help set up a settlement where those raiders were.” She swallowed, refusing to let the longing show through.

“What did you tell him?”

”I told him we might come back one day...but that we had to find my dad first.”

”Is that what you want?”

”I want to help you find your family,” she told him simply. And it was true. Her father, maybe she could forget about. Her brother, they could retrieve without going to New Vegas. Other settlements could be helped without ever confronting Vault Tec. But he’d been looking for his family for over two hundred years, and she wouldn’t be the reason he never found them. No way in hell.

“And your daddy?”

”You already told me what you were going to do to him.” In fact, it had been one of the first things he’d said to her after they’d started traveling together. She could still remember the shiver of fear...Lucy didn’t think he’d shoot her. Not anymore. But she still didn’t have any plans of getting between him and her father.

Cooper nodded, thoughtful. “I did.”

”I promised not to get in the way. And I meant it.” Lucy shook her head, jaw tight. “He deserves whatever he gets.” His lips against her temple made her soften, and she turned to kiss him again, resting her forehead against hers when he pulled away. “But if we make it back...if you get your answers and take care of my father...can we come back here?”

”Sweetheart, after this, we can do whatever you want.”

She smiled, closing her eyes and just resting with him for a moment. She knew it would be her last chance for a long time. But then she sat up on her elbow, pressing a quick kiss to his forehead. “Right now, I want more cake.”

That made him chuckle, sitting up and reaching for his pants. “Well then, let’s go get some cake, Vaultie.”

Once he was dressed, the two of them went to the town square, meandering around the shops and looking at the clothes and trinkets, the various people they’d met earlier that day waving hello or stopping Lucy to say hi. For once, she had plenty of caps, and Cooper had plenty of vials, so they focused on the other things they’d need for the last leg of their journey to New Vegas. Water. RadX. Ammo. A better gun for Lucy, which she found, along with a couple of grenades that Cooper shot a wary look at as she placed them in her pack.

”Just try not to blow us up, huh, Vaultie?”

”I’ll have you know that we took an extensive weapons training course in the Vault.”

”Oh, did you now?”

”Yes.”

He tilted his head. “And how many grenades were in the Vault?”

She deflated, just a little. “Well...we didn’t have any real ones...”

“Ah.”

“But we had drawings!”

He nodded, mock serious. “Basically the same thing.”

Lucy rolled her eyes, striding purposefully over to the next shop while he followed her, chuckling to himself. Dogmeat ran up ahead, going straight to a familiar girl who crouched down to pet her.

“Hi, Kira!” Lucy greeted, feeling almost like she was back in the Vault...but in a good way. It had been so long since she’d been surrounded by so many people whose names she actually knew...since she’d felt any kind of community.

“Hi.” The girl straightened. “Did Mindy tell you?”

“Tell me what?”

“Rhonda and Nancy offered her a job at their farm! Her parents said yes...they all left about an hour ago.”

“That’s great. Her parents didn’t mind?” Granted, Lucy hadn’t met the girl’s parents but it still seemed kind of strange...then again, her father had left her with a man that, for all he knew, would have been happy to kill her, so what did she know?

“Not really...they don’t care much what she does. But Rhonda said I could come visit.”

“That sounds fun.”

The girl glanced at the pack thrown over her shoulder, frowning. “Are you leaving?”

“Not just yet...maybe tomorrow.” She glanced at Cooper, questioning. He didn’t argue, just lifted his brows.

“Oh...I think my mom was hoping you’d stay...”

“We can’t...not just yet. But we might be able to come back.”

“That would be great.” She scratched Dogmeat behind the ears one last time. “I’d better get home. My parents are expecting me for dinner.” Waving, she gave Dogmeat one last scratch behind her ears, tossed her own bag over her shoulder, and took off.

“You ready to go after just two days?” Cooper asked the moment Kira was gone, sounding surprised.

The thing was...she wasn’t. She wanted to stay. She wanted hot showers and cake and lazy days in bed with him. But she couldn’t have that yet, and there was no point in dwelling on it. Besides, they were so close. It would be crazy to stop now. “Yeah. I want to get to New Vegas.”

“In a hurry to gamble away all your hard earned caps?”

“Yep,” she told him simply, giving him a bright smile, and he breathed out a laugh. “We’ll play with slot machines and...Black Jack.”

“You got any idea what Black Jack is?” he asked, smirking.

“Of course. It’s...a card game,” she guessed.

“It is,” he agreed. “How do you play?”

“With...the black cards?”

He snorted. “Great. We’re gonna be rich.” He gazed around the town for a moment, eyes far away, before he turned to her. “It’s about 80 miles to Vegas, and there might not be any settlements between here and there. We need to make sure we’ve got plenty of water. We ought to be good on RadX. RadAway too. But extra food couldn’t hurt.”

“So...four days? Five?”

“About.”

“There are a lot of old cities...” She held up her PipBoy, pointing to the I15 and the little pinpoint cities along it.

“Yeah, and if we’re lucky, one of them has a settlement built up...and none of them have been taken by raiders.”

“Well, we are notoriously lucky so I don’t know what you’re worried about,” she teased, making him laugh aloud, and drawing more than a few stares.

“Your mouth to God’s ear, sweetheart.”

The grocery store was their next stop, and Lucy could have spent all night in there, wandering around the shelves and staring at the food options. There were shelves full of food, all for sale. A deli with things like chicken and eggs and beef, all in tall refrigerators with clear doors. Loaves of bread. And a bakery with pastries and cookies and cakes...three different kinds!

Cooper followed, his eyes soft and amused as she browsed. She picked a different kind of cake this time...chocolate with little swirls of white frosting on top, and they carried that, along with the loaf of bread and jars of Cram they’d found, back to the hotel. They would leave in the morning, they decided, so Lucy hit the vegetable stalls on the way. That, Lucy thought, along with whatever they could hunt and what was left of the Death Claw jerky, ought to keep them fed until they got to New Vegas.

They got dinner at the second restaurant in the settlement, this one specializing in burgers and sandwiches, and stopped at the bar as it was getting dark. Lucy sipped a glass of wine while Percy asked her questions about life in a Vault, and Cooper nursed a bottle of that moonshine he’d had before. Lucy stuck to one glass this time, and although she missed Rhonda and Nancy, Kira’s mother showed up before they left, taking a seat and continuing their conversation about water maintenance and the infrastructure of the settlement. Then, back at the hotel, they shared their slice of cake as they lounged on the sofa, Cooper waiting until she’d eaten the last bite to kiss her, his tongue sweeping away the last bits of chocolate on her lips, then seeming to stroke every part of her mouth.

Lucy could have stayed there all night...could have kissed him forever.

“You taste like cake,” he murmured against her lips after a moment.

“You already had cake,” she laughed when he pulled away, tilting her head so he could kiss one of the marks he’d left on her neck. She already had a few bruises, and he seemed intent on making another one...not that she minded.

“It tastes sweeter on you.”

That night, Lucy dreamed about the Vault.

She dreamed about the Vault a lot, it seemed, although she still didn’t understand why a place that had been her home for so long had turned into a location for all of her nightmares. She dreamed about her apartment...Monty was in there somewhere, and he was looking for her, only the door wouldn’t open and Cooper wasn’t there. She called for him, pressing the button again and again to no avail. The door was supposed to open! It always opened! She

dropped to her knees, fingers prying at the seam...but Monty was right behind her and there was a knife in her hand, and she spun around...

Only it wasn't Monty. It was a teenage boy with a gun in his hands, blood dripping from his lips...and Cooper was outside, knocking on the door...knocking...beating on the door! He was beating on the door and she had to find a way to let him in!

She gasped, jerking upright, a hand pressed to her chest, and immediately Cooper was sitting up beside her, hand going for his gun. And that's when she realized...the knocking on the door was real. She jumped out of bed a second after she realized he had, hurrying to follow him.

"Stay," he told her softly, moving over to the front door where Dogmeat waited, tense.

"Not a dog," she hissed, following him, but she did pause at the door to the main room, gun at the ready, peering around the corner. Dogmeat stood at Cooper's side, teeth bared. Ready.

The knocking continued, soft and frantic, and she watched Cooper yank the door open, pointing the gun at the head of a figure whose hands immediately went up...Lucy couldn't see who it was, so she inched forward, watching as he lowered his gun.

Cooper sighed. "Honey, it's a little late for visiting hours," he told them, then stepped back as the person stepped into the room, closing the door quietly behind them. That's when Lucy finally realized who it was.

"Kira?" she asked, incredulous.

"You have to go," she whispered, and Lucy realized she was in must have been sleeping clothes, her feet bare and filthy. "Right now. You have to leave!"

"What's going on?" Cooper demanded, a lot nicer than he usually demanded things from people he'd just been pointing a gun at.

"There's a knight here," she told them, so soft Lucy had to move closer, the three of them forming a tight circle in the darkness. The only light came from the moon, filtering in through the closed curtains. "From the Brotherhood. Lucy, you've got a bounty on you! It just came through...the Brotherhood is looking for you and they want you. Dead or alive."

"What?" she whispered, heart dropping. A bounty? Why?

"How much?" Cooper demanded, clutching his gun.

"A lot...higher than almost anyone else on the bounty wall...that's what my dad said.

"Fuck," he hissed, wiping a hand over his face. "God fucking dammit!"

"The knight came to my house...he was questioning my parents. He's going to the sheriff next. My dad said he'd never heard of you...said we don't let ghouls in. But you have to hurry!"

Cooper moved as fast as Lucy had ever seen him, but she felt like she was rooted to the spot.

“Why is he questioning your dad?”

“My dad’s the mayor.”

“Oh...” Lucy nodded weakly. “Okay...” Then something occurred to her. “Which knight? What’s his name?”

“He said his name was Knight Maximus.”

Max.

“Lucy?” Cooper called softly, voice an impatient hiss.

She glanced down at her PipBoy...it was still at least two hours from sunrise. She was so tired...

“Lucy, we’ve got to go,” Cooper told her, appearing at her side again. Then to Kira, “we appreciate the warning. Go on home now.”

She nodded, giving Lucy one last glance before she slipped back out into the night.

“Cooper... it’s Max,” she whispered. “She said it was Knight Maximus. He’s my friend!”

“Be that as it may, he’s a knight. In the fucking Brotherhood of Fascists. If he’s looking for you, wearing that armor, it ain’t for nothing good.”

She glanced at the door, teeth digging into her lip. “But...”

His hands gripped her shoulders, the struggle for patience obvious on his face and in the way he held her...careful, but like he was tempted to shake her. “Sweetheart, if he finds you, he will take you, do you understand? And if he can’t, he will kill you. Those are his orders.”

“He wouldn’t...”

“If he’s your friend, he might not look too hard for us. But if he does, I am not letting him take you.”

She glanced at the door again, dazed and disoriented, and he brought a hand up, cupping her face. She looked at him then, meeting his serious gaze with her own startled one.

“Lucy, I need you to trust me, okay? Please.”

It was the please that did it...that made her hear the urgency in his voice. Cooper knew the wastes better than her. He knew the Brotherhood...knew what they could do. And if Max was looking for her...if she had a bounty on her head...

“Lucy...”

“Okay,” she whispered, nodding and hurrying into the bedroom to pack. Behind her, Cooper let out a sigh and took a puff from his inhaler.

She packed as fast as she could, hands shaking as she placed the food and clothes back into her bag, then pulled socks and her boots on. She spun around in the middle of the room, making sure she hadn’t missed anything, then slung her pack onto her shoulder, followed by her rifle. Buckling her holster in place, she grabbed her hat and placed it on her head, then hurried to join Cooper at the door.

He looked at her for a long moment, jaw tight, then, after giving the room one last glance, he put his hand on the doorknob, ear resting against the wood. Then, when it must have been all clear, Cooper opened the door and stepped outside, Lucy and Dogmeat on his heels.

Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

This is another one I had to fiddle with a lot, but hopefully it turned out okay in the end! Thank you so much to everyone who has been reading and commenting! I hope you enjoy!

Lucy stuck as close to Cooper as she could as the two of them walked through the nearly silent settlement. In the distance, she could hear the blades of the Brotherhood helicopter, and she wanted to ask Cooper if he thought that Max was the only knight nearby, or if he thought there were others...if it might not be better to just hide. Did they travel in groups? Or on their own? But it was so quiet that even their footfalls felt too loud, so she just scanned the surrounding area every few seconds, the two of them sticking to the shadows as they made their way towards the gate. That, of course, led to another problem...the guards. There were guards at the gate at all hours...and the gate was the only way to leave. She didn't recognize the two young men standing just out of sight at the entrance, but Cooper walked right up to them, gun at the ready but not pointed at either of them.

The first man to turn started at the sight of Cooper, then glanced at her and the dog, then back towards the helicopter. For half a second, Lucy worried he would scream...that he would alert Max or whatever other knights were nearby. Instead, he stood to the side, gesturing for the other man to back up. His companion did, their guns pointed at the ground and Cooper eyed them.

"Go on," the first guy hissed. "There's only one of them and his squire for now."

"You ain't planning on turning us in?"

The second guy looked almost offended. "You saved Nancy and Rhonda. Mindy too. Took out those raiders. We ain't saying shit to the Brotherhood."

"Huh," Cooper grunted, nodding a little. "Well alright then."

"Thank you," Lucy whispered, hurrying past, Dogmeat running a little ahead. Cooper took a hard left, sticking close to the wall, and she couldn't help hesitating...couldn't help looking back. The moon shone down on them, lighting up the darkness enough that she could see the two men guarding the gate and, beyond them, the helicopter.

Did Max really want to kill her? Or, if he didn't, would he do it anyway if those were his orders. His friend had called the Brotherhood a complicated organization. Cooper called them fascists, and she had to admit, they hadn't studied politics very much, so her grasp on

the word 'fascist' maybe wasn't the best, but he'd also told her that they wanted to keep all technology for themselves, which was obviously bad.

Wiping a hand over her face and resisting the urge to sit down on the softest looking patch of ground and just sleep for a few more hours, she followed Cooper along the wall of the settlement, glad she didn't hear any gunfire or screaming. She didn't think Max would hurt anyone in pursuit of her...then again...what if he did? She thought she knew him, but she'd only traveled with him for a few days.

He'd tried to save her in the Vault even though he'd been happy there. He'd been kind to her. She'd thought they were at least friends. But she couldn't help remembering what Cooper had said that night in the observatory...that when the Brotherhood took the Observatory, they'd kill her. And just a few minutes ago in the hotel room...he'd been worried. He didn't want Max to take her. She doubted he'd be worried about nothing.

Shaking her head at herself, she turned back around and hurried to catch up with Cooper, her gun still drawn. He glanced back at her, checking to make sure she was still there before continuing forward, the two of them walking in silence. They kept walking, following the same road they'd been traveling for what felt like years now, until the sun was rising and Lucy didn't know if she could keep it up. Her eyes kept closing as she walked, chin dropping to her chest as her legs somehow carried her forward. They'd stayed at the bar late, then they'd eaten their cake and, a little tipsy from the wine, Lucy had fallen into bed, only to be dropped into a nightmare.

So the next time Cooper stopped, she ran right into him, grabbing his arm to keep herself upright, but not moving her head from his back even though her hat had been half knocked off her head. Maybe, she thought, she could sleep standing up for a few minutes even though the back of his jacket was unbearably hot against her already hot forehead.

He sighed, staying where he was for a minute. Then, "Let's eat something."

"Okie dokie," she murmured, not moving. She smiled automatically his shoulders shook with a laugh.

"You gonna sleep there?"

"I'm considering it." She lifted her head though, blinking in the bright sunlight and pulling her hat back over her face.

They sat down a few feet from the road, Cooper pouring Dogmeat some water and Lucy pulling out the loaf of bread, tearing off pieces to eat with their jerky. When she finished, she dropped her head on Cooper's shoulder, scooting a little closer when he wrapped a casual arm around her.

"I'm tired."

"I noticed."

"Why couldn't he have come a few hours later."

“Hopefully we won’t get the chance to ask him.”

“Will you hurt him?” she asked, voice dying in her throat as she realized what she’d just asked...it still made her nervous, asking him too many questions. Even if he cared about her and even if he held her at night and kissed her like he loved her.

“Only if he shoots first,” he told her softly, thumb rubbing over her arm.

“Why would anyone have a bounty on me?”

“My guess? Your daddy made it to New Vegas and found himself some fellow Vault Tec assholes.”

Of course. Her father. Her father who’d killed his wife for defying him. Her father who may now be trying to do the same to her. “Why dead or alive?” she asked softly, hating the pain in her voice. She shouldn’t care...he was as dead to her as she must be to him. So it shouldn’t have felt like a knife in her chest to have it confirmed. Cooper didn’t answer, so she went on. “I mean...why alive? He killed my mom. Why wouldn’t he just do the same to me?”

“As soon as he tells me where my family is, you can ask him.”

Lucy nodded against his shoulder, eyes closing. There was no shelter for them to take... nothing but dirt and sand and hills for as far as the eye could see, and she could feel sweat dripping down her back. Her feet already ached and she wanted to drink some more water but she couldn’t convince her arm to do the work of lifting her canteen to her face. Still, with her hat tilted over her face and his arm around her, Lucy managed to doze for a little while, not waking until Cooper shook her.

“We can’t stay here,” he told her, voice apologetic as she sat up. “Next shelter we come to, we can rest for a while, but with the Brotherhood after us, we’ve got to keep moving.”

He was right. Rubbing her eyes, she nodded, letting him pull her to her feet, and the walking resumed as she took a generous drink of water.

“When this is over, I want to lay down for a week,” she told him, making him chuckle. “I mean it. No more walking,” she told him with a smile.

“Does that mean I’m going to be waiting on you?” He didn’t sound too put out by the idea, but she shook her head.

“Nope. You’ll be in bed too.”

“Hm...this idea’s getting better and better. How exactly are we going to eat?”

“Dogmeat can serve us our meals in bed.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

“What do you think, Dogmeat?”

Dogmeat's tail wagged, and she moved over to Lucy's side for a few head scratches before bounding off again.

"I think she might just miss all the walking."

Lucy yawned. "She's crazy."

That made him grin. "Yeah, she is." There were a few more moments of quiet between them, during which Lucy did her best to walk a straight line and Cooper slowed down so he could walk beside her. Then he reached out, flicking the brim of her hat so she had to catch it before it fell, and when she shot him a look, he was grinning. "Alright, sweetheart. Now's as good a time as any. How about you explain that water maintenance system to me?"

Her lips quirked. "Right now?"

"You got anything better to do?"

"I guess not."

So, wiping her face and yawning again, Lucy did just that, starting with the infrastructure they'd had in the Vault and the ways she'd learned to maintain and repair it. Then she moved on to Baker and the last settlement they'd been to, and how it could have been improved. She told him about bringing water to the settlements that needed it so they could have running water in all their buildings and make things safer and more sanitary.

Cooper nodded along, asking questions every once in a while, and by the time they sat down and ate lunch, Lucy felt at least somewhat more awake. The food helped too, so by the time they set off again, she felt a little better.

"So that's your plan?" he asked when they were walking again. "Get your brother and travel the wastes fixing up settlements?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. It's not a plan, exactly. I just...I think we could help some of them. If you wanted." She couldn't help the sinking in her stomach at the thought that despite everything between them, something might make him change his mind...make him leave her. She knew that he cared about her...a lot. Maybe he even loved her. But the what ifs haunted her anyway. The closer they got to finding her father, the closer they got to the end of this part of their adventure. They'd started this trip because they both wanted the same thing: to find her father. And she wanted to help him find his family. But what then? What if he found them? What if...

"Like I said, we can do whatever you want."

We . That meant something, right?

"Can I ask you a question?"

"Well, throughout our acquaintance you've proven yourself more than able to talk, so if pressed, I'd wager that yes, you were capable of doing so."

Lucy rolled her eyes, fighting her grin. But when she spoke, her voice was serious. “What will you do if you find your ex wife?”

All mirth seemed to disappear then, and she could practically feel the air shift around him. She wanted to reach out...to take his hand. She loved him...had been falling in love with him since the moment he'd dropped those caps into her hand. But she still didn't want to push him...worried about what would happen if she did. Sure, he'd told her a couple of things about his ex wife and his daughter, but almost always unprompted. More than just worrying about his anger, she didn't want to hurt him...didn't want to make him remember things that were so painful he'd kept them locked away for over two hundred years.

But she would need to know eventually.

“I'll do the same thing I plan on doing to every other Vault Tec asshole I run across,” he told her simply, so much raw pain in his voice that it hurt to hear.

“But what if you find Janey?” She didn't say the rest of it out loud, even if it was implied. What if he found both of them? Would he really kill her mother? And then what?

He stiffened, and when she glanced at him, he was staring out at the horizon, jaw clenched so tight it must have hurt his teeth. “Don't.”

So she didn't. Snapping her mouth shut, she dropped her eyes to her boots, and they walked for a few minutes in heavy silence. In front of them, Dogmeat sniffed at a spot on the ground, following her nose off the road and after something that would probably be dead soon. Finally, Lucy couldn't take it anymore. “I'm sorry,” she all but whispered.

“Don't,” he ordered again, softer this time. “Lucy...”

“No. I...I shouldn't have...” She shook her head, forcing a smile and staring straight ahead. “Anyway, I'll bet Norm would be able to help with the setup too. He wasn't a Young Pipefitter...he didn't actually join any activities. I mean, he and Chet used to get together and play games, but...just because he didn't join the activities didn't mean he didn't know how to do all of those things. He knew just as much about gardening as I did, and he must have done every job in the Vault. I think he'd be really good at living out here...once he got used to it. And...”

Her words were cut off when his hand caught hers, leather brushing against her skin. “How do you think he'll feel about ghouls?” he asked, voice mild.

“Well...as we were taught from childhood that it's not acceptable to discriminate, I'm sure he will feel exactly the same way I do.”

“No offense to your brother, but I'm not really interested.”

It took her a moment, but then she snorted, elbowing him. “Not like that.”

“Just wanted to clarify. I know you Vaulties are into some weird shit.”

“We are not,” she laughed.

“Two words, sweetheart. Cousin stuff.”

They had to sleep out in the open again that night, choosing a spot a few hundred feet from the road where a few sad looking bushes sort of hid them. He wasn't willing to risk a fire, so they ate jerky and bread with cherry tomatoes, and then, too tired from a full day of walking after a lot less than a full night's sleep to do anything else, Lucy curled up on her side, smiling when Cooper draped the sleeping bag blanket over her, then wrapped her in his arms.

She wiggled closer, eyes closing as she rested her head on his chest.

“Comfortable yet?” he asked, voice heavy with amusement.

She gave a happy hum, nodding against his chest, hand clutching his shirt. When they'd first started this journey, it had been so dark at night...darker than any darkness she could ever have imagined. There had always been some kind of light in the Vaults...emergency lights and night lights and the lights from the hallway. But the only lights out in the wasteland were the stars...and, she was discovering, the moon. Despite her exhaustion, Lucy found herself staring up at it. In the distance, she could hear the chirping of bugs and probably other animals, and Dogmeat's soft breathing behind her. She had her back pressed to Lucy's, offering some additional warmth as the temperature dropped.

Still, despite being relatively warm and comfortable, Lucy just stared up at the moon.

“I can't think about finding her,” Cooper told her after a moment, hand rubbing her back. “I can't. It's been too long, sweetheart. I can't let myself hope for something like that.”

Lucy nodded. “I can understand that.” Then, hesitantly, “No matter what...I'm with you.”

He took a deep, shaky breath, her head rising and falling with the motion.

“And so is Dogmeat,” she told him, trying to lighten the mood a little.

It worked, and she could hear the smile in his voice when he said, “Thought you were tired. Why aren't you asleep?”

“I keep having nightmares.”

He pulled their makeshift blanket further over her, and she missed the bed at the hotel... missed four walls and a roof and the security of knowing there were other people around to help if raiders or a deathclaw showed up.

When he was quiet, she went on. “About the Vault. I'm always stuck there...and that doesn't make sense because I never felt like that when I lived there. I loved it,” she admitted. “I was so happy...I...I was. I thought I was so happy. But I keep having these dreams that I'm stuck in the Vault and...I'm afraid. And I can't find you.”

Cooper squeezed her. “Not gonna happen, Vaultie. Not if I can help it.”

She tightened her hand around his shirt, nuzzling a little closer. He was right. He would keep her safe.

“Now go to sleep. You’re too slow when you’re tired.”

Lucy huffed, smacking him lightly on the chest, smiling when he laughed. His arm tightened around her, and she turned her face, pressing a kiss to his shirt over his heart, then settled back into her spot.

I love you, she thought, finally closing her eyes.

The last thing she felt before she fell asleep were his lips on her hair. And this time, when her dreams took her down into the Vault, Cooper was right there with her.

The sun woke her the next morning, rising over the horizon and shining in her eyes. Groaning, she buried her face into his chest, and the arm around her squeezed. Yawning, she stretched from her fingers down to her toes, then rested her chin on his chest.

“Thought you were going to sleep all day,” he told her, voice mild.

Lucy rolled her eyes. “It’s seven in the morning.”

“Practically lunch time.”

Remembering her thoughts from a few nights ago, and how thoughts of kissing him had threatened to consume her, she rolled over on top of him, hips resting against his, and leaned in to do just that. She could now...she could kiss him whenever she wanted. He groaned into her mouth, hips jerking up into hers, and she wished they were in a room and not out in the middle of nowhere. Not that she was shy...but still...it was hardly appropriate to have sex outside where anyone could walk by.

Still, she rolled her hips against his as she kissed him, her hands cupping his face before moving down his chest. They couldn’t have sex out in the open...but maybe she could do something else for him, especially since they were covered in the blanket. Ignoring the ache between her own legs, she trailed her hand down to his pants, managing to unbuckle and unzip the (in her opinion, excessive) amount of closures. “You know,” she murmured, “Vault Suits are a lot easier to open.”

“I ain’t wearing a fucking...”

The moment she had a hand around him, thumb stroking the tip, he grunted, teeth clenching as his breath caught. Then, when she kissed him again, he bit down on her lip, hungry and desperate as his hips jerked, and the pain of it made her want to stick her hand into her underwear to finally fill her own aching need. Smiling, she pulled away, letting go of him and bringing her hand up to her mouth. Maintaining eye contact, she let her mouth fill with saliva, then ran her tongue over her palm.

“Lucy...” His words died when she gripped him again, but the way her name sounded in his mouth when he was pleading with her...breathy and desperate, had her moving up and down,

grip firm, slow and sure until he did it again. “Lucy...god, Lucy...” Hips jerking, he plunged his tongue into her mouth, kissing her and tasting her, one of his hands fitting between her legs and pressing and that made her hand falter for just a second, the pressure electrocuting her.

He groaned when he finished, hips thrusting up, hands dripping away from her to dig into the dirt instead, and the warm, sticky fluid covered her hand. Panting, he stared up at her, swallowing hard when she licked one of her fingers, wondering if that would help her get used to the taste. Not so bad, she thought, dropping her hand and smiling down at him. She liked him like this, she decided, all out of breath because of her.

“Well good morning to you, Miss MacLean.”

She poured some water onto a handkerchief, wiping her hand off. “Now who's laying around, burning daylight.”

“Sweetheart, trust me, if I had things my way, we could burn all the daylight you wanted.”

“But we have to get moving?” she asked, pulling the bread out of her pack.

He sighed, reluctantly sitting up and fixing his pants. “That we do. If your cast iron skillet friend is after us, we can't afford to stay in one place for long.” He took the bread she offered, then pulled her closer, kissing the place on her neck, right at her pulse, that seemed to be his favorite, biting down hard enough to make her gasp, then licking the pain away. “But believe me, darlin', I'll be returning the favor later.”

He'd hear no arguments from her.

It was a few hours of walking later that they found the cluster of buildings off the Interstate, the old cracked and crumbling road branching off to what must have been a town. “Was this another rest stop?” she wondered as they headed for them.

“Pretty much. Seems like a couple of people lived here, but there wasn't much besides a gas station and a grocery store. Maybe a couple of other things...it's hard to tell now.”

There had maybe been six houses along the road that was more dirt than gravel at this point, and one of them looked like a strong breeze might just knock it over.

“There was probably more to it,” he told her, pointing down the road. “Maybe a trailer park. We're close enough to Baker that they could have commuted. But it don't look like much survived. Go ahead and check the houses on the right...”

“Oh no, I know that trick! That's how you keep finding better stuff. You go right. *I'll* go left.”

He snorted, shaking his head at her as she started walking. “Or maybe I'm just better at looting than you.”

“We'll see,” she called over her shoulder, patting her thigh, then scratching Dogmeat behind the ears as they walked.

She was still smiling to herself as she entered the first house, determined to find more than him. Hand on her gun, she started on the ground floor, stepping over rubble and opening every cabinet...examining every nook and cranny and squeaking in excitement when she found a can of Cram and a bottle of pills. Throwing them in her pack, she moved on to the living room while Dogmeat trotted upstairs.

Crouching beside the rotten sofa, she turned her PipBoy's flashlight on and grinned when she found more pills and a bag that jingled with caps.

Climbing back to her feet, she headed for the bathroom, making sure to check behind the toilet and around the tub. Nothing. Sighing, she headed up the stairs, careful to skip the ones that looked rotten. There were three doors, and she went for the first one on the left where Dogmeat waited for her, pushing it open and stepping inside, jerking to a halt when it shut behind her.

The hand that clamped over her mouth was too big and too strong to have been flesh and bone but she still fought the second it grabbed her, screaming into the metal, then bringing her elbow back with as much force as she could muster as Dogmeat started barking, sounding the alarm. The pain of the impact made her knees buckle, tears springing to her eyes as she screamed again, the hand tightening around her face.

"Stop!" the distorted voice ordered, and then, a familiar one. "Lucy, stop!"

Cradling her arm to her chest, she tried again to twist away from him, but he just held her tighter.

"Lucy, it's me!" he hissed. "Stop!"

Dogmeat lunged, her crazed barking echoing through the empty room as the arm restrained her, but she remembered the *or* in the dead or alive and how the Brotherhood of Steel had taken the Observatory, killing everyone, and she couldn't help trying to fight. He wasn't just pretending to look for her...he had actually hunted her down!

She'd thought he was her friend.

Somewhere close by, there were pounding footsteps...a door hitting wood.

"Damnit Lucy, it's me! It's Max!"

He finally moved his hand, and she stumbled forward, catching herself on the door right before it flew open. She might have pitched forward if Cooper hadn't caught her, his other one pointing his shotgun right at Max.

"Release her, ghoul!" he demanded, starting to lift his own gun, but Lucy shoved Cooper back before he could fire, her right arm still cradled to her chest, her left arm outstretched.

"Don't!" she cried, panting, heart still pounding. He had a minigun...she wouldn't let him shoot Cooper.

"What are you doing?" Max cried.

“What am I doing? What are you doing?” she demanded, left hand crossing her body to grab her gun.

He followed the movement with wide eyes. “Lucy...I was trying to talk to you! I just didn’t want to scare you!”

“You had a hand over my mouth!”

“I didn’t want him to hear us!”

“You’re carrying around a poster of me that says ‘Wanted, Dead or Alive!’”

Cooper grabbed the back of her shirt, yanking her back into the hallway and stepping into the room, his eyes never leaving Max. Thankfully, neither of them opened fire. For a moment, the room was nearly silent, the only sound her own heavy breathing.

Max hesitated, looking between them. “That...I can explain.”

“Then explain it,” Cooper demanded, not lowering the gun.

Max ignored him, staring at Lucy where she was peering over his shoulder. “What’s going on? Why are you with him?”

That, she thought, was going to be an awkward question to answer. “We’re traveling together.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Didn’t he sell you to organ harvesters?”

“He...it doesn’t matter. We’re traveling together. I trust him. What are *you* doing?”

Max blinked at her, then shook his head, lowering the gun. “Wait...he didn’t kidnap you?”

“No! We’ve been traveling together since the Brotherhood killed everyone at the Observatory.”

“I thought he was holding you hostage! That’s why I was trying to talk to you alone.” He sighed, glancing over his shoulder. Through an opening in the wall that led to a crumbling balcony, she could see someone with what looked like a giant bag making their way slowly towards them. “Vault Tec put a bounty on you. I asked to be the one to bring you in.”

“Why?”

“Because I was afraid someone else would kill you! Like him!” he snapped, pointing a metal covered finger at Cooper.

“Knight Maximus! Do you need...any...assistance?” the figure in the distance called from below, sounding ready to collapse.

“No! Just...wait there for a second!” Max called back, a hand up.

The figure promptly dropped. “Thank you sir!”

Cooper rolled his eyes. “Jesus Christ,” he muttered. “You ain’t taking her back to her piece of shit daddy, I’ll tell you that right now.”

Max clenched his jaw. “Listen, I can’t just...” He shook his head. “I’m not going to let anyone hurt her!”

“You don’t think her daddy’s gonna hurt her? Did you miss the dead *or* alive part of that poster you’re carrying around?”

“If she comes with me, she’ll be safe.”

“The fuck she will.”

“I can keep her safe! I’m a knight! I’ll talk to the Brotherhood...”

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me...” Cooper stared at the ceiling, looking suddenly exhausted.

“What?”

“Boy, are you stupid? You think the goddamn Brotherhood of Steel is going to protect her?”

Lucy shook her head, shouldering past Cooper and ignoring the look he shot her. “Wait...I thought you guys were all about technology? Why did they send you after me? You’re not bounty hunters too, are you?”

Max was quiet, dropping his eyes to the floor. Then, “Your father has that power armor...the Brotherhood wants it back. He offered to make a trade.”

“For me?”

“Or her corpse,” Cooper asked flatly.

“I don’t have a choice, Lucy,” he whispered, glancing back at his friend again. He was still sitting in the dirt, dwarfed by the bag he was carrying. “It’s a direct order. But if you come with me....”

“Why don’t you just...quit?”

Max started to wipe a metal-covered hand over his face, then dropped it. “I can’t quit the Brotherhood, Lucy.”

“Why not?”

“Because they’ll kill me!”

He never could have lived with her in the Vault, she realized then. Even if he’d snuck away from the Brotherhood...would they have found him? The people in her Vault couldn’t have

protected him, not if Vault Tec and the Brotherhood worked together. He couldn't even live there as her friend...he couldn't ever be safe. Because of the Brotherhood. Because of Vault Tec and the world they'd created.

"My father will kill me, or he'll drag me back to the Vault." Honestly, she wasn't sure which would be worse at this point. "He killed my mom. He destroyed Shady Sands. Your home! She tried to leave him and he bombed a whole town just to kill her."

Max sighed. "Lucy..."

"I can't go with you, Max," she told him softly. "I'm sorry. I can't. I have to go to New Vegas. We're going to go see my dad...talk to him." She swallowed hard. "Kill him. He deserves it. He has to answer for what he's done."

"You want to go with *him*?" he asked, incredulous. "The ghoul? Don't you remember what he did to you?"

"Things are different now?"

"Different how?"

I'm in love with him, she thought, biting her tongue to keep the words in. She wouldn't say those words to another person before she said them to Cooper. "We're friends," she told him instead. "Partners. I trust him."

Max shook his head, closing his eyes. "Lucy...how do you know he isn't going to turn you in for the bounty?"

"He won't."

"He's a literal bounty hunter. It's his job!"

"He won't," she told him again.

"How do you know?"

"Because I know!"

"This is insane, you know that right? I...I can't..."

"Don't do this," she pleaded, feeling cold dread in her stomach. "Please, Max."

He leaned in, lowering his voice. "It's my job. I...I'm a knight. All I've ever wanted was to be a knight and now I am and...if I don't do this..."

"I'm not going to let you take me to him," she told him softly, shaking her head. "I can't. You'll have to kill me."

"And I can tell you right now, that's not going to happen," Coope put in. "Don't forget, I've worn that armor. I know how to take it down. You've seen that firsthand"

Max's jaw went tight, his eyes going to Cooper's gun.

"Son, I promised her I wouldn't shoot you unless you shot first. You can walk away if you want, but either way, you aren't taking her."

For a long time, the three of them were silent, Dogmeat still snarling from her place by the door. Then Max sighed. "If they find out, they'll kill me for this."

"That ain't on her," Cooper snapped. "You're the one who chose to come after us."

"Because I wanted to protect her!"

"You can't." Now Cooper's voice was softer. Serious. "You can't protect her from them. They'd rather kill the both of you."

"They won't find out from us," Lucy put in. "I promise. We're friends, Max. I wouldn't tell anyone."

Max sighed, shaking his head and swearing under his breath. "Are you sure about this?" he asked her, something pleading in his eyes.

"I'm sure."

He walked over to the place that had once been a door to a balcony and was now a hole in the wall. "Squire," he called, eyes not leaving Lucy.

"Yes, my lord!"

Something in his eyes dimmed and he turned around. "It's not them. We've lost the trail."

Cooper lowered his gun, the two of them watching as Max stepped out onto the balcony and, without another word, leapt, his jetpack lowering him to the ground.

"But...my lod..."

The helmet must have closed again, because when he spoke again, she didn't recognize his voice anymore. "Let's go, squire."

The moment he was gone, Lucy dropped her head against the wall, sighing in relief. Dogmeat relaxed too, leaving the room to go find something more interesting to sniff, and Cooper moved to her side, the two of them watching Max wrap an arm around the person he'd called 'Squire.' And then they were airborne again, Lucy and Cooper watching them go. She had a sinking feeling in her stomach that she'd just lost a friend.

"Partners, huh?" Cooper asked, and against all odds, Lucy smiled, leaning against him. Maybe she was wrong. Maybe she'd see Max again one day, once all this was over. Maybe they could still be friends.

Feeling just a little hopeful, she nodded. "Yes."

“Sounds good to me.”

Chapter 32

“How’d that happen?” Cooper’s question tore Lucy out of her thoughts as she watched Max disappear around the corner, and she turned to face him, eyebrows raised in question. How had Max found them? How would she know? “Because if you’re going to tell me he broke your arm, I might change my mind about letting him walk away.”

“Oh. It’s not broken. And he didn’t do it.”

“What, you trip up the stairs or something?” He was only kind of teasing...his eyes were glued to her arm.

Lucy sighed. “He just...he grabbed me from behind and I couldn’t see who it was and I elbowed him,” she admitted, flushing a little.

He smirked, but when he took her hand, he was careful. “Squeeze.” She did, wincing a little, and he ran the fingers of his other hand down her arm, straightening it, then touching her elbow. She was in one of the overshirts, not her Vault suits, so it was easy to roll up her sleeve, his fingers squeezing gently up her arm. “You’re right...it’s not broken. Not if you can move it like that. It’s probably going to hurt like hell, though.”

“It already does,” she admitted, flexing her fingers again and wincing.

“Maybe don’t try to take on anyone else in power armor elbow first.”

“I panicked!”

“A for effort, sweetheart.” He kept a hold of her arm as he chuckled, leather covered fingers encircling her wrist for a moment, his face softening.

“Next time I’ll use my left arm,” she joked. “It won’t matter as much if I break that one.”

He huffed, shaking his head. “I’d prefer we end this little adventure with all of your limbs intact.” Then, to her surprise, he pulled her in close, an arm wrapping around her, her head tucked under his chin. She melted into him, closing her eyes and sighing as he rubbed a hand over her back. “Although I’m sure, knowing you, that all future adventures will be just as eventful as this one considering you attract trouble like a magnet.” He said it wryly, like he was resigned, but she still couldn’t have fought the smile even if she’d wanted to.

“I do not,” she muttered, no heat in her voice. Then, “I think he means well.”

“Yeah, you know what they say about the road to hell.”

At that, she pulled away just enough to look up at him, cocking her head. “Hell? The... Christian afterlife?”

He snorted. “Right. No religion in the Vaults, huh?”

“I mean...we learned the basics. But I didn’t think Christians believed there was a physical road to...”

“Just an expression, Vaultie. The road to hell is paved with good intentions.”

She pondered that for a moment, then nodded. “Oh...sometimes even though you try to do the right thing, you still end up in a bad place.”

“Got it in one.” He still held her arm, thumb stroking her wrist, keeping her close, and if it were up to her, they would have stayed there.

“Were you a Christian? I don’t mean to be disrespectful of your beliefs.”

He shook his head. “It was more of a cultural thing. Everyone was supposed to be a Christian back then.”

“And no one was supposed to be a communist?”

“Right.”

“I thought America was a free country.”

“It was. If you were a Christian who was against communism,” he told her kind of wryly.

“Is that why you say Jesus Christ so much? Was that a Christian thing too?”

Cooper chuckled at that. “No, sweetheart, that’s called blasphemy. It’s the same as swearing. Christians didn’t like it much.”

“Oh...” She shrugged a little, then, because she could and because she wanted to and because, judging by the way he was holding her arm, he’d been worried, she kissed his cheek. “Thank you for not shooting my friend.”

“Yeah, well, no promises for next time,” he grumbled, but in the next second his lips were on hers, arms pulling her flush against him. When he pulled away, it was only far enough to press his forehead to hers. “Also, if you could stop putting yourself between me and guns, I’d greatly appreciate it,” he told her, the strain of patience in his voice.

“I’m not going to let someone shoot you.”

He sighed, voice a little harder. “I think it bears repeating that I can heal from shit like that.”

“But you don’t have to if you don’t get shot.”

“And if you get shot?”

She gave him a sweet smile. “Then you get ass jerky for dinner.”

He shook his head, cupping her cheek, his eyes so soft it made her heart ache. “You would be delicious,” he muttered, and when his mouth found her neck, biting down gently, she

giggled. “Then again, it would contribute to those high rates of cannibalism you find so concerning.” He pulled away with a glance out of the place in the wall that had been a door once, sighing. “Alright, darlin’, think you can finish searching these houses without running into any more trouble.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“Hm.” He didn’t look reassured, but he did kiss her once more before turning and heading out the way he’d come.

“And don’t take any of my houses!” she called. “No cheating!”

“Whatever you say, sweetheart.”

Lucy got to work, scouring every inch of the houses she was searching, Dogmeat helping as she looked in every hiding place she could think of, and some that the dog went sniffing after. She was sure she had him beat when she found not one, but two small bottles of some kind of alcohol, a StimPack, *and* another stash of caps, but when she finished laying out all of her treasures by the fire he’d built, including another paperback book (a western!) and some assorted first aid items, he just smiled, and her own smile dropped.

“What?”

“It’s a good effort, Vaultie.”

“Don’t patronize me, Howard. What do you have?”

Smug smile firmly in place, he pulled out the stash of RadAway, a large bottle of whiskey, a grenade, two StimPacks, a bag full of caps, three pill bottles, and a whole box of bullets that would fit in her gun, along with two paperback books. He barked out a laugh when she gritted her teeth and started to pack her own things away.

“Next time,” she told him simply.

“Of course.”

They were back on the road, lunch eaten and bodies at least somewhat rested when she thought to ask, “Max called his friend ‘Squire.’ Was that his name, or is it like a squire from medieval times?”

“Just like.”

“Why?”

“Because they’re all idiots?”

She laughed. “I just mean...the legion people do it too...the man that named himself after the Roman Emperor.”

“Also idiots.”

“But why?” she asked, nudging him. “Why are they using stuff from history? Why not make up their own names?”

“Not everybody knows their history up here. It ain’t like a lot of textbooks survived this long, and no one’s making new ones except maybe the Enclave, and I wouldn’t trust them as far as I could pick every one of them up and throw them. Most people probably think the Brotherhood of Shitholes made all that up. Or heard it from their fucking toaster god or whoever they worship.”

“You’re right...I don’t think the Brotherhood of Steel has a very good education system, especially when it comes to anatomy.”

His lips twitched, eyebrows raising as he turned to face her. “Really?”

“It’s not his fault,” she told him, preemptively defensive.

He shook his head, mock solemn. “Of course not.”

“And it’s important to respect other people’s beliefs as long as they’re not harmful to others.”

“Did he not know where it went?”

“He didn’t know it was *supposed* to explode,” she muttered, and in the face of his wheezing cackle, she smacked his arm. “Stop!” she ordered, trying to swallow her own smile. “It’s sad that they don’t receive a proper sex education.”

“Very sad,” he agreed, still laughing.

“And it’s not nice to make fun of other people’s ignorance.”

“Well, we can’t have that. I’m known for being nice.”

She rolled her eyes, lips still twitching.

That night, his words came back to her as he seemed intent on proving that niceness, along with his own sex education. The two of them had walked for a few more hours, covering as much ground as they could before she was too tired to go any further. Even Dogmeat had been lagging a little in the sun, and so they’d built a fire off the side of the road, Dogmeat lapping up some water and chewing on the remains of a radroach while she and Cooper shared bread and Cram. Her eyes were heavy as she watched him kick dirt over the ashes of the fire and the remains of the pages from one of the books he’d used to start it, and she leaned against his shoulder when he sat back down beside her, closer than before.

The moment she’d swallowed her last bite of bread he was kissing her, hands slipping under her shirt to her breasts and across her stomach then her back, exploring like he couldn’t get enough as he lowered her to the ground. She went more than willingly, spreading her legs so he could settle between her hips and wrapping them around him, making his breath stutter as she pulled him closer.

So much better than Chet.

So much better than Monty.

Cooper's hands alone made her feel like he'd lit a match inside of her, every nerve ending catching fire as he touched her, and when she explored his mouth with her tongue like her hands explored the skin of his back, the noises he made had her grinding against him, desperate. He was so warm and he touched her like he couldn't get enough...like he loved her. Like he wanted to know every part of her.

It wasn't even fully dark yet, although the moon was faintly visible, and Dogmeat had curled up a few feet away, more interested in taking a nap than she was in whatever they were doing. Again, Lucy wished for a bed and blankets and walls...it felt wrong, doing this outside where anyone could stumble upon them, but she also couldn't make herself ask him to stop...not until his mouth, which had left hers at some point to travel down her neck, probably leaving more marks, to her breasts, shirt pushed up around her neck, to her stomach where his hands made deft work of her jeans.

"Oh..." She tensed, going still, and he froze.

It had been two days of walking through the desert and she hadn't had a shower. She *had* to smell bad, and it wouldn't be polite of her to let him perform oral sex on her when she wasn't clean.

"Um...you don't have to do that," she told him, smiling a little awkwardly.

He tilted his head, hands moving to her hips. "I don't suppose I *have* to do much of anything. But surely you know by now..." One hand moved to slot between her legs, and even over the denim of her pants he somehow knew how to get just the right angle to make her arch her back, a jolt running through her all the way from her clit to the tips of her fingers and toes. "I enjoy a free meal anytime I can get it."

"I'm...we've been walking all day and I'm not..."

He pressed again, rocking his hand and making her words die in her throat.

His lips went back to her stomach and up to her chest again, teeth occasionally making an appearance, and somehow the little hints of pain only made her want it more. When his teeth closed around her nipple, just a little harder than he'd done before, her hips jerked, a cry escaping and trailing off into a whimper when his tongue took its place.

"Even if I did have a nose, I don't think there's a thing in the world I'd rather do right now than put my face in your cunt and lick you until you scream."

Her cheeks flushed, followed by the rest of her. "I mean...if you want to..." she whispered, torn between propriety and the fact that his words had her so desperate for him to do exactly what he'd said that it was causing her physical pain.

He needed no more invitation, pulling her jeans down so slowly that she whined, wiggling her hips to try and help him.

“I’m savoring here, sweetheart.”

“Savor faster,” she pleaded, making him laugh.

“As the lady wishes.”

The minute he touched her, his tongue reaching up inside her, the abrupt ridge of his nose hitting her clit, her whole body went rigid, back arching, her head aching from where she hit it on the ground as she threw it back, fingers digging into the dirt at her sides. All thoughts of how she might smell went out the window, replaced only with his tongue and his lips and even his teeth on her clit. “Please...please don’t stop,” she all but sobbed, and just the contact of her elbow on the ground hurt but she didn’t care, not in the face of this.

He gave no answer, and she would have worried about his ability to breathe except he seemed perfectly fine where he was, mouth working as she gasped out his name, still pleading. “Cooper...Cooper, please...it’s so good...” His fingers plunged into her then, lips sucking her clit, and her inner walls clenched around him, hips thrusting up into his face, high, breathy cries filling the otherwise silent night air. He still didn’t stop, licking her until she put a hand on his head, unable to take it anymore. Only then did he crawl up her body to kiss her, hand gently stroking the arm she’d brought up to cradle to her chest.

“Sweet as apple pie,” he murmured, and she found the energy to smile somehow.

“Think they’ll have that in Vegas?”

“One way to find out.”

Still panting, she reached for his pants, too tired to keep her eyes open but wanting to reciprocate. He was already moving, though, pulling her pants back up and fixing her shirt, then covering her in the sleeping bag blanket.

“Don’t you want me to do you?” she asked around a yawn. “It’s only polite.”

“Polite, huh?” he huffed out a laugh, laying down beside her and pulling her close. It was getting cold fast, and the sweat on her skin wasn’t helping, so she burrowed herself as close as she could get.

“Mhm. It’s important to reciprocate when your partner...”

“You just read the Vault Tech manual on relationships or are there more you’ve memorized?”

“Oh...I read lots of manuals,” she mumbled, eyes too heavy to keep open. “The power armor and...engines too. Turrets. The equipment we use for water purification. Our terminal based locking system...”

“Why doesn’t any of that surprise me?” He squeezed her in a gentle hug. “Get some sleep, Miss MacLean. Maybe tomorrow you can teach me all about those terminals. God knows shooting them doesn’t always work.”

“That’s because...” she yawned, then continued “shooting them just destroys the machine and...” she trailed off then. “Why are you changing the subject? Do you not like it when I perform oral sex on you?”

He huffed, rubbing a hand up and down her back. “Believe me, sweetheart. There’s not much I enjoy more than your sweet mouth on my cock.”

She flushed again. He was so crass...although using the word ‘penis’ wouldn’t have made that sound any better. “Then why...”

“Because you’re half asleep, and because whoever told you that you had to reciprocate sex when you’re so tired you can hardly open your eyes was a piece of shit.” His voice was unexpectedly angry, and she peered up at him, taking in the tight line of his jaw and the hardness in his eyes.

“I think it was in a manual,” she admitted, and he shook his head, that hardness leaving him as he kissed her forehead, soft and sweet.

“Well then whoever wrote the manual was a piece of shit. Now go to sleep. I’m tired, Vaultie.”

She didn’t believe him, not least of all because he didn’t stop trailing his hand up and down her back, his head tilted up just enough so he could press his face to her hair like he was breathing her in. “But...”

“Shh,” he murmured. “I’m sleeping.”

Lucy managed to roll her eyes with them closed, but it wasn’t much longer before his hand on her back lulled her into a sleep so deep that she didn’t even dream, and when it came time to wake up the next day, he had to shake her a little, calling her name a few times before she managed to open her eyes.

They took off early, eating as they walked, both of them checking Lucy’s PipBoy at least three times before lunch. 65 miles. 64. 63. 62. They tended to cover the most ground in the morning before the hottest part of the day, and then again in the evening before the sun went down and Lucy could walk for longer without the heat driving her to pull out her water and sit down. Cooper seemed to have a sixth sense for when she needed to stop, usually finding some rocks for them to sit on, or even an old car for her to lean against.

The sun beat down on them, and even with her hat, it was hard to keep her eyes open against the sun. She was starting to think that she might need more RadAway if the strange exhaustion was anything to go by...then again, was it strange? She’d walked more in the last month than she had in her entire life, all aboveground and in the oppressive, never-ending heat of the surface. She’d had to fight for her life several times and it felt like every few days, she found herself in life or death situations. Besides, she didn’t want to waste the RadAway...they only had a few bags, and if they ran out before they could get to a settlement, she’d be in trouble.

She was lost in these thoughts when Cooper stopped, scanning the horizon, then turning to her. Dogmeat didn't seem bothered, just sniffing around the side of the road, so Lucy figured they were safe for now. But Cooper was regarding her with a little smile. "Come on, Vaultie. Time for a little detour."

She cocked her head but followed. "A detour?"

"Yep."

There was a little bit of an incline, and her calves burned as they climbed it. "Is there something over here? A settlement?"

"Not quite."

"Is there...some place we can loot?"

"Nope."

"Okay..." She looked around, searching for clues despite the dull headache she'd developed at some point.

"Just wait a few minutes and I'll show you," he told her with a grin.

In fact, she didn't have to wait a whole three minutes before he reached back and took her hand, guiding her toward the edge of what she realized was a giant pit. Her stomach flipped at the height, hand tightening around Cooper's even though they were several feet from the edge. The pit was filled with water...a lot of it.

"Is this a...lake?"

"It's a quarry."

She cocked her head. "Quar-uh?" She asked, repeating the word he'd said it, and he shook his head, grinning.

"Quarry." He pronounced it slower, enunciating. "They were mining for rock here. Cut away the edges and dug a pit. That's why the walls are like that...you can walk down the path, but you've got to be careful. The water's real deep. Probably fifty feet or more."

Still...it was water. He correctly read her hopeful look and nodded, giving her a soft smile.

"That's right, Vaultie. We can get cleaned up some. Here. Take..." he was cut off, hand reaching for his pack, when Dogmeat's fur bristled, the snarling pulling both of their attention to the things running towards them. The dog took off like a bullet from a gun and met one of them halfway, but there were more and before she'd even taken in the strange creatures with frills around their necks and spikes on their backs that ran on their back legs, Lucy was dropping her pack, pulling out her gun, and firing. One of them dropped, then another, head exploding when Cooper's bullet struck it square in the face.

They kept coming though, sharp teeth glistening in too-wide mouths, and Lucy had to remind herself to move...to keep her feet from planting themselves as she took aim and fired, moving along the edge of the quarry the whole time. And then one got too close and opened its mouth, and somehow, impossibly, actual flames erupted from between its teeth. She gasped, feet tangling beneath her as she tried to jump back and avoid the fire, back hitting the ground when she tripped.

“What...what the fudge is that?” she screeched, shooting its leg out from under it.

“Fire gecko!” Cooper called.

“It’s breathing fire!”

“Thus the *fire* part of its name.” He sounded far too reasonable considering they were facing lizards that were currently *breathing fire*.

“How is that possible?”

“Sweetheart, I played a cowboy on TV. I wasn’t exactly a biologist!” He glanced back then, swinging to aim at another lizard that was coming after her, but he wasn’t fast enough and she had to bring her arm up to protect her face. It managed to sink its teeth into her skin, making her scream as she pressed the muzzle of her gun to its head and fired. No time to contemplate the stabbing pain in her arm, she scrambled to her feet just as Dogmeat sprinted back to her side, planting herself in front of Lucy, teeth glistening with blood as she snarled at the oncoming lizards.

There was a whole group of them coming in the distance and the idea hit Lucy so fast that she was racing for her pack, shooting any of them that got too close, before she could form the entirety of her plan. There were too many of them to just shoot...Cooper had said they ‘fucked like rabbits’ and apparently that was true...they must have stumbled upon a nest of them. Grabbing the grenade, Lucy spun and took off, running parallel to the quarry as she and Cooper both fired into the...pack? Herd?

“Lucy! What...”

Bringing it up to her mouth, she spun, making sure they were all grouped together and running for her. A few had broken off to go for Cooper, and Dogmeat was fighting one at his side...but twelve or fifteen or maybe even twenty of them were heading straight for her...it was so bright and they moved so fast and she felt full of adrenaline, so much that she couldn’t focus for long enough to get a count. Lucy pulled the pin with her teeth, praying the drawings in her technical manual on surface weaponry had been accurate, and then threw with every bit of strength she had, muscles going through the motions they’d been through in a hundred Vault softball games.

The explosion sent a wave of heat back at them, and she brought a hand up to shield her face as she shot at one that had gotten a little too close to her, stepping back and trying to keep moving. She was pretty sure that had killed most of them and was about to turn to Cooper and rub in the fact that the drawing actually had been helpful, but her foot slid on loose rock and then her feet went out from under her.

Cooper spun, and then he was sprinting towards her, arm outstretched, but Lucy was already falling, heart in her throat as she stared up at him, his voice screaming her name which he so rarely used. She was falling...falling so far...some instinct made her curl up into a ball, gasping in a breath at the last second, fingers closing around her gun lest she drop it.

When she hit the shockingly cold water with a painful slap, she kept going, sinking...

She was sinking.

She was sinking!

Cooper hadn't covered swimming under water!

It was so dark and she was so cold and even with her eyes open she could barely see, eyes stinging from the contact. Water had gone up her nose and burned her sinuses and she was under water and there was no bottom...

She was going to drown!

All around her was dark and she was under water and...

Cooper would tell her not to panic. He would look into her eyes, all serious and firm.

Deep breath, sweetheart.

Just the thought of his voice soothed her...she'd taken a deep breath already. She was under water. She had to think. Swimming was something she knew how to do now, and even if it was under water, the same movements had to work! So she tucked her gun into her jeans, stretched her body out, then blew out a little air between her lips.

And then, kicking and dragging herself with her arms, she followed the bubbles to the surface.

At first, it was like she was barely moving, but her body adjusted automatically, legs kicking in sync, lungs burning as she cupped her hands, pulling herself up inch by inch, then foot by foot, then faster and faster until she broke the surface, gasping for air and coughing so hard her already aching lungs just hurt worse.

Blindly she swam, just like Cooper had shown her, until her fingers hit rock. Gripping the ledge, she used the last of her strength to drag herself up and out of the water, still coughing, then flopped over on her side, shivering even in the sun.

She'd done it.

"Lucy!"

Frantic footsteps made their way down towards her, but she couldn't stop coughing for long enough to answer. How long had she been under? Was he being careful? If he fell, would she be able to help him?

“Lucy! Jesus fucking Christ!”

Blasphemy, she thought, enjoying the strange word and vowing to look it up.

Managing to draw in a shaky breath, she opened her eyes and stared out at the placid surface of the water. There was no evidence she’d almost drowned. Her nose burned, tears running down her face from the sting of it, and she realized Cooper probably couldn’t swim underwater with his nose gone...all of the water would go straight into his nasal cavity.

She wasn’t sure how long it was before he was on his knees beside her, one hand on her arm, hesitating like he wanted to roll her over but was afraid to do it. She brought her left hand up, glad she was laying on that side and not her right since her right arm was still tender, and caught his hand. “Hey, Cooper,” she managed, coughing a few times before she was able to continue. “Be careful. The rocks up there are slippery. Someone could fall.” She squeezed his hand, rubbing her thumb over the leather of his gloves. “And the water is really cold. I don’t understand how it can be so cold...”

“Fuck, Lucy,” he whispered, voice shaky. “You can’t...I thought...”

She managed to turn just enough to see him then...to see the haunted look in his eyes that hadn’t yet given way to relief. He was afraid...no...he was terrified, and just seeing it made her heart clench. So she tried to smile. “I just wanted you to kill the rest of the fire lizards. I was tired of fighting them,” she joked, and his answering laugh was more of a breath, his eyes closing as he took a deep, steadying breath.

“Maybe just tell me that next time instead of jumping off a fucking cliff.”

“I mean...I don’t know if I would call that jumping...”

He wiped a hand over his face. “I could have sworn you promised to be more careful. Did I dream that? Because the one thing you have not been is *more careful!*”

She gripped his hand, using it to help her roll over onto her back, then to sit up. He braced her, a hand on her back. The rush of adrenaline had disappeared, leaving her cold and shaky, her teeth chattering. “Those lizards could breathe fire! That’s insane. It shouldn’t be real! I was being as careful as I could.”

“I also remember you saying that we were notoriously lucky.”

“Well...I’m very lucky that you taught me how to swim,” she reminded him, not a little smugly.

Instead of answering, he wrapped his arms around her, squeezing hard.

Lucy didn’t mind, just brought her arms, one bruised and the other bleeding, up to hold him. “I’m sorry,” she whispered, resting a hand on the back of his head as he buried his face in her neck.

Cooper didn’t answer, just held her for a long time, not pulling away until neither of them was shaking anymore.

Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

It has been a super busy, stressful, car trouble type of week with huge work things happening, all of which has made me too tired to write much. But after this week things should slow down and I should be back to my regular faster posting schedule! This is only sort of edited because I wanted to hurry and get it up after making you wait for so long. Also, I'm justme--emily on tumblr if you want to chat! :)

When Cooper finally let her go, he pressed a long kiss to her temple, then cupped her face in his hand, his solemn gaze taking her in. "You alright, Vaultie?"

She nodded before glancing down at her still bleeding arm, remembering at the last minute that the gecko had bitten her. "You said the green ones were venomous, right? What about the fire ones?"

"Pretty sure those just breathe fire, but once we get cleaned up, we can disinfect it. Then again, you've already taken your bath," he told her wryly.

"I'd rather use soap."

"Well, your pack's up there, sweetheart. Better start walking if you want soap."

Lucy followed his pointing finger up at the sheer rock wall and the steep path that she'd have to climb. The top felt like a million miles away. She was sure Cooper hadn't been focusing on their stuff when he'd watched her fall over the edge of a cliff, but still...she wished he had been. Just a little.

"Never mind," she muttered, dropping her head onto his shoulder, and she could feel his laughter through the contact. She wanted to curl up in his lap and sleep...she wanted to be back in bed beside him, safe and warm and comfortable...

Lucy wondered if it was exhaustion or radiation poisoning making her feel this way. Or a mixture of both.

Above them, Dogmeat started barking, and Cooper sighed and shook his head, his hand rubbing up and down her back. "I told her to stay. Didn't want her falling off a cliff too. Come on, Vaultie. We can't leave our shit laying around. Someone might think we're dead and do some looting."

She almost asked if he would just get it for her...he probably would have. But she'd already scared him and she didn't want him worrying again so soon. So, with a sigh, she let him pull her to his feet and they started to climb.

“Alright, we’re coming! Hold your horses!” Cooper called to the dog who continued to whine after them, apparently not too happy at being left behind, even when she had plenty of lizards to eat. “You know, I have to admit,” he told her as they started up the path, “it seems that Vaultie weapons training was no joke. Apparently you do know how to use a grenade.”

She smiled faintly at his back, adjusting her soaking wet hat on her head and shading her face from the unforgiving sun. “I know how to set up a landmine too.”

“Maybe let’s skip that one, sweetheart. In fact, going forth, let’s keep the use of explosives to a minimum.”

“The grenade worked, didn’t it.”

“It did. And it was a good call. But if you blow yourself up with a landmine, the jerky is going to be hard to gather up.”

She managed a huff of laughter as the throbbing in her head went from an irritating background problem to a fully unbearable one. But when he glanced back at her, she did her best to smile. “I’d hate to put you out.”

The higher they got, the worse she felt, and soon, the sound of Dogmeat’s high pitched whining felt like a needle in her skull. Biting her lip to keep herself from begging the dog to shut up, she focused on her feet, on taking one step after the other, and then, when even that wasn’t enough to keep her mind off of her roiling stomach, she remembered Cooper’s face and how afraid he’d been, and reminded herself that he’d be even more afraid if she fell again.

Somehow, she managed to make it all the way to the top of the cliff before she had to sit, legs folding under her the minute they reached the top, and Dogmeat would have barreled into her, possibly sending her back over the cliff, if Cooper hadn’t caught her by the scruff. “Easy,” he laughed. “At least wait until she…” Cooper turned, then seemed to take Lucy in, his words cutting off mid sentence. “Sit,” he ordered, suddenly serious, and the dog did, none too happy about it as her paws tapped against the ground. “Lucy?” He grabbed her arm like he was afraid she was going to topple back over the edge.

“I think I need more of the RadAway,” she told him quietly, doing her best to stay upright.

“Yeah, I think you’re right. Come here,” he urged, pulling her upright. She got her feet under her, leaning on him as he led her several deliberate steps away from the edge. Only when she was far enough away that she wouldn’t fall back in if she passed out did he ease her back down to the ground, grabbing his pack and then sitting beside her once more. She leaned against him and swallowed against the nausea.

“I’ve been taking the RadX.”

“I know. But that only lasts for so long and you’re breathing this shit in constantly,” he murmured, guiding her to rest her head in his lap. “Not to mention the water you just swallowed.” Then to Dogmeat, “Fine, but be easy, alright?”

As if she understood, the dog lay gingerly beside Lucy, resting her head on her stomach, and Lucy brought a weak hand up to stroke her back while Cooper inserted the needle with practiced hands, hooking up the tube and holding the RadAway bag in the air. “It’ll be better when we’re not walking through the fucking desert every day.”

“We still have to walk back,” she reminded him, wincing when the medicine hit her veins.

“We won’t be in as much of a hurry then. We can stop more often...maybe spend more than a couple of days in a settlement.”

She was glad to hear it...she didn’t think she could handle this kind of pace for too much longer. Cooper seemed to know that too, tilting her hat more to shade her eyes.

“Just a few more days,” he told her softly.

“A few more days,” she agreed, nodding tiredly.

Like the first time he’d given her the RadAway, Lucy dozed off, not waking until the bag was empty. Cooper had wrapped gauze around the bite in her arm while she’d been asleep, and one of his hands rested on her stomach, fingers splayed, rising and falling with her steady breaths. Dogmeat, apparently assured that both of her people were okay, had moved on to eating one of the geckos.

She shifted in his lap, bringing a hand up to rest on his, and he flipped his hand to capture it. “Better?” he asked.

She tilted her hat up to look at him. “I’m still tired,” she admitted

“I think that’s probably more to do with walking over two hundred miles in a month than the radiation.”

“What if my dad’s not in New Vegas?”

The question seemed to take him aback, but he just stroked his thumb over the back of her hand. “Then we’ll keep looking.”

“What if we can’t find him?”

“I can find anyone, sweetheart.”

Her lips twitched at his cocky smirk. “What if...”

“Remember what I said about ‘what if’s’?”

She nodded, closing her eyes again with a sigh.

“If he’s not there, we’ll regroup. Get some rest. Try to find another lead.”

He was right. She knew that. But the closer they got to Vegas, the more nervous she felt. What if, what if, what if. The questions ran through her head every time she let herself think

about the city they'd been walking toward for what felt like years but had only been weeks. What if Cooper decided to part ways with her? What if they couldn't find her dad?

What if they found him?

What if she met her makers? What if she came face to face with Vault Tec? What if she didn't make it out of Vegas? She was wanted, after all. Dead or alive. What if her father decided dead was fine with him, like he'd decided for her mother?

"Come on, darlin'. Let's get cleaned up." He squeezed the hand on her stomach, then helped her sit up, pressing a long kiss to her hair as soon as she was within kissing distance. That finally pulled her out of her thoughts, and she turned to kiss him properly, one of her hands cupping the back of his head.

She loved it when he kissed her and when he held her and when he took care of her with such surprising tenderness. She loved it when he rested a hand on her back and pulled her closer, pressing their bodies together and holding her. She loved it when he smiled against her mouth, humming as her tongue stroked along his, and when her teeth nipping against his bottom lip as she pulled away made him laugh.

Despite the tiredness that had become ever-present these last few days, Lucy felt decidedly better when she stood up, the headache all but gone. Still, she didn't argue when Cooper went down the path first, her following, and Dogmeat carefully picking her way down behind them. She made sure to watch every step, not wanting a repeat of earlier, although she did joke, "It was a lot faster going down my way."

He ignored her. Pointedly.

Once at the bottom, Lucy pulled her clothes out and left them within reaching distance and stripped down to her underclothes. After taking the RadX that Cooper handed her, she slid into the cold water, soap in hand, and started to wash as best she could. Cooper dropped into the water beside her, clothes and all, which she guessed was also an option. When she felt a little cleaner, Lucy pulled her clothes into the water one by one, giving each article of clothing a good scrub before tossing it back onto the rocks.

Only when her clothes were clean and laying out to dry did Cooper swim up behind her, resting his arms on the rock ledge and licking the water droplets from her neck. The sensation made her giggle at first, but then he pressed closer, his teeth biting down gently, then a little harder when she moaned, the pain and pleasure of it sending a spark through her, straight to her clit. She started to reach down, already aching for relief when he bit down just hard enough to make her gasp, but he caught her wrist, placing her hand back on the rock.

"Stay," he ordered softly, voice firm and playful all at once.

"Not a dog," she whispered, then whimpered when he sucked hard on the place he'd just bitten. Her wrist twitched again, but she kept her hands in place.

"Good girl," he murmured against her throat, a hand finding her breast, thumb circling her nipple over the fabric of her bra before pinching so hard she cried out, gripping the rock so

hard her fingers went white and the slightly gray one went a little grayer.

“Please...yes...harder.”

He sucked on a different spot, pinching again, one arm wrapped around her to help hold her up in the water, and soon she was panting, fingers twitching with the need to slip under her underwear. But the second she started to move her hand, he just put it right back.

“Thought I told you to stay.”

“Cooper, please...touch me. Please.”

She felt him smile against the back of her neck, then he rested his chin on her shoulder, biting down gently on her earlobe. “What do you mean, sweetheart? I’m touching you right now.”

“More...”

He moved closer, hardness pressed against her butt and...no one was down here, right? Surely this didn’t count as sex in a public place because they were alone in a quarry! No one could just stumble upon them all the way down here.

“How’s that?” he murmured, arms coming up to rest on either side of her on the rock.

“Cooper,” she begged, and never before had anyone (Chet or Monty) made her beg for anything. Never had either of them been so rough, pinching and biting her and making her ache so wonderfully. She’d really been missing out. “Please!”

“Please what. You’ve got to use your words, sweetheart.”

His teasing made her want to turn around and dig her teeth into his lip again but his arms were a cage she never wanted out of.

“Please stick your dick in me and touch my clit,” she told him sharply, then cried out when his hand slipped into the front of her underwear, running roughly over her clit and making her hips jerk.

“Such a mouth on you, Vaultie,” he teased. “I ought to wash your mouth out with that soap.”

“Yes...thank you! More please.”

“So greedy.” Cooper chuckled, and she felt him moving behind her, hopefully pulling his pants down. It seemed he was, because the next thing she knew, he was sliding her underwear down and lining himself up with her, then thrusting inside, and she threw her head back against his shoulder, a gasping cry torn from her throat. This angle was different and somehow better...she felt so full and he was grunting in her ear as he rubbed her clit with the hand he used to push her back into him.

“Cooper...Cooper,” she begged even as he did everything she’d asked. “That...yes...harder, please!”

He obliged, thrusting so hard that her face dropped forward, slipping under the water before she jerked it back upright. He did pause then but she put a hand on his arm, shaking her head.

“Don’t...gosh, please, don’t stop! I’m so close...”

He obliged. “You’re so fucking beautiful,” he murmured through gritted teeth. “God, sweetheart...you’re the best thing I’ve ever felt...fuck...”

He sucked on her neck again, and then she was tumbling over the edge of another cliff, moaning and digging her nails into his arm, noises she couldn’t stop filling the quarry as her walls clamped down again and again and still, he kept thrusting until she didn’t think she’d be able to stand it anymore. And then, just when she thought the pleasure might kill her, he brought his hand back to her clit and after only a minute she was clenching around him again, head back against his shoulder to keep from drowning herself. He came then, heat filling her as he bit down hard on her shoulder, their bodies flush together, both of them shuddering with the pleasure of it.

Lucy panted as the hand that had been between her legs came to wrap around her instead. He slipped out of her, pressing soft kisses to the places where he’d bitten her, all along her shoulder and up her neck, then finally to her earlobe.

“I didn’t hurt you, did I?” he asked after a moment.

“No. It was so good. So much better than Chet. 10 out of 10. A plus, Mr. Howard.”

“You’re not too bad yourself, Miss MacLean.” He laughed, pulling away, then spinning her around. She went eagerly, wrapping her legs and arms around him, then squeaking and pulling away when they started to sink. “Come here. I’m not going to let you drown,” he promised, bracing an elbow on the rock this time, and when she tried again, they only dipped down a little before they stabilized.

Taking advantage of the opportunity, she kissed his forehead and the ridge of his nose, moving down to his cheeks. His eyes were so soft as he watched her that she couldn’t bear to look for too long, closing her eyes instead and resting her forehead against his.

“We’re going to need to find a different metric than ‘better than your cousin,” he murmured, making her laugh.

“Why? Chet was pretty good by the end...” She giggled when he pinched her side.

“Yeah, because you taught him everything he knew. I’ll bet I could teach you a few things...”

“I am a very fast learner,” she told him with a grin. “I had the best grades in my whole class.”

“That doesn’t surprise me one bit, sweetheart,”

When they finally dragged themselves out of the water, Lucy was shivering. She stretched out on her back along with her clothes to dry off in the sun, Cooper laying beside her, hat tilted over his face. Dogmeat, who'd hopped into the water to swim around for a while, had long since curled up in the sun, taking a nap of her own. She didn't get up until Cooper grabbed his pack, unwrapping the soggy gauze from Lucy's arm and cleaning the gecko bite with alcohol before wrapping it with a fresh bandage. They shared some jerky, tossing the dog a couple of pieces, then packed their clothes away and started the long trek back up the path to where they'd left several dead fire geckos.

Then it was back to the road, walking for another several hours as the sun moved from high in the sky down to the horizon. Even after so many weeks, that never got old. Cooper glanced back at her as the sky started to change from blue to pink, a smile tugging at his lips while her eyes were glued to the horizon. She was surprised when he stopped about an hour earlier than he usually did, building a fire and making a makeshift soup with water, pieces of cram cooked over the fire, and whatever pieces of vegetables they had left. She couldn't help noticing that he gave her the bigger serving, putting most of the Cram in her cup.

Then, when they were done eating and they'd put out the fire, cleaning up and stowing their belongings in their packs once more, he took a seat against a bolder, and Lucy sat down between his outstretched legs, head resting on his shoulder, Dogmeat laying beside them with her chin on his knee. Giving a soft little amused huff, Cooper wrapped one arm around her and rested his free hand on Dogmeat's head.

One glance at her PipBoy told Lucy that they were less than 40 miles from New Vegas.

She dropped her arm, closing her eyes and smiling when he kissed her temple. This, she thought, was who he was. Who he must have been before. Kind and strong and funny...a good man who'd been betrayed. Who'd done what he'd had to to survive. She turned her face, nuzzling against his neck. He was so warm and comfortable and he kept her safe and she loved him so much it hurt if she thought about it for too long.

"Come on, sweetheart. Let's get some sleep. You need it."

He was right, she knew, so she sat up, letting him shift his leg so he was sitting beside her, the two of them laying under her sleeping bag blanket. Dogmeat lay behind her, their backs pressed together, and Lucy thought that she had everything she could ever need right there. That night, head against his chest, she listened to his heartbeat, fingers gripping his shirt until she fell asleep, and when she dreamed, it was of the two of them lying side by side in the cold waters of an endless lake, fingers intertwined. And in that dream, when he turned to her and pressed a kiss to her hair, she turned and whispered, "I love you," against his lips.

The next morning, for the first time in a long time, Lucy woke feeling rested. Her body still ached and her mouth was so dry she could have drank an entire bottle of water, but her head didn't hurt and it wasn't a struggle to open her eyes. She thought about reaching for the front of Cooper's pants and showing off her skills with a belt buckle, but she really had to pee. So, instead, she sat up, his arm tightening around her for a moment before falling away, and gave him a quick kiss to the cheek before climbing to her feet.

Cooper started the fire, heating up a can of beans to go with the Cram, and the two of them ate in comfortable silence, Lucy glancing at her PipBoy every few minutes until he finally nudged her foot with his. “What do you keep staring at that thing for?”

“Thirty five miles,” she told him softly.

Slowly, he nodded. “Well...it’s about goddamn time.”

Lucy had to laugh, tossing a piece of Cram to Dogmeat who snatched it out of the air, tail wagging. “Think we could find a hotel when we get there?”

“I don’t know. Guess it depends on how that battle at the damn went. I doubt the Legion won, but if the NCR did, we might be alright. Then again, you might attract a little too much attention, Miss Wanted Dead or Alive.”

She grimaced at that...she’d almost forgotten. “So...I shouldn’t wear my Vault suit?”

“Probably better not.”

There was one more settlement on their way to Vegas, as it turned out...a little town that straddled the border. They didn’t stop, though, since Cooper vetoed both her idea to just tilt her hat low and try not to be noticed and her idea that maybe he should just go in on his own to restock. “No way in hell, sweetheart. Your luck, bounty hunters would show up the second I walked inside.”

“You’re right. I’d hate to get taken by a bounty hunter,” she told him, voice exaggerated and dry. He snorted, smacking the brim of her hat and finally knocking it off her head, walking on when she had to scramble to grab it.

“Trust me, I ain’t the meanest bounty hunter you’ll find in the wastes. Not by a longshot.”

Considering their first meeting, she was more than a little troubled by that thought.

They kept to the road, not so much as looking at the gate to the settlement which appeared to be unguarded, but neither of them were willing to take the chance. He even called Dogmeat back when she went to sniff close to it. “Stay with us,” he ordered, slapping his thigh, and she did, her whole body wagging along with her tail when he rewarded her with scratches behind her ears. Only when they’d passed out of sight of the wall did Cooper seem to relax. Still, Lucy couldn’t help thinking about the three bottles of purified water she had left, and her single, half full canteen. Cooper would share with her, of course...but he didn’t have that much either.

“Are you sure we couldn’t have stopped?” she asked, shifting her pack on her shoulder. She was pretty sure she had a blister there now, but didn’t want to check. She knew that ignoring it wouldn’t make it go away, but she could hope, right?

“I’m sure. If anyone in there had recognized you, we’d have had to shoot our way out, and I don’t like our odds considering only one of us is bulletproof. Besides, we don’t want your knight friend’s buddies finding out where we are.”

“You could have gone in alone.”

He shook his head again, solemn now. “I ain’t leaving you outside a settlement all on your own, Lucy. Not when you’ve got a bounty on your head.”

“I wouldn’t have been alone. Dogmeat would have been with me,” she reminded him, leaning down to stroke her soft fur. The dog leaned against her leg for a moment before taking off after what might have been a roach and what might have been some other kind of small creature. Either way, it quickly became her lunch.

“Dogmeat ain’t bulletproof either.”

“I only have three bottles of water left.” She didn’t have to explain further...he knew she’d need more if they were walking for more than two days, and that if New Vegas was empty, they could be in trouble. Well, she could.

“Ration it as best you can. We’ll find more.”

All day, the miles went down and Lucy kept her eyes on the PipBoy, following their little dot on the map to keep her mind off her dwindling supply of water. Cooper told her about his last trip to New Vegas as they walked...about a long, boring journey on his own and the bounty he’d been chasing down...how he’d vowed never to take another bounty headed for New Vegas because it wasn’t worth the hassle. He told her about the caps he’d made and the hotel room he’d stayed in...how it had been almost as nice as the ones he’d stayed in before the war.

“Had to keep my head down, though. House has a fucking robot army. Securitrons. Apparently if you kill one of them, they all come after you, and they’ll shock the shit out of you. They’re armed to the teeth. Best to stay out of their way.”

“Do they look like the Mr. Handy ones?” she asked, shuddering at the thought.

“Nah...more like a tv with shoulder pads and arms.”

Lucy was finishing the water in her canteen that evening, all two aware that this left her with only two bottles, when Cooper stopped. She’d been staring at her feet for a while, tired from the long day of walking with very few breaks, eyes only ever leaving her feet to look at her PipBoy, when his voice broke her out of her thoughts.

“Take a look, darlin’.”

At first, Lucy thought he meant the sky...the changing colors as the sun started its descent. Another day, another several miles closer. She was hot and sweaty and thirsty and she knew that the sky was beautiful but was maybe not in the best headspace to appreciate it, even though she appreciated his attempt to point it out.

And then her jaw dropped. Because as her gaze drifted from the colors of the sky to the horizon, she spotted it. A city skyline. A wall, and buildings, and a single tower standing

high above the rest. Her breath caught, lips trembling as hot tears sprang suddenly to her eyes. “Is...is that...?”

Cooper was grinning when he answered. “Sure is. New Vegas. Looked better last time I came through. Still. Seems like we’ve almost made it, Vaultie.”

She nodded, smiling when Dogmeat forced her head under Lucy’s hand, demanding some attention that she willingly gave. “I...I know this is stupid, but there were times when I didn’t think we’d actually make it,” she admitted with a weak smile, wiping a hand over her face but unable to tear her eyes away.

Cooper draped an arm around her, pulling her close, the brim of her hat knocking against his shoulder. “We’ve still got a ways to go...might as well set up camp, though. What do you say? One last night under the stars before New Vegas?”

Lucy nodded, staring at the city until it had burned itself into her brain. New Vegas. The city that had somehow survived a nuclear blast somewhat intact. Run by a decrepit asshole with a robot army or maybe under the control of the NCR...or maybe just abandoned. “Do you think he’s in there?”

“One way to find out.” He squeezed her shoulder. “Come on. Eat something. There’ll be plenty of time to stare at the city tomorrow.”

Chapter 34

Chapter Notes

I have not played Fallout New Vegas, nor do I have a way to do so (apparently you can't play it on PS4 and I don't have a Windows Computer) so I'm doing my best just looking stuff up. I know very little about Vault Tec/Robert House/the city in general other than what I've been able to find online. Remember, vibes not plot! If you're a big fan of the game and I messed something up when it comes to the city, just pretend I didn't lol.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The morning after New Vegas became visible, Cooper shook Lucy awake from a nightmare about a Vault...her Vault. Again and again she'd pressed the button to let her out of her own apartment...Monty was in there. He'd had a knife. She'd needed to get out. Cooper had been outside. He'd been waiting for her and she hadn't been able to get out and the moment she opened her eyes, Lucy was sitting bolt upright, gasping, hand reaching out to press the button again that should have let her out.

Cooper stayed where he was, flat on his back, and she could feel his gaze on her as her heart pounded and she struggled to get her breathing back under control. Just a nightmare. She knew that. Just a bad dream. Traumatic things had happened to her in that apartment and she'd come to associate her life in the Vault with captivity and she was nervous about New Vegas so...the fact that she'd had a nightmare made perfect sense.

Slowly, she lowered herself back down, resting her head on his chest and closing her eyes when he wrapped an arm around her, his hand moving in idle strokes. Dogmeat, who had jumped to her feet the moment Lucy had sat up, curled up beside her again, settling when Lucy did. Under her ear, Cooper's heart beat steadily, and he pulled the blanket around her once more, stroking her back as the sun peered over the horizon. She wanted to freeze time...to stay right there with his arm around her and their dog at her back. Their family.

"The Vault again?" he asked eventually.

She nodded against his chest. Then, "it never felt like a prison when I lived there."

"No...I don't suppose it did," he murmured, squeezing her to him. "You can't exactly miss what you've never had."

"I left the Vault when I was little. I should have remembered."

"Well," he told her, conversational and casual, "I guess I could quote some more studies from back in the day. Tell you that kids that young can't form memories the same way they can when they get older. But you were a teacher. You've worked with kids plenty...I'm sure you

had to learn all about them too, since you were expected to have them. Tell me, Miss MacLean, how old were you when your momma took you out of the Vault?”

“Six. Maybe seven.”

“And when your daddy brought you back, do you think he wanted you to remember?”

She shook her head. “No.” She knew that...she couldn’t remember talking to him about it, and Norm would have been too young. But her father would have wanted her to forget.

“So if I had to guess, I would say that any time you mentioned seeing a city or the sun or your momma’s girlfriend, I’ll bet he told you it was all a dream you’d had, or that you’d made it up. Kept telling you that your momma died in that famine. And after a while, you probably started to believe it.”

Lucy didn’t answer...didn’t want to search her memories for that time of her life. Not right now, when they had more pressing things to attend to. When she was quiet, his hand came up to cup the side of her head, fingers stroking through her hair. She closed her eyes, breathing him in and pushing it all away. She couldn’t let herself feel it right now. She had to focus.

“You going back to sleep on me, sweetheart?”

When she opened her eyes, she was smiling. They had a job to do and she was going to do it. “Nope. I’m ready to go when you are.”

He lifted his brows, a smirk tugging the corners of his mouth. “Has anyone ever told you your Vault Tec smile is creepy as hell?”

Lucy’s jaw dropped and she smacked a hand against his shoulder, making him laugh. “What? I don’t have a ‘Vault Tec’ smile!”

“Yeah you do. Makes you look like one of those synths. Robot people,” he clarified.

She rolled her eyes, started to get up, but he held her fast. Lucy huffed, but the unimpressed look she was shooting him melted away when faced with the raw pride in his face.

“You are a grade A badass, Lucy MacLean. A fucking force to be reckoned with. Don’t you ever forget that.” He cupped her cheek in his hand, thumb stroking under her eye. “Those assholes won’t know what hit them.”

Lucy couldn’t help smiling...couldn’t help the way she was drawn to him, their lips pressing together, as if this had been their routine for years. When she pulled away, she gave herself permission to just look at him for a moment, staring into eyes that stared right back.

She wanted to freeze time.

But she couldn’t.

The routine of breaking camp was so familiar now, Lucy could have done it in her sleep. And on many mornings, she’d been so exhausted that she basically had. She rolled up their

blanket. He started a fire and doled out breakfast. She tried not to drink too much water. Two bottles left, and one of them had been used to fill her canteen. She used a sip to swallow a RadX, and changed into her denim pants, pulling new socks on and tying her hair back into a ponytail. They checked their guns. Checked their ammo. She stuck her knife into her boot. Cooper took a puff from his inhaler.

And then they set out, his eyes scanning the horizon, hers fixed firmly on New Vegas.

It took the two of them most of the day to reach the wall surrounding the city. Cooper had told her a little more about the battle for New Vegas. The NCR held it. House ran it. The Legion wanted it. Something about a courier, which was a job he had to explain to her. There was a battle at the Hoover dam, which supplied electricity to the city.

“I was underground for that part...heard about it when I was tracking that doctor. Didn’t ask who won...figured I’d find out if it was important. ‘Course, that was before I realized I’d be taking this particular trip.”

She hesitated, parsing the words. She’d been happy to let him do most of the talking up until then, mostly because she didn’t want to have to drink more water when talking inevitably dried her mouth out. But here she had to interrupt. “Wait...is that another expression?”

Cooper glanced over at her, brow raised.

“The...underground part. Like...you were hiding from something?”

“No, unfortunately that part was all too literal.”

“What do you mean?”

Cooper hesitated for a moment. “About thirty years back I was working with a fella...Dom Pedro. The partnership went south. That part’s an expression. It means...” He smirked when her elbow jabbed him in the side. “Anyway, he did something not many people have managed to do...he caught me off guard. Took me a while to get out of that one. About thirty years to be exact.”

“Are you saying he kept you in a basement or something? Like...a prison?”

Something passed over his face...a grimace. A reluctance. Then, “something like that. Don’t worry about it, sweetheart. He’s on my list of people to deal with, right underneath every Vault Tec employee that’s still around. The point is, I was a bit preoccupied, and so I’m not exactly sure what kind of shape we’re going to find this city in.”

Thirty years...Cooper had been held captive for longer than she’d been alive.

That was a conversation they could have later, though.

“Far as I can tell, the NCR was doing real well there for a while, but then your daddy nuked one of their cities and it all went to shit for a while. They’re still trying to hold strong, but with the Brotherhood getting their hands on that cold fusion and taking out Moldaver and her group, I’m pretty sure they’re not doing too hot anymore.”

“But...they all want control of the wastes?”

“Bingo.”

“Are any of them actually good?”

She half expected him to laugh at her for still thinking that *anyone* could be good anymore. Instead, he gave the city skyline a considering look.

“The NCR was alright at first. I don’t think there’s ever been a government that ain’t corrupt, but they were trying, I’ll give them that. I think Moldaver was trying to do something good, even if she sure as hell didn’t say no to the power that came with it. Caesar and his Legion are about as evil a group as I’ve ever seen. I’ve made my opinion of your little friend’s tin can buddies abundantly clear.”

“So...the NCR are...the best option?”

“Out of those three, I suppose you could say that.”

It was almost four in the afternoon before they reached the city wall. For a while, no matter how long they walked, it seemed that the city stayed the same size in the distance. But then, all at once, they were approaching the wall which got taller and taller the closer they got. Lucy could tell, even before they reached the wall around New Vegas, that something was wrong. Cooper had described New Vegas as something close to a prewar city, with electric lights and running water. This place looked more like a ruin.

The wall had crumbled in spots, and where she thought there might have been a gate at one time, now there was just a gap in the metal, strange boxy robots littering the ground. Dogmeat trotted over to one to sniff it, following her nose from one to the other as Cooper pulled his gun out, Lucy doing the same right behind him. It was quiet...even Dogmeat seemed tense as she followed them through the gap and into the city itself.

Immediately, Lucy could see that this place really was more ruin than city. She kept her eyes on the alleys and the shadows between the quiet, hulking buildings, gun pointed at the ground, her boots nearly touching Coopers as she followed close behind him. More of those robots littered the streets, screens shattered with shards of glass covering the area around them. One of the big helicopters she’d seen the Brotherhood arrive in lay on the ground, part of it broken away into scrap metal, the ‘NCR’ logo on its body chipped and faded away. And not ten feet away was the skull of a creature that made her heart stutter in her chest. Deathclaw.

That made her freeze in her tracks, a hand gripping Cooper’s arm. Sure, it was dead. That didn’t mean there weren’t more.

He nodded, leading her down a side alley. She felt better then...less exposed. They moved as quietly as they could, and although she wasn’t exactly sure what they were looking for, she had a feeling he had a destination in mind. Reaching down, she ruffled Dogmeat’s fur, smiling down at the dog who nuzzled her face into Lucy’s hand. “Good girl,” she whispered, glancing over her shoulder out of force of habit. Nothing was following them, thankfully. To

her left, she saw an alley that dead ended in a tall chain link fence, stacks of crates piled up on either side.

They were right at the mouth of the alley when Cooper froze, shoulders stiff when she ran into him, his arm coming out to stop her from walking past him. She peered over his shoulder, breath catching in her throat. Ghouls. Feral ones. Some walked aimlessly in a pattern she couldn't discern, others slumped on the ground, eyes staring into nothing, the only sign they were still conscious the twitching of their hands and feet. Cooper took a slow step back, guiding Lucy to do the same...

And her foot landed squarely on Dogmeat's paw.

The sharp yelp of the dog had Lucy jumping out of her skin, and every single ghoul snapped their heads up in unison.

"Fuck," Cooper hissed as Lucy rested a hand on Dogmeat's back in silent apology. For a moment, all was still, the tension thick enough to choke her. But then some small movement must have tipped him off because he was spinning, and without having to be told, Lucy did the same, slipping around Dogmeat who quickly caught on, the three of them setting off in a dead sprint.

Lucy hadn't expected to be in the lead, but instead of going straight, she made a sharp right, running straight for the fence. Thankfully, Dogmeat didn't need to be coaxed to jump onto the first crate, then the second, using that one to clear the fence with ease, and Lucy scaled with a strength fueled purely by adrenaline while Cooper climbed onto the stack of crates, spinning around once he'd reached the top one and pulling out his gun.

Dogmeat watched Lucy's back as she fired through the chain link fence with her rifle, aiming for the heads and picking them off one by one. There were so many...

"Cooper!" she called, jerking her head towards her as she pulled out a grenade. He needed no further instruction, hopping over the fence and rolling when he landed. Only when he was on his feet did Lucy pull the pin, lobbing the grenade over the side of the fence and turning to run. The three of them were almost to the mouth of the alley, Cooper pushing her against the wall and covering her body with his, when the grenade exploded, the sound nearly deafening her even with her hands over her ears.

When Lucy looked back, the ghouls were mostly a gory mess of severed limbs, with a few of them still trying to crawl towards them, mouth opened, eyes glazed. She sighed, slinging her rifle back over her shoulder and pulling her pistol out again.

"Come on, little killer. If there's anyone around, they'll have heard that," he murmured, leading her back towards the street.

They headed north again, Lucy careful to avoid the potholes in the street and the places where the asphalt had buckled. She kept an eye out for more ghouls or anything else that might want to kill them, but for the most part, the city was quiet. Finally, she gave in and asked, "Where are we going?"

“The Lucky 38 Resort and Casino. It’s where House lived back before the war...and where they kept his body after. He ran New Vegas from his penthouse. I figured that if there were any Vault Tec assholes around, we’d find them there. It’s the big tower with the sphere on top.”

Lucy nodded...she could remember seeing that tower. It was the tallest one in the city. “Are we just going to...walk in?”

He chuckled. “Well, I figured we’d scope the place out first and go from there. We might have to find a place to camp for the night...it’s gonna be dark before too long.”

“Do you think there are more ghouls?”

“I’m right here, sweetheart.”

She waited for him to grin back at her before she rolled her eyes, wanting to make sure he saw it.

There weren’t any bodies in the streets, although they ran into a few skeletons. “My guess,” Cooper told her, keeping his voice low, “is that House is laying low...getting his systems back up. A place like this won’t stay empty for long.”

“But...why is it empty now?”

“NCR probably pulled back to regroup.”

“You said it had electricity? Running water?”

“It did.”

“Do you think it still does?”

“You’re always thinking about your next bath, huh Vaultie?” he asked, a faint smile in his voice.

“You could always join me,” she told him with a causal shrug. “I’m sure we could find a bathtub with room for both of us...”

He lifted his eyebrows. “Well now, when you put it like that, I might have to reconsider my stance.”

She laughed, bumping his arm with hers and watching Dogmeat run up ahead of them, following her nose.

“What do you think, girl?” Cooper asked, following. “Smell anything?”

They followed her for a while, mostly sticking to main roads, then when they rounded another corner, Lucy felt her eyes go wide at the sign towering over them. Vault 21. “Is that really a Vault?”

“Sure is. They turned it into a hotel and gift shop.”

“Gift shop?”

“Yeah. Filled in some of the lower levels, but you could stay in the rooms. Buy shit.”

“Did you go there?”

“Nope. They weren’t getting me in a fucking vault. I prefer staying aboveground.”

The entrance to the Vault was open, the gaping hole in the front where the gear shaped door had been rolled away dark and looming, and Lucy peered inside as they passed, thinking about her brother and her father and the first time she’d stepped out of her own Vault...how bright the sun had been. Now the sun was headed for the horizon, and a glance at her PipBoy told her that it was nearly five...they’d been walking through the city for an hour already.

“House’s whole schtick was a gambling. He wanted to set up a Vault where everything was based on chance, as far as I could tell.”

“So...people had to gamble for...what? Resources? Everything?”

He nodded.

“But...those were people’s lives,” she whispered, sick at just the thought. “That...it’s not right...”

“That a bunch of rich assholes got to run decades long social experiments on people trapped underground? Tell me about it, darlin’. That’s what I put in the divorce papers. Not that anyone believed me.” His shoulder pressed to hers softened his words some.

“I’m sorry she did that to you,” she whispered, leaning against him. “It’s horrible. All of it...all of them. I just...I can’t believe they could all be so awful.” She shook her head, thinking about Vault 4 and her own Vault...breeding stock. How many more were there? How many people had died locked away in Vaults, their names forgotten to history, because a group of rich people had decided to run social experiments?

“Come on,” Cooper murmured, a hand on her back guiding her. “We...” his sentence cut off, head cocking as he turned to glance behind them. Lucy turned too, following his gaze, but saw nothing.

“What?”

“Let’s keep moving,” he told her, and she followed his lead, gun at the ready.

The Lucky 38 Resort and Casino had no security out front. Even Lucy, who had been on the surface for less than three months, knew better than to just walk up to the front door though. Something was wrong...it didn’t add up. Why would her father come here if the city was abandoned? Was House really still here? She hesitated beside Cooper, the two of them standing across the street and staring at the building that was so tall, Lucy had to crane her

neck back to even try to see the top. Dogmeat continued to sniff the ground, moving in circles around their feet.

“Let’s try the back,” he murmured, leading the way around the building, Lucy on his heels... but something made her stop. A dot...first on the sidewalk between her feet, then moving up his leg and then the back of his hat, and she was moving before she even thought about it, taking a running step towards him and shoving with everything she had just as the sound of a gunshot filled the air, then another, sending her hat flying from her head and making her scream.

Cooper stumbled but didn’t fall, a stream of curses falling from his lips as he reached back and grabbed her, taking off for the nearest alley as bullets followed them, striking the bricks and breaking off little shards. He shoved her into the alley first, then returned the gunfire before stepping into the alley himself.

“You hit?” he asked, voice terse. She shook her head, gripping her pistol, and he gave her an extra long look like he thought she might be lying before peering around the wall, immediately yanking his head back when the gun fired again. “God fucking damn it,” he growled.

“Where are they?”

“One of the buildings next door. Snipers. Not fiends...maybe raiders. Maybe Legion. Fuck!” he hissed, shaking his head. “Alright...this way.”

Lucy and Dogmeat followed him, keeping low, moving between buildings and trying to stay covered. Somehow, he seemed to know the streets well enough, even after so long away from this city, that he managed to lead them to an alley across from the back of the Lucky 38 without using the main roads. But someone knew they were there...someone wanted them dead. And they’d be out in the open while they were trying the back door.

“Do you think it’s my dad?”

“Doubt it...he seems like the monologing type.”

“Takes one to know one,” she murmured, grinning when he shot her a look that quickly disappeared, replaced by concern as his hand came up to touch her forehead. When he pulled it back, there was a red smear on the leather of his glove. She brought her own hand up then, searching her scalp, then wincing when she found the cut. “Oh...something must have grazed me. I’m fine.”

Cooper didn’t look like he believed her, but since she was still standing, she guessed he decided to argue about it later.

“We need to get higher...we’re sitting ducks down here.”

There were footsteps nearby...someone running, then someone yelling, and Cooper jerked his head towards the back door. “Let’s see if we can get inside. Stay close to me. I’ll cover you. Shoot the lock if you have to.”

Lucy nodded, stepping under his arm when he wrapped it around her, waiting for a second, then in tandem, the two of them took off, racing for the door. It seemed to be some kind of service entrance, with a naked bulb sticking out of the wall beside it.

They were halfway across the street when movement appeared in the corner of her eye. Cooper fired and someone dropped right as another bullet hit the ground by his feet. Dogmeat raced ahead to the door, and Lucy was only a few feet from her when something stung her in her left arm. Flinching, she slapped at it instinctively, fingers knocking into something she didn't see as her hand pressed to the spot. Not a gunshot wound...she didn't have time to think about it as she tried the door handle. Locked. She needed her gun... Cooper had asked her to shoot the door. He was standing behind her, gun out, ready...the gunshots had stopped and her gun was falling from her hand, hitting the ground before she'd even realized it.

She turned back to Cooper, but his confused face seemed to ripple and fade at the edges as her knees hit the ground.

He was on his knees and holding her upright before she could fall. "Lucy? Lucy?" he asked, whispering her name over and over as footsteps approached. A lot of them. His shaking hand pressed to the back of her head, the other one patting her down like he was searching for something. "Where? Lucy, where are you hit?"

"Step away from her, Ghoul!"

So many footsteps. Red dots. She brought a hand up with every bit of strength she had, covering the side of his face with her hand like that might protect him.

"Cooper..." His name came out slurred and strange, and keeping her eyes open was almost impossible. "I...I think..."

He glared at someone...she could hear someone approaching them. A lot of someones. Raiders? He wasn't shooting, though, and if it had been raiders, he would have killed them, right?

"Okay!" he shouted, easing her down to the ground, and her eyes closed and refused to open, but she just knew that he was furious.

"Put down your weapons!"

"Don't you fucking..."

Cooper called her name.

Hands grabbed her shoulder.

And then she was gone, giving in to the darkness pressing in on all sides.

When Lucy opened her eyes again, it felt like no time had passed, only she was in a bed. A soft, wonderfully comfortable bed, and she rolled over, arm coming up to wrap around Cooper, but her hand landed on the pillow instead. For a second, she was confused...why

would she be in bed without Cooper? But then it all came back...New Vegas. The people shooting at them. The way she'd dropped. They must have drugged her. But why? They'd been shooting regular weapons at them before? Why not just kill her?

She sat up and threw her legs over the side of the bed, eyes darting around the room. "Cooper?" she called softly, her throat painfully dry. Right by the bed on a nightstand was a glass of water, but she didn't dare drink it. Whoever it was had drugged her once. Who's to say they wouldn't do it again. "Cooper!" Hesitantly, she stood, arms out for a moment to make sure she was steady on her feet. The room was small...a bed, the nightstand, and a door that led to a bathroom. She peered inside the bathroom. A toilet, a sink and a shower. No Cooper. She pulled back the pink shower curtain. Nothing.

Then she went to the door, trying the handle.

Locked.

Her guns were both gone. So was her pack. Her canteen. But she could feel the handle of her knife in her boot when she flexed her leg, so she wasn't totally defenseless. Pressing her ear to the door, she listened for a moment. She thought she could hear distant footsteps but she wasn't completely sure.

She was alone. The door was locked. She didn't know where Cooper was.

Deep breath, sweetheart.

Right...Cooper would tell her not to panic. She needed to break this down. Step one, she needed something to drink. As if on autopilot, she went to the bathroom and turned the faucet handle, marveling when the water sputtered, then ran clean. She drank straight from it, mouth right at the tap, forcing herself to go slowly. The last thing she needed was to be sick.

Then she examined the room again, slowly this time. There were no windows, just plain white cinder block walls. She pressed her hands to them...the bricks were cold. Were they underground?

Lucy pressed her ear to the door again and tried to remember. Had she seen the faces of any of the people who'd been shooting at them? She knew there had been at least two or three. Cooper had shot one of them. Someone might have told him to step away from her, but she didn't remember if she'd recognized the voice. Maybe this was a prison cell...maybe they'd been captured by raiders.

Footsteps approached then, shoes clicking on a tile floor, and Lucy backed away from the door. She wanted to pull her knife out...wanted to hide and stab whoever it was and find Cooper and get out of here, but first she needed to know what she was up against. So, instead of going in knife first, Lucy backed up against the far wall, eyes on the door as a key turned in the lock, and waited.

Step two, find out what exactly she was up against.

It wasn't a raider that stepped through the door, though, or a member of the Brotherhood, or a fiend.

It was her father.

Hank MacLean wasn't wearing the power armor...it was just him in the Vault Suit he'd worn her whole life. His hair was combed back and his beard had been shaved...he looked the same. How, she wondered wildly, could he look the same after everything? The moment his eyes found hers, he softened, that smile she'd known all her life turning the corners of his mouth, and she felt her lip start to tremble.

"Hey sweet pea."

Lucy shook her head, pressing herself into the wall.

He sighed, looking so sad it hurt, but he had no right to be sad! He'd done this! All of it! "Oh Lucy, you look so tired. I can't believe that...that *monster* dragged you all the way out here."

"Are you with the people that were shooting at us?" she demanded, voice hoarse, and she wished for more of the water from the tap.

"That was...a little misunderstanding. I just asked them to tranquilize you. I wanted to talk to you. I can't imagine what he's told you about me..."

"You told them to tranquilize me?" she asked, incredulous. Why not just kill her?

"It was a necessary precaution. I needed to get you away from him."

Lucy shook her head. "Where is he?"

"Lucy, honey..."

"Is he okay?"

"I need you to listen to me..." His face turned stern and some part of her, the part that had obeyed him for her entire life, wanted to shut up and do exactly as she was told. But she wasn't that little girl anymore.

"I'm not listening to anything until you tell me where he is!"

He sighed, the sound heavy with disappointment. "They didn't kill him, if that's what you're asking. After all, it seems he was just doing his job."

She just blinked at him. His job? "What do you mean?"

"He's a bounty hunter, Lucy. You had a bounty on you."

That...that didn't make sense. Cooper hadn't brought her here for the bounty. He'd brought her here to face her father...to face Vault Tec. To take them down. Only neither of them had

expected to be ambushed like this.

“He took the money. He’s staying in one of our rooms...we’re going to let him go on his way.”

“We? Who is we?” she demanded. None of this made sense!

“Lucy, I need you to listen to me. I want to tell you everything. I couldn’t before...not with that monster after me. But you...honey, you’re my whole world. You know that right? I know you’re scared, and he’s dragged you all the way out here.” Here, her father shook his head, looking heartbroken. “You must have been so scared...so confused.”

“You lied to me!” She wanted to pull out her knife but he had a tranq gun on his hip and she had no idea how many more people were here...or if she could even do it. Could she really look her father in the eye and kill him with a hunting knife? And if she hesitated, she was dead. And maybe Cooper would be too.

“I had to, Lucy. You never could have understood the choice I had to make. I had to keep you safe! All of you! That was my job. I never wanted you to see any of this. My most important job was to keep you and the people of our Vault safe. The surface, it does terrible things to people. I didn’t want you to be one of them. You were never meant to survive out here. ”

She had, though. She’d survived. She’d thrived. She’d found a man she loved and she had a dog and those two were her family. She was a badass. A force to be reckoned with.

But right now, her father held all the cards. He hadn’t killed her, so that must mean he wanted something from her. He was talking like he expected her to listen...like he expected her to still be *his* Lucy, the little girl he’d raised. The daughter who always obeyed him. If she was going to get out of this alive and with the information she needed, maybe that’s who she had to be.

“Cooper is my friend. We’ve been traveling together.” She spoke with wide-eyed confusion...a young girl ready to be deceived. He had to underestimate her. He had to drop his guard.

“Oh honey...” There was relief in his smile, and he took another step forward. She forced herself to relax instead of flinching away. “He took the money.”

“What do you mean?”

“He brought you here for the bounty. So the people I came here to meet gave him the money.”

“Who are the people you came here to meet?”

His smile turned dismissive and he waved a hand. “Just...some people I used to work with. Listen, the important thing is, you’re safe now, and I’m going to take you home.”

That brought her up short. Home? Home was with Cooper and Dogmeat.

“I know this must be so hard, but trust me, a few days back in the Vault and it will be like none of this ever happened. We can forget all about it...put it behind us. Be a family again.” He smiled, finally close enough to rest his hands on her shoulders. “My Lucy...my little girl. I’ve missed you so much.”

The Vault. He was taking her back to the Vault. Lips trembling, she shook her head, remembering the nightmares and late nights with Cooper’s arms around her, Dogmeat at her back. She remembered the sky and the rain and the unforgiving sun that she didn’t know if she could live without now. “I...can’t...”

“Of course you can.” Her dad sighed, squeezing her shoulders. “I know it’s been a confusing time for you, and I know you trusted...Cooper.” He said his name like it was something distasteful, his nose wrinkling. “Your mother couldn’t see reason, Lucy. She got so confused...that woman got in her head. Made her think...” He hesitated, breathing out a tired sigh. “I had to make a terrible choice to keep you and your brother safe. Please don’t make me do that again.”

Lucy’s heart stuttered in her chest when she met his eyes...when she saw the coldness there. Was this how he’d looked when her mother had told him no? When he’d nuked Shady Sands.

“I don’t want to lose you, honey. You’re my daughter. My baby. Think of your brother. How would he feel if you never came home? It would kill him. And if your...friend out there...if *he* was the one to keep you from coming home...who made me do something so...” Her father shook his head, hands tightening around her shoulders until it was just a little uncomfortable. “Well...I don’t think I could ever forgive him for that.”

So there it was.

Her father wouldn’t just kill her. He’d kill Cooper too.

And that wasn’t an option.

It felt like her heart was breaking...like something inside of her had actually cracked open when she realized what she had to do.

Deep breaths, sweetheart.

She imagined him there, his arms around her. His lips on her hair.

Step one.

“Can...can I see him? Before we go. Please?” she whispered, dropping her eyes from his softening ones.

“Lucy, he brought you here for...”

“I know.” She made herself smile. Made herself nod. “But...we traveled together for a long time and he was nice sometimes. He saved me from raiders once. I just...I want to say goodbye.”

Her father cupped her cheek in his hand, his thumb wiping a tear from her cheek, and she wanted to scream. He didn't know...that's what she had to remind herself over and over. He didn't know that she was a force to be reckoned with. He didn't know that she wouldn't give up...that she would not let this be her fate. That losing a single battle didn't mean she'd lost the war.

"You're too good for this place," he murmured, that smile back on his face...the one full of love that had so many conditions. "Okay, sweet pea. A few minutes can't hurt." His smile turned firm again. Unyielding. "But remember, you're coming back home. Where you belong."

Chapter End Notes

I'm justme--emily on Tumblr if you'd like to chat :).

The Actor's Interlude (Part 1)

It wasn't that Cooper had never messed up before. He'd been traveling the wastes for over 200 years now, watching his skin burn and his nose fall off, holding on to his humanity by the skin of his teeth and a moral code that allowed cannibalism but not stealing. He'd walked into ambushes before. He'd lost fights before. Hell, just thirty years ago, he'd ended up in a coffin underground, taking the longest, most boring naps of his life and coming up with revenge fantasies so graphic he'd be afraid to share them with Lucy lest she have even worse nightmares.

But assuming that just because New Vegas had been quiet and seemingly abandoned, no one had noticed them coming...now that had been a hell of a mistake. And he'd known it the second Lucy had shoved him out of the way of yet another bullet. They really would have to talk about that again. She was all for honest, respectful communication, and he'd been doing his best, but she'd also promised to be more careful and she sure as hell hadn't seemed to be holding up her end of the bargain. In fact, she seemed bound and determined to put herself between him and every gun this side of the border (Any border. Every border. Take your pick.).

He couldn't be mad, though...not when the last time he'd seen her, a man he didn't know but vowed to kill had been carrying her unconscious body away, at least four guns on him keeping him from going feral and killing as many of them as he could to get her back. It wasn't just the fact that he would most certainly lose a fight against the thirty or so armed people surrounding him...it was that a stray bullet could have hit her.

He'd expected a few people inside the Lucky 38...maybe some guards or those Securitrons, all of whom could be taken out with a bullet. He'd expected to find young Henry with the somehow still alive corpse of Robert House, the two of them eating jello in a boardroom or something. He'd expected to point a gun in the man's face and demand his answers...maybe inform Henry MacLean that people thought *his* name was Mr. MacLean now.

Instead, the man had somehow amassed a small Vault Tec army, all of whom had parted when he'd come to stand in front of Cooper, paying no mind to his daughter or the man carrying her off.

Now, Cooper sat in the cinder block room and cataloged every one of his mistakes, running them over and over in his head so he didn't have to remember seeing Lucy fall to her knees...how it had felt to hold her in his arms, her hand cupping his cheek which he suspected had been less a show of affection and more one last attempt to protect him from those snipers. He'd thought that she'd been shot but there hadn't been any blood. A tranq gun then.

But he wasn't thinking about that. He was thinking about his mistakes. Not expecting snipers. Not going to the door on his own. Not trusting the voice that had told him to turn around, get Lucy out of that city, and just run the moment they'd stepped through the gap in the wall. At least he'd told Dogmeat to stay when they'd brought him into the building at

gunpoint. None of them had paid the dog any interest, thankfully. He knew Lucy would be devastated if anything happened to that dog.

Henry had looked him up and down, obviously relishing the position he'd found himself in. "Well, Mr. Howard, I'd heard about The Ghoul, a famous bounty hunter who was spotted traveling with my little girl, but I certainly didn't expect that ghoul to be you."

"Aren't we all just full of surprises, young Henry. How about that autograph?"

He'd smirked, nodding to one of the men behind Cooper. Cooper hadn't fought when they'd taken his guns or his bag. "Weapons," Henry told him, nodding to the knife. "All of them." And because they'd had Lucy and because he was ready to just rip Henry's throat out with his bare teeth, Cooper had complied, leaving him with only the inhaler in his pocket. "Just a precaution. You understand?"

"Oh, I understand alright." It was only partially true, of course. "So you're the one that put the bounty on her?"

Henry's eyes had widened just a little, then he'd nodded to himself. "That's what brought you here. And here I thought you wanted answers."

"I do. To quite a few things. The first of which being, where did you take her?"

"I didn't take your daughter..."

"Lucy," he'd snapped. "I know you don't have my family. I just figured a middle manager like you would know where to find them, especially considering you're looking awfully good for almost three hundred years old. Where's Lucy?"

"Lucy is safe." He'd gestured towards a soldier who'd stepped forward, eyeing Cooper with not a little trepidation. "Why don't you show Mr. Howard one of our rooms?" Then to Cooper, "we'll return your things and get you your reward as soon as I talk to my daughter."

"I didn't bring her here for the fucking reward," he'd growled, holding onto his patience by a thread. He was doing his best to at least appear civil... Henry MacLean had killed his wife, along with all of Shady Sands. He was under no illusions that he wouldn't do the same to his daughter, and probably his son too if it came to it. Make up another famine and go on with his life. Maybe find a willing young Vault bride and make some replacements. "If you're so worried about her safety, why did you put dead or alive on that flier?"

Henry hadn't answered... he'd just stepped back, watching four soldiers, all armed to the teeth, lead Cooper to the elevator.

He'd inspected every inch of the room he'd been placed in. Cinderblock walls. Cold. No windows. Probably underground. A bed and a nightstand. Empty. A bathroom with running water and an honest to god shower. That had made him smile, just a little. Lucy would have been thrilled to see it. Then, when his inspection had come up with absolutely nothing, he'd sat on the bed to count his mistakes.

He very pointedly hadn't thought about Lucy or the soldier who'd carried her away or where she might be now. Or her daddy, whose skull Cooper spent a few minutes fantasizing about putting a bullet into. Henry MacLean was going to talk to Lucy. What the fuck about?

Only Cooper had a feeling he knew. His daughter had defied him, just like his wife. She'd pointed a gun at him in that observatory, even if she hadn't pulled the trigger. And Henry was apparently not a man who allowed the people he saw as his to defy him and get away with it.

It must have been two hours later before a key turned in the lock, making Cooper's head snap up. If it was just Henry, maybe he could get the jump on him. Rip his fucking throat out, take his gun, and pull a Lucy. Guerrilla warfare his way out. It wasn't the best plan he'd ever had, but between his pack and Lucy's, they had two grenades left. That was enough for a significant amount of bluffing, at least. They just had to find their bags. He pulled himself to his feet, ready to plan on the go.

But when the door opened, he only caught a glimpse of his ex wife's old assistant. Instead, it was Lucy who walked into the room.

"I'll give you a few minutes," Henry told his daughter, voice firm and somehow condescending and Cooper thought again about sinking his teeth in the man's throat before the door shut and Lucy was in his arms. He'd opened them without thinking, wrapping her in an embrace, his face in her hair as he used the last bit of his senses to inhale what little of her scent he could get. Lucy buried her face in his shoulder and he held her so tightly it might have hurt her but she wasn't complaining. She was okay. Her daddy hadn't killed her.

Before Cooper could ask what exactly Henry had meant by 'a few minutes', the feeling of hot tears soaking into his shirt brought him up short.

"We don't have long," she whispered, voice hoarse and shaking, and he squeezed her a little tighter.

"What do you mean? What did he say to you?"

She inhaled, nose against his neck as she squeezed him again, then pulled back just enough to cup his face in her hands, her fingers so impossibly soft against his skin. Her eyes were pleading with him, only he didn't know for what. Whatever it was, she could have it. He couldn't think of much he wouldn't do for this woman. "Cooper, I need you to trust me."

The words automatically made him suspicious, but he nodded anyway. For the first time in a very, very long time, he trusted someone. Completely. This was Lucy. He was so in love with her he didn't know what to do with himself. And somehow, she loved him back. So yeah...he trusted her...but she also consistently put herself between him and guns, so that was something to consider. "Okay..." he pulled a glove off, letting it fall onto the bed, then wiped a tear from her cheek. "What's the plan, little killer? Are we going to use that trusty knife of yours?"

He'd meant to make her smile. Instead, her lips trembled and another tear ran down her cheek, breath catching as she leaned into his hand. She was staring at him, huge eyes red-

rimmed and scanning his face like he was trying to memorize it. “They...my dad and...the people with him...the Vault Tec people...they’re going to give you the reward for my bounty and they’re going to let you go.”

His mind went blank then, the horror of her words nearly paralyzing him. “No,” he croaked before he could even fully process what she’d said. They were going to let *him* go.

She went on, undeterred. “They’re going to let you go and...”

He shook his head. “Fuck no.” The reward for the bounty? What the hell was she talking about? “Why the fuck would I want that?”

“And he’s going to take me back...”

“I said...”

“Listen to me!” she hissed, desperate, eyes darting back to the door, and he wanted to kill every Vault Tec asshole in that building, starting with her daddy, for making her look like that. “I have to go along with it, okay? I have to! He will kill both of us if I don’t agree to go with him. Just like he killed all those people...and my mom...”

“He can’t take you.” All he could feel was panic...it was like his head was full of old TV static. He couldn’t lose her. No. Not now. Please...not her too!

“I’m sorry, Cooper...I’m...” She closed her eyes, tears running down her cheeks, and then she threw her arms around him again, shoulders shaking.

Cooper felt his heart break. He never could take it when the people he loved cried. “Sweetheart...” He wrapped his arms around her, holding her like he could keep her safe. This whole time, he’d kept her safe. But now...how the hell was he supposed to protect her now?

She pressed her lips to his neck, hair covering her face, and for a wild second he wondered if she thought this was going to lead to one last quick fuck before he lost her forever...as if that could be enough. As if he could bear one more loss. But then she spoke, her voice just barely above a breath like someone was listening. And they very well might be, he thought. “When I stepped out of my Vault, I could see the ocean on my right,” she whispered against his skin, voice urgent. “I could see a pier, and...a big circle. I think it’s called a Ferris Wheel. I’d only walked for about a day when I reached Filly, and I wasn’t going very fast. Vault 33.”

He went still, a hand on her back, the words echoing in his head. Santa Monica. He knew that much. The pier by the ocean. The Ferris Wheel. Her Vault was along the coast. Vault locations weren’t secret. Vault 33. He knew that...had seen the number on her vault suit every day until he’d gotten her some new clothes.

Then she pulled away as footsteps approached the door again, her hands resting on his shoulders, eyes locked on his, whispered words coming out in a rush. “I love you, Cooper.

So much. You're everything I've ever wanted. No matter what, getting to meet you made it all worth it."

He was frozen in place...rooted, jaw wired shut, like when she'd dropped, a raider's bullet in her side, or when she'd fallen off that cliff, Dogmeat barking like crazy and his hand outstretched and useless. He couldn't move. Couldn't breathe. The horror of it was too much. He was standing in that office, hearing his ex wife tell a room full of execs and billionaires that they'd end the world themselves. He was standing on a patio with his daughter, a slice of cake in hand. He was kneeling on the floor beside Lucy's hospital bed, a hand on her head, his face resting on her shoulder as he tried to keep his breathing even so he didn't wake her, because this woman had almost died in his arms and for the first time in a long time, he'd started to remember what it was like to love someone.

How many times was his world going to end.

"Lucy..." he finally managed to whisper. Lucy. His Lucy. He loved her so fucking much and they'd made it to this godforsaken city but now...

No. He couldn't break...he fucking refused. He had to play this right. He was going to *yes*, *and* this little show for her hopefully soon-to-be-dead daddy and then he was going to do what he did best...he was going to find her. This wasn't over. He wouldn't let it be over. Henry was going to take her but Cooper wasn't going to let her stay buried.

The door behind her opened, and Lucy let her hands fall, lips trembling a little as she gave him something close to a smile. "You can find anyone. Find me," she told him, voice barely above a breath, then stepped back as her daddy entered the room.

"Lucy. It's time to go."

He was going to take her back to the Vault.

She had nightmares about the Vault...nightmares of being trapped in that place and she'd told him that she looked for him in those dreams but could never find him and she was scared, but she still smiled, letting her dad put his hand on her shoulder. That man had killed her mother and he'd sent bounty hunters after her and he'd lied to her for her whole life and now he was dragging her back underground.

"Let him go first." When Henry hesitated, she went on, her voice going from firm to pleading like she was putting a mask on. "Please daddy. He's my friend."

Partner.

Lover.

"Sweetie, he turned you in for a bounty. He's not your friend," her dad told her, voice gentle like he was reminding her of something she should already know, and Cooper clenched his jaw so tightly that it hurt. He knew Lucy didn't believe that, but he still wanted to kill the asshole for saying it.

“I know he did. I just...I want to make sure no one here hurts him. Please.”

Cooper had read a lot of studies in his time...they’d published them in the paper back when there had been a paper. When faced with a direct threat, most people knew about fight or flight. Some knew fight, flight, or freeze. But there were more options. Humans weren’t so simple. And Lucy, he realized, had picked a fourth option.

Fawn.

She didn’t have the training or practice acting that he’d had, but she was doing her best, and young Henry seemed happy to believe her. Slowly, Henry nodded, softening a little. “Okay, honey.” He smiled, all fond and soft down at the daughter he was holding hostage, and not for the first, nor the last time, Cooper vowed to put a bullet between his eyes.

Henry MacLean led his daughter by the shoulder, guiding her out of the room, and the soldiers appeared once more. One of them, a man around Lucy’s age, gestured nervously for him to leave the room, and, after grabbing his glove and pulling it on, Cooper did, heading down the hall and back to the elevator.

The four of them stepped inside, Henry putting himself between Cooper and Lucy, and he knew that if either of them had had a gun or one of those trusty little grenades, they could have gotten out of this...they could have killed her daddy and the soldier and they could have made a run for it. They could have gone back on the road and Cooper would have taken her back to Baker and he would have gotten her all the cake she could ever want and stood under the spray of a shower with her, just holding her until it didn’t feel like he was going to break apart anymore.

But he wasn’t going to break. He wasn’t even going to look concerned. He’d brought her here for a bounty. That’s what her daddy wanted to believe and what Lucy needed him to believe. She was about to be locked in a Vault with him...but not for long. She’d gotten out once. She’d get out again. And Cooper would be there when she did.

“You walking back, young Henry? Or are you taking one of those vertibirds?” he wondered idly, staring at the wall.

“I think Lucy’s had to do enough walking through the desert. We’ll fly,” Henry told him, voice all false courtesy.

“I’ll admit, she slowed me down plenty,” he told the wall, forcing the smirk. He could practically feel the look she wanted to shoot him. “From here back to Filly, that’s at least 290 miles. On my own, that kind of trip would only take about two weeks. But dragging her along...” he trailed off, risking a glance over at her. She was staring at the ground, but he knew she understood.

Two weeks. He’d be at that Vault in less if he could. And if she couldn’t get out, he’d rip the door apart, piece by piece if he had to.

They took him to the front door where more soldiers waited. Henry kept a hold of Lucy’s arm, and Cooper fantasized about breaking off his fingers while one of those soldiers handed

over his saddlebag. “We put your guns by the back door where we found you. Lucy’s pack too,” Henry told him, giving Lucy another one of those condescending smiles. “She won’t be needing any of that stuff. She’ll have everything she needs back home.”

Cooper grunted and thought about ripping his tongue out. He wouldn’t eat it...it was probably poison.

“And we can’t forget...” Henry gestured to another soldier who stepped forward, a cloth sack in hand. His reward.

Cooper took it. It was heavy with caps, big enough to be cumbersome. As he threw the strap of it over his shoulder, he wondered how many nights in that hotel in Baker they could buy with it once he’d bought himself more vials. Or maybe, he thought, that Walter fella still liked Lucy enough to let them stay for free. So what would he buy her, he wondered, as the soldiers all stepped away from him. Cake, of course. Clothes.

Anything she wanted.

“You sure I can’t get you another autograph, young Henry?” he asked, smirking at her daddy.

Henry just gave another tight smile. “You should be on your way. You’ll want to be out of the city before dark.”

Message received.

Cooper meant to start walking. To grab his things and hers and get started. But he couldn’t help looking at Lucy one last time. She had her arms wrapped around herself, face pointed to the ground, but he could still see the way her shoulders shook and the tears that ran down her face. He wanted to hold her. He wanted to rub her back and press his lips to her hair. He wanted to promise her that he’d find her.

But she already knew that.

“Well, Miss MacLean,” he told her, voice soft. “It’s been a pleasure. Best of luck, sweetheart.”

She managed a smile, tear-filled eyes meeting his as she gave a little nod. “You too.”

She’d be okay. His little killer.

He held her gaze for a long moment, as long as he dared, then nodded before heading around to the back of the building. The moment his back had turned, the smile slipped away, and something cold took a hold of him. Two weeks. He had two weeks to get back to her Vault. He wasn’t wasting a fucking second.

Dogmeat had waited for him, sitting beside Lucy’s pack, ears pricked upwards as he approached. “Good girl,” he murmured, ruffling her behind her ears. He couldn’t help noticing how she peered around him, obviously looking for Lucy, but he wasn’t going to think about it...wasn’t going to let himself think about anything but getting the two of them

back to that Vault. Cooper was a patient man. He was a determined one. And now, he had a plan.

Well...part of one.

He had to assume that Lucy could get herself out of the Vault. She had that thing on her wrist. She'd gotten out once before. Her daddy would be an obstacle, but not an insurmountable one. She'd probably have her brother with her this time. That was fine. Hell, it saved them a trip. And she wouldn't have to walk all the way back. She could rest for a while. For two weeks.

Two weeks was longer than he'd gone without seeing her since the day they'd met,

Cooper gave himself a sharp shake. He wasn't going to do this. He wasn't going to mourn her because he hadn't lost her.

She had nightmares about the Vault.

He crouched beside Dogmeat for a second, stroking her fur as he closed his eyes and took deep breaths. She was fine. She would be fine. She had to be fine. And he had to be fine because he had to go get her! He stayed there, her bag thrown over his shoulder, his hands buried in Dogmeat's fur, for a full minute, eyes closed as he focused on breathing.

Deep breaths.

Dogmeat whined a little, thrusting her nose into his cheek and nearly knocking him over, her whole body vibrating with her ever-present need to move. He wrapped an arm around her.

Deep breaths.

He had a job to do. Cooper had always been good at finishing a job.

"Alright girl. Let's go find your momma."

And with that, he stood, taking a puff from his inhaler and slapping his thigh, his feet pointed towards Santa Monica and Vault 33.

Chapter 36

If you'd asked her a week ago, Lucy would have told you that she would gladly accept a ride back to Santa Monica if it meant she didn't have to spend another few weeks walking through the desert. If Cooper had been on board with her, he would have teased her about the way her fingers dug into the harness that held her to her seat. She could just imagine the look on his face...the smirk, just a little lopsided. A brow lifted.

"Now, don't tell me you're scared of heights, Vaultie."

And she would grit her teeth and give him what she'd always thought of as her perky, happy smile, but that he called her 'Vault-Tec' smile. "Of course not."

He'd called this thing a vertibird, but she didn't care what it was called...she wanted off of it. She knew that Cooper was down there somewhere with Dogmeat...that the death machine she was traveling in at a speed she'd never been able to imagine was flying over the I15 and Baker, Rhonda and Nancy's farm and Jen's family's home. The quarry. What was left of the corpse of the Deathclaw. The dozens of places where they'd set up camp, Cooper's arms around her, her head on his chest.

But she couldn't bring herself to look down...couldn't relinquish her death grip on the restraints or even open her eyes to see her father sitting across from her.

Deep breaths. She was okay. People traveled in these all the time. Max must travel in one. His squire. All of the knights. Cooper was in the Marines...she was pretty sure he'd probably been in one too. She'd have to ask. She would make a list of the things she wanted to know...his time in the Marines would be at the top of the list. She breathed through her teeth, fingers aching from where she held onto her harness.

She was glad it was so loud, though. It gave her an excuse not to talk. Her father's hand had stayed clamped around her shoulder until Cooper had been out of sight, like she might just run after him. And she'd thought about it. She'd known how that would end, of course. She'd known that they would shoot the both of them...and that without any weapons between them except the knife stuffed in her boot, they would both be dead.

She wouldn't let her father kill Cooper. Two weeks. She only had to make it two weeks. She would be the person her father still thought she was for two weeks. She would tell Norman everything. She would get the supplies she needed, get Chet to open the outer door again, and then she would find Cooper.

With any luck, he'd be waiting for her outside.

Of course, she wasn't 100% sure that Chet would still be able to open the door after he'd let her go. Maybe they'd put someone else in charge. But she'd be able to figure out who it was. Vault job assignments weren't secret. It would be easy to find out. And...she could meet Steph's baby, even if the thought of her friend from Vault 31 felt like a stab of betrayal.

Steph had known. Maybe not all of it, but enough. And she'd never even hinted to Lucy that there was something strange about Vault 31. Never. She'd just given her that same line about the mashed potatoes being better. Had her husband known? Would she have told anyone? Ever? Or, like her father, would it be a secret forever? Reclamation day had already happened. There had already been cities and civilizations and governments on the surface. So did she know what they'd been working towards? Had they ever actually been friends, or had Steph thought she was stupid and silly for believing everything Vault Tec told her?

Everything her father told her...

It took the verdibird three hours to cross the distance it had taken Lucy months to walk. Two months? Three? It was hard to keep track of the days when so many of them had been spent just walking, the sameness of the desert broken up only by the occasional boulder or rusted car. Part of her couldn't believe it when they touched down. Three hours to cross almost 300 miles.

Her hands shook so badly when they touched down that she couldn't work the buckles of her harness, and she didn't know if that was because the machine was still shaking or because she was afraid...afraid that she'd never see the outside world again. Afraid that she would die in that Vault...that the rest of her life, she'd be trapped inside, never to see Cooper again.

"Here, honey, let me help," her father murmured, fingers making quick work of the buckles. She had to fight not to shudder at his touch, instead letting him help her to her feet, his grip gentle as he pulled her towards the open door. He jumped down first before offering her a hand, and she took it, following him out into the darkness. The only light came from the moon, and Lucy stared at it as they made their way down the last stretch of ground she'd see for two weeks.

The pilot took off without waiting to see if they made it to the Vault door.

"You must be exhausted," he told her softly, his hand still on her shoulder. "You can go straight to bed. I'll take care of everything."

She nodded. It was true...she was so tired she felt like she could drop, and it had been so long since she'd gone to sleep in an actual bed. It wouldn't be the same without Cooper... she mentally shook that thought off. She couldn't do that...couldn't keep thinking about him. Not right now. Not when she needed her father to believe this little act she had going. "Okay," she murmured, eyes drifting back to the moon as they came to a stop outside the Vault door. 33.

Home.

Prison.

He tapped on his PipBoy, sending a message once he'd connected to the network inside, and Lucy had the wild thought that maybe, just maybe, no one would let them back in. Could she get away from him if that happened? Or would he drag her somewhere else? How would she leave a message for Cooper? How would she get to her little brother?

But after a few tense minutes, the door rolled back, the noise seeming too loud in the silence of the night. Lucy stared at the moon the whole time, the sound of the waves crashing just barely audible under the sound of the door. It was dangerous to make this much noise at night. But they were about to be inside a Vault. Nothing could get them in there. That was the whole point.

She tore her eyes away from the sky when her father urged her forward, taking a deep breath as she stepped back into the darkness of Vault 33. The door closed behind them almost immediately, the sound of the alarm so shockingly loud in the stillness that she wanted to duck down...to find the nearest surface and hide behind it, lest a Deathclaw or some other horror come to find them. She didn't have a gun or Dogmeat or Cooper to protect her...just the gun on her dad's hip. But then the door was closed, the outside world cut off as the gear settled back into place.

The air felt different in the Vault. Still. Heavy. She couldn't smell the ocean anymore, or the desert air. The wind was almost always blowing outside...nothing was ever still for long. It had been so strange at first, the constant movement and change. The fluctuating temperature. The heat of the sun that burned her skin, then the cold air of the night that had her curling up against Cooper, the two of them snuggled close under the blanket, even before she'd expressed her desire for a romantic relationship.

Even before he'd kissed her, he'd still loved her. He'd still taken care of her, holding her close and wrapping an arm around her to keep her warm. Rubbing her back to soothe her, or maybe because he liked it, or maybe both. Holding her for a moment in the mornings. She wondered if he just hadn't wanted to wake her during those early days, or if he hadn't wanted to let her go.

Betty was there to greet them. Betty, who she'd known her whole life. Betty, who had helped raise her after her mother had died. Betty, who was from Vault 31.

"Hank," she whispered, shaking her head and looking some mix between relieved and hesitant. Her eyes shot to Lucy, the smile softening. "Lucy. We thought..."

"It's a long story," her father interrupted, something meaningful in his voice. "We'll have to talk soon. But for now, Lucy needs rest."

"Of course. Lucy, sweetheart, you must be so tired. I was afraid you'd never make it back." She put her hands on Lucy's arms, and the concern looked so genuine. That's what surprised Lucy the most...she genuinely seemed so worried! "Are you okay?"

"I'm okay." She tried to smile. Tried to remember who she'd been before. A different animal entirely.

"She found me," Hank told her with a proud smile. "She's been so strong."

"Does she need medical attention?"

"I think a check up wouldn't hurt. Probably a dose of RadAway."

Lucy wanted to tell them that Cooper had already given her RadAway just a few days ago. She'd rested her head in his lap and he'd held the bag in the air for her, stroking her arm while she'd slept. He'd made sure that she took a RadX every day. He'd...

"If it's okay, I'd like to get some sleep first." She tried for sheepish. "I'm just so tired..."

"Of course. Why don't I walk you?" Betty obviously needed to talk to her father, but she doubted they were going to do so in front of her, no matter how Lucy wished they would.

They took the elevator down, down, down into the Vault, and the whole time, her father's arm stayed wrapped around her like a shackle. She closed her eyes, making herself lean against him rather than the wall. He had to believe she'd missed him. He had to believe she trusted him again.

It was late, so the hallways were, thankfully, empty as the three of them made their way down the 'street' that led to Lucy's apartment. Her old one. No husband, no new apartment. As much as she would have liked her own space, she also didn't mind too much...she never wanted to see that apartment again, with its cracked oven glass and the sheets where she'd had sex with Monty...the curtain where he'd wiped himself off. The replacement blender they must have found.

Hank pressed his hand against the button and the door slid open. There it was. Her old apartment, the same as ever. Only Norman had lived there for the last few months. Had he been lonely? Had he known that she was okay? Had he worried about her? She wondered if he was in bed...he wasn't in the living room. Would their dad wake him? Or just see him in the morning? Had Betty told him that they'd returned before coming to greet them?

"Let me talk to Lucy for just a minute. I'll meet you in the office?"

Betty nodded, and Hank shut the door behind her before turning to Lucy who tried not to notice that she was trapped in this room now. No, she told herself, not trapped. The door would open when she hit the button. It always did.

Her father put his hands on her shoulders, head tilted down to smile at her. She fought to return the smile...to remember how it had felt when this place had made her feel safe.

"Alright, sweet pea. I'm going to go tend to business. Why don't you get cleaned up and go to bed."

She nodded, but before she could turn to go, the hands on her shoulders tightened.

"This is for the best, Lucy. You know that, right?"

"Of course," she lied, meeting his eyes. He knew best. He always knew best. That's what she'd believed before and she had to believe it now.

"I know you think that man was your friend, but trust me, he wasn't. You have such a gentle, kind heart. You've always been so good, just like your mother. So quick to trust others, even when they want to hurt you."

Lucy swallowed bile and smiled. “I’m so sorry...about before. I...I didn’t understand, but I know you were only doing what you had to do. I know it must have been so hard...”

He nodded. “It was. It was the hardest choice I’ve ever had to make. But I had to protect you and your brother...the people of this Vault. Your mother, she put all of that in danger. She put *you* in danger. My children. I couldn’t let her do that. I couldn’t let her hurt you.”

Lucy thought about her mother, sitting at the table, mind gone, body rotting away. She thought about the ghouls at the Super Duper Mart and the way they’d repeated their names. She thought about Cooper, lying in the dirt, staring up at her as she placed a handful of his medicine vials by his hand...the first act of kindness shared between them. The first of many. “I know, daddy.”

“It’s going to be an adjustment, I know that. You don’t have to go back to work right away. You need a break. But I promise, everything will be just like before. And who knows, maybe someday soon, we can find you a husband from Vault 31.” He cupped her cheek in his hand before pulling her into an embrace that made her skin crawl, but she returned it anyway. “Soon, you’ll forget all about those horrible things you went through.”

Lucy made herself nod against his chest...made herself wrap her arms around him and even wished, just for a second, that it was real. That her dad wasn’t the man she knew he was. That he truly did love her without the condition that she live her life exactly the way he’d planned it out. That he wasn’t planning on holding her prisoner for the rest of her life.

“Okay, honey. You go get cleaned up and get some rest. I’ve got some work to do.”

She didn’t watch him go...couldn’t bear to watch that door close. So, passing her brother’s closed door and vowing not to wake him, she went to her room, shutting her own door softly behind her, then slid down to the floor, her face hidden in her knees.

Deep breaths.

She imagined what she would say to Cooper if he was trapped here with her. She would show him around. She would walk him through the apartment she’d grown up in, first with both parents, then with just one. He would lay in her bed and she would curl up beside him, head on his chest. Maybe she would roll over on top of him and press her lips to his, an action that felt so familiar now that she could imagine what it would feel like as if it was happening. She closed her eyes, imagining he was there, sitting on her bed and looking around her room with idle curiosity.

Kind of sterile, huh sweetheart? I thought you’d at least have a poster of me or something.

When she opened her eyes, she knew he wouldn’t be there. Of course she knew that. But the pain of it being true was still so heavy that her head dropped back onto her knees, her shoulders shaking with sobs. She was trapped. She was alone.

No. Not alone. She would have Norman. And Chet, if she thought he could keep a secret. Maybe. Or maybe just Norman. It was hard to think...hard to plan. She was tired, she told

herself firmly. She needed sleep and a shower. Change her clothes...only her father hadn't allowed her to bring her pack with her clothes.

So she'd put on a new Vault suit. That was fine. It was only for a little while. And then, when two weeks was up, she would get out and take Norman with her.

And if her father tried to stop her...well...then he would be the primary aggressor.

She couldn't have stopped the tears pouring down her face at the first spray of hot water from her showerhead if she'd tried, and she didn't try. It felt so good, the pressure pounding the water into her skin, the steam enveloping her, and she wanted Cooper to be there with her. She wanted to be out in the desert, covered in dirt and sweat but safe in his arms. No matter how hard she tried pushing thoughts of him away, Lucy's brain couldn't stop going to him...like when she'd been little and she'd lost her first tooth. No matter how much it had hurt, her tongue had continued to press against the empty spot.

Lucy didn't want this place. She didn't want this life. She wanted the terrible freedom.

Grabbing a washcloth, she scrubbed herself with the floral smelling soap, washing her entire body twice and then covering her hair in shampoo that she lathered with rough fingers before applying the conditioner that she left in while she scrubbed herself with the soap one more time. She'd missed hot showers...she still would have traded it for Cooper, though. In a heartbeat.

When she got out of the shower, she stared at herself for a moment in the steamy mirror. Earlier, she'd been glad for the layer of dirt and grime covering her...it had hidden the marks Cooper had left on her neck which absolutely would have been noticeable to her father. Now though, her fingers found those vivid marks...the round, red bruises from his lips sucking on her skin...the faint teeth marks where he'd bitten her shoulder. She'd have to use a little makeup on the marks that would be visible with the suit. But that was a problem for the morning.

She'd half hoped that her shower would have woken Norman, but when she emerged from the bathroom, dressed in pajamas, mouth tasting of mint from brushing her teeth twice in a row, their apartment was still silent. According to her PipBoy, it was nearly midnight...way past her bedtime back when she'd lived here. Way past her bedtime on the surface too. By the end of a day of walking, she'd been so tired that most days, she'd been ready to go to sleep before the sun had even fully set.

Lucy had no hope that she'd be allowed to keep her clothes from the surface, but she still carried them back into her room after her shower, slipping the knife she'd hidden in her boots under her mattress and leaving the boots by the door. And then, clean and dressed in pajamas for the first time in months, Lucy crawled into the bed she'd slept in for most of her life, vowing to feel better in the morning.

And surprisingly, she did.

When she opened her eyes almost nine hours later, Lucy knew immediately where she was. She didn't reach for Cooper or feel tears gather in her eyes at the thought of him. She was

okay. Cooper was on his way. She just had to kill some time. So she would do what she did best: keep busy.

She climbed out of bed and then made it like she had every morning for as long as she could remember. She washed her face in the bathroom and brushed her hair, then changed into fresh underclothes and a vault suit, zipping it all the way up. She put little dots of makeup on the marks on her neck that the suit didn't hide. And all the while, she planned. She needed to talk to Norman first thing. Maybe Chet too.

She needed to try and get into Vault 31 and see if she could find anything out about Cooper's daughter. Hopefully Norman could help with that. If she was in there, Lucy would get her out. If not, she would see if she could learn anything else about other Vaults where she might find her. She needed to gather supplies for when she left the Vault...see if there was anything in her bedroom that could be sold on the surface. Cooper would have her things, including her caps, but he might not be at the Vault yet by the time she broke out. This time, she would be prepared for the surface. She had one more chance to take anything she needed...after this, she never planned on stepping foot in Vault 33 again.

There were other things to be done too. She wanted to meet Steph's baby and find a way to say goodbye to her friend who had lied to her but who had still been her friend. And she wanted to see her students again...even though she wouldn't be able to tell them the truth, maybe she could lead them in the right direction. Maybe she could leave a note for someone...write it all down. Maybe someone would read her words and believe her.

She made herself a mental list as she walked into the kitchen where her father was making pancakes, stacking them on two plates and drizzling them with syrup. Immediately, her stomach was growling. She wasn't sure what time he'd gotten back from the office, but he looked surprisingly well rested as he placed one plate at her normal seat at the kitchen table, then placed the other plate at his own spot.

"Good morning, sweetie. Are you feeling better?"

She had to be Lucy from the Vault...the Lucy he remembered. And with him looking like he did every other day, as if nothing had changed, it was surprisingly easy "I am. A lot better. It feels so good to take a shower and sleep in a bed again."

"I'll bet it does." He chuckled, gesturing for her to sit. Lucy hesitated, glancing back at Norman's bedroom door. It was still closed.

"Is Norman already at work?" Surely he would have wanted to see her...right? Did he even know she was home?

Something passed over her father's face...something dark that made her stomach clench uncomfortably. But then he was back to normal, gesturing to her chair. "Sit down, honey. We need to have a talk."

Lucy felt cold, all of a sudden. Numbly, she sat. "Dad? What's going on? Where's my brother?" She thought about the knife under her mattress. If someone had hurt her brother...

“Norman is fine. Don’t worry.” His hand covered hers, his face so deceptively gentle.
“Don’t worry. Everything’s okay. It’s...it seems that there’s been a little mix up.”

“What do you mean?” she demanded, shaking her head. “What kind of mix up? Where is he?”

“Eat your pancakes. You must be hungry. I can’t imagine that bounty hunter fed you.”

Of course Cooper had fed her. She’d have been dead without him. He’d taught her how to hunt for her own food and how to prepare it...how to make jerky and how to clean bloatflies and mole rats and Deathclaws. He’d bought her extra corn muffins because he’d known that she liked them. And in Baker, he’d bought her stir fry and a slice of cake and cold Nuka cola, smiling when she’d thrown her arms around her because he liked it when she was happy.

Lucy forced herself to take a bite, but the pancakes tasted like dust in her mouth. “Please...daddy, where’s Norman?”

He sighed. “As you may have guessed, in my absence, a new overseer was needed. And Betty was chosen to fill that role.”

“Okay...”

“Well, considering the people of Vault 32 were killed by raiders, it was decided by Betty that some of our members would be relocated. We can’t have Vault 32 empty...we need to continue to grow our population to repopulate the surface when it’s safe to do so.”

How would it ever be safe, she wondered, bewildered. They’d both seen the surface...was he just pretending none of it had happened? Reclamation day had already happened! There were governments and factions and people making a life on the surface as best they could...

No. She was Vault Lucy. Vault Lucy trusted her father.

“Of course. That makes sense.”

“Well, the lists of who would move and who would stay were compiled by Betty based on genetic compatibility and aptitude. Norman was apparently chosen to move to Vault 32.”

Lucy felt her heart drop...felt her stomach lurch, the pancakes threatening to come back up. “But...no...he can’t!” she cried, shaking her head. “No. He has to come back. Right? He has to!”

“Betty and I are discussing it...”

“But I’ll never...we’ll never see him again!”

“Apparently he’s doing very well in Vault 32. Chet is there as well. And your friend Stephanie is the overseer. And there’s always the triannual trade.”

“That’s...daddy that’s three years from now! We can’t go three years without seeing Norm!”

“I know. Don’t worry, honey.” He patted her hand. “I’m going to take care of it. It’s a delicate process. Betty was elected the overseer and it’s a discussion we’ll have to have. We didn’t have time last night with everything else we needed to discuss. You just have to trust me. I’ll bring him home soon.”

She wanted to scream...how could he be so calm about this? Why would Betty have sent Norm to another Vault? Would Norman have been okay with that? No...right? He couldn’t have been! He would have known she would come back. And he would have been waiting for her!

“I want to see him,” she whispered, taking a chance. Lucy from the Vault trusted her dad, but she didn’t worry about questioning him sometimes. “Please...daddy...he’s my brother and I haven’t seen him in months! We have to get him back! Or...can we visit? Just for a few minutes?”

“Lucy, I promise, I’m going to take care of this. I just need you to be patient. Okay?”

Lucy forced herself to nod. Forced herself to take a deep breath and smile. Everything was okay. Vault Lucy trusted her dad. He always had her best interests at heart. “Okay.”

She would be patient. She would wait. And if that didn’t work, Lucy would break into Vault 32 and get her brother herself.

Chapter 37

Assemblies in the Vault weren't labeled as 'mandatory.' In fact, other than doing your part for the community by doing your assigned job, almost nothing in the Vault was labeled as 'mandatory.' That didn't mean Lucy had the choice to skip them. Not really. Even if she hadn't been determined to prove to her father that everything was exactly the same as it had always been and that she hadn't been on a mission for the last several weeks to help Cooper put a bullet in his head, Lucy wouldn't have skipped an assembly. No one did. It wasn't one.

That's how she found herself, on her first full day in the Vault, spending her lunch listening to her father address the community.

"And as you all know, my brave Lucy left the protection of the Vault to rescue me." Hank smiled out at the crowd, Betty standing a few feet away with a placid smile of her own. All around her, the people Lucy had known for her entire life listened with rapt, almost worshipful attention. Had she looked at her father this way before? Had she trusted his words so implicitly?

Of course she had.

"What you don't know is that she braved the wastes, traveling alone for weeks, and she found me. She faced the woman who had kidnapped me. She saw through that woman's lies. But before she could free me, she was captured by a monster...the most ruthless bounty hunter in the wastelands."

All around the room were gasps like this was a scary story at a sleepover.

Well, Lucy thought, trying and failing to suppress a faint smile, at least Cooper would have liked that part. She wiped that smile away as fast as she could when her father gestured towards her, all eyes glancing her way.

"It took me a month to find her again, but I was finally able to bring her home."

There was a round of applause as the jello cake was wheeled out. Through it all, Lucy smiled. She ate the corn and green beans and chicken and bread, unable to keep herself from enjoying a good meal when it was sat in front of her, and she thanked the well wishers and the numerous people who had told her how brave she'd been...how they couldn't have survived up there. She wanted to tell them that of course they could...they all could. And in fact, they should! Instead she shook her head and told them that she was lucky her father had found her when he had and drank the Nuka cola that was cold and sweet and not as good as the lukewarm one she'd shared with Cooper.

She decided, as she sat at the same table she'd sat at during her wedding, the same tables they brought out for every big occasion that she would give her father and herself a couple of days. That would be time enough to rest and eat real food and convince her father that she was the same girl she'd always been. To socialize and wait to see if he would make good on

his word to get Norm back (dubious) or if she'd have to do it herself. If she did do it herself, it would have to be towards the end of the two weeks, and they would have to leave right after. Otherwise her father would know that she'd defied him.

She needed to get into the armory...see if she could find another tranq gun at least.

That morning, her father had taken her straight to the medical clinic where she'd been thankful that she'd used makeup to cover the love bites Cooper had left on her. Still, his teeth marks in her skin had been visible, and the doctor had hesitated when she'd pulled her vault suit off, leaving her in her bra and underwear and the many, many bruises and scrapes and cuts she'd accumulated.

Dr. Anderson, had paused, eyes wide as they'd started at her legs, working their way up past the twin scars on her stomach, along with a place on her side where she was pretty sure a bullet had grazed her, then finally landing on the bite mark on her shoulder. "Oh..." the doctor had whispered, pressing her lips together. "Your father said...I mean, we all knew, but..."

Lucy hadn't bothered trying to explain.

"Okay..." The doctor had touched the screen on her PipBoy. "Have you consumed any food or drink containing radiation?"

"Yes." She hadn't elaborated or talked about a lack of choice or Cooper's attempts to mitigate the radiation by making sure to have RadX for her, nor the time he'd made her drink what she was pretty sure was animal pee.

"Are you currently in any pain?"

"Not really. Just kind of tired. It was a lot of walking." And fighting. And, over the last few days, really good sex.

"Last menstrual cycle?"

"Probably...before I left the Vault." It wasn't something she'd thought about much, mostly being concerned with surviving. "But exposure to radiation can cause women to lose their menstrual cycle." That. Stress. Hunger. Dehydration. Probably being dipped into an irradiated lake and nearly drowned. Two bouts of radiation sickness. All things that would have made a pregnancy impossible anyway. Not to mention, the last man she'd had sex with had to be sterile considering the amount of radiation he'd been exposed to.

The doctor had hesitated. "I'd like to do a pregnancy test. Just in case."

So Lucy had peed in the cup and had winced a little when Dr. Anderson had stuck a needle into her wrist, and had been released just in time to join everyone in the field. No one had managed to fix the projector or salvage the film, so the walls were the same as every other room in the vault...gray metal. She couldn't look at them for too long, although she did wonder if the cornfields would have been worse now that she'd seen the real sun.

“Lucy?”

She looked up from her food, the smile automatic when she saw the man coming to sit across from her. “Hi Reg. How are you?” She really had missed the people from her Vault...they were the only thing she missed now, apart from the showers and food, and she’d found those in Baker. There were other settlements too, she knew. Places where she could find a bed to sleep in and meaningful work to do. And bating in quarries was always an option.

“I’m...” he swallowed, nodding a little. “I’m...good.” He smiled, weak but genuine. “Glad to have you back.”

“Thank you,” she murmured as her dad kept talking. “It’s good to see you.”

“Yeah. I...gosh, Lucy. I can’t believe you did it. I mean...we were all sure that you were going to die! How did you do it?”

“I...” Lucy shook her head, smiling a little. “I just...did. I followed the map. Talked to people. And I had some help.”

“Really? From someone on the surface?”

This was dangerous...but maybe if she didn’t say too much, she’d be okay. Besides, didn’t she want to at least try to change people’s minds? “Um...a few people,” she admitted. “A lot of people, actually. They’re not all bad. There were kind people too. On the surface.”

His eyes went wide. “What?”

“Yeah. It’s not all raiders and monsters...although...there are a lot of those too.”

“Really?”

“Yes. There are good people up there...people working to make the surface better. Whole communities of them.”

At that, his eyes narrowed, and she realized she must have said too much. If he started asking questions...if he mentioned this to her dad...

“So much has changed down here,” she told him with a little laugh, taking a drink of her cola. “I can’t believe some people had to move to 32.”

He nodded, biting down on his lip. “Yeah. That...we were all surprised too.”

She glanced over at her father, still at the podium with Betty, then turned back to Reg. “I don’t see Woody. Or Davey...were they both...”

“Yes. Both of them. Davey...he almost didn’t go. He didn’t want to. I don’t know how she chose but...” Reg sighed, and she felt a twinge of pity for him. He and Woody had always been close friends. “Stephanie is the new overseer. You know what they say. When things look glum...”

“Vote 31,” she murmured, nodding. “I just...I don’t understand why she would assign Norman to 32.”

At that, Reg glanced up at her, and she could see in his face that that wasn’t right. She didn’t know how she knew it but...something was wrong. He looked like he was going to say something...but then her father was making his way back over, and Reg schooled his face into a smile.

“Right. That...it was weird. She said it was a resettling campaign. It was crazy to see it... the crops were all dead but...we all got to walk through. See Vault 32. It was abandoned. Like everyone just got up and left.”

“Oh.”

“They must have cleaned up...from where the raiders...well, you know.”

“Did you ever find out how the raiders got in?”

He shook his head. “No. Someone must have opened the door.”

“Right.”

And then her father was there, taking his seat beside them. “Hey there, Reg. Good to see you.”

“You too, Hank.”

“I heard you and Woody ran for overseer. Betty said you ran quite the campaign.”

“Well...thank you. Yes. I...put up several posters. But Betty had the experience.”

“I want to thank everyone for choosing me to be your overseer in Hank’s absence,” Betty’s voice came from the podium, and Lucy turned to find her smiling out at who was left of Vault 33. “Of course, now that Hank has returned to us, I will be stepping down. It means the world to me to know that you chose me to lead you not once, but twice. I’ll be helping Hank with his transition back to our Vault to ensure that everything runs smoothly, and in the meantime, if you need anything, I’m here to talk.”

Her father smiled as he took a bite of mac and cheese, and Lucy made herself return it, going back to her own food.

Then lunch was over and everyone was cleaning up, carrying plates to bins that would be taken to the kitchen to be washed and gathering up the tables to be put back in storage. Lucy found Reg manning one of the dish carts and took her plate to his, smiling as she placed it inside. Glancing around, she found her dad talking to Betty over by the podium before it, to, was carried away, and moved a little closer.

“What were you going to say?” she murmured, separating her silverware and putting them in the appropriate slots.

“What do you mean?”

“You were going to tell me something.”

Reg glanced at her, then back at her father. “Nope.”

When she, too, glanced at her father, he still wasn’t looking at them, so she took a chance. “Norm wasn’t chosen to go to Vault 32, was he?”

He was silent, staring down at the dirty dishes, and she had her answer. Instead of saying it out loud, though, he gave her a tight smile. “Sorry, Lucy. I’ve got to get these back to the kitchen. I’ll see you around.”

Slowly, she nodded, stepping away. “Okie dokie.”

Steph was overseer of Vault 32. Chet was gone. Norman too. Reg wouldn’t talk to her. Betty was from 31. Sighing, she headed back to her own apartment. Before, she’d told Cooper that she wanted to stay in bed for a week, but as she stepped into her own room, she couldn’t bring herself to lay down. Or sit. Instead, she found herself pacing around her bedroom, hands clasped behind her back. She was used to walking all day...waking up with the sun, pointing her feet whichever way the I15 was leading, and going until Cooper had them stop. Now, she felt like Dogmeat when they stayed put for too long...full of nervous energy with nowhere to put it.

Norman hadn’t been chosen to go to Vault 32. She just knew it.

So why was he there now?

Stepping into the living room, she looked around, making sure her father wasn’t home, then slipped into Norman’s room, making sure to shut the door behind her.

His bed wasn’t made. That’s the first thing she saw, and her lips twitched into a sad smile. Norman never made his bed correctly, when he bothered making it at all. War and Peace sat on the nightstand, and she ran a finger over it, remembering the last book club meeting they’d had at the kitchen table. She remembered how Norm had played on his PipBoy the entire time. Smiling a little, she opened the cover and found her bookmark sitting at page one.

His room looked exactly the same as it always was. There was a picture of the four of them framed on his dresser...their mom and dad, and her and Norm when they were little. They were in their apartment, a Christmas tree in the background.

Norm wouldn’t have just left it. Left everything. Would he?

No. Of course not. He would have been given time to pack and he would have brought those things with him.

Lucy rested her hand on Norm’s pillow, closing her eyes and wishing there was a way to send him a message without their dad finding out. But she could still remember how her father had looked at her in that room with no windows...how he’d bombed an entire city, all

because one woman had defied him. Tens of thousands of people, all dead. She couldn't risk it. Not yet. She had to make her father think she trusted him.

So Lucy left her brother's room, shutting the door behind her, then left the apartment, walking down the hall without any real purpose.

She had two weeks to kill.

Before, Lucy had almost never been bored. She'd gone to work and helped in the garden, and she'd read books for book club. She'd been in various other clubs too, with practices nearly every day of the week. She'd chatted with Steph, the two of them working with the other Young Pipefitters to keep everything running smoothly. At dinner, she always asked her dad and her brother about their days, and the three of them would sometimes watch movies together, or play board games, or just talk. And of course, there had been her time spent with Chet.

Now, though, most of the people she'd spent the most time with were gone, either in Vault 32, or, in her father's case, traitors who were dead to her. Not that she let herself think about that. Still, she had to at least pretend things were normal, and the more time she spent with him, the harder that was going to be. She had a sinking feeling that he was going to try and talk her into something normal, though, like reading a book together, or god forbid, watching a movie. She sincerely hoped he didn't ask if she wanted to watch one of his old westerns... she didn't think she could handle hearing Cooper's voice right now.

That night, though, her father worked late, and she was able to eat and get in bed before he ever came home, ready with the excuse that she was still tired after so long spent on the surface...he didn't ask, though. The light under her door told her that he stayed up for a long time...she fell asleep before it went off.

The next morning, Lucy made breakfast and, when he joined her in the kitchen, she made herself kiss his cheek. "Good morning. How's work going? I didn't get to see you last night."

"Hey, sweetie. It's been good. I'm glad to be home."

"Me too."

"How are you feeling?"

"Much better. It's so good to be able to take showers again. And sleep in a real bed. And cook real food. I ate so much Cram, I never want to see it again," she joked, laughing lightly when he chuckled. She was glad she could keep her back to him as she flipped the turkey sausage, fresh from the freezer. In the blender, she placed some frozen fruit and poured in some soy milk for smoothies.

"I'll bet it is. How about work? Have you thought about when you'd like to start teaching again?"

“I’m not sure...maybe in a day or two, if that’s alright? I’ll miss having Steph in the classroom with me.”

“That’s perfectly fine.” He smiled when she sat a plate with sausage and toast in front of him, and the sound of a blender filled the kitchen. “Let’s say two more days? Then you can get back in the classroom. You’ll have a new assistant. I’m sure you’ll be good friends before long.”

“You’re probably right.”

By force of will, she didn’t bring up Vault 32, and neither did he.

When he was gone, Lucy went back into Norman’s room and grabbed the old backpack he’d used to carry his books to the classroom back when they’d been kids. It was Vault Tec blue, with his name stamped onto a metal name tag pinned to the back. He would have passed it down if he’d ever had kids, or if Chet had, or Lucy. Until then, it sat at the bottom of his closet. She pulled it out, emptying it of a couple scraps of paper and a pencil, then rolled up three sets of underclothes and socks, tight as she could, then placed them in the bottom.

She couldn’t risk getting any traveling packs...someone would notice if she took a sleeping bag or travel pack, so she’d have to get him a sleeping bag on the surface, or hope Cooper brought her pack with him. Surely he would...he could have hers. In the refrigerator were three bottles of water, and she took one. She’d fill it up slowly, sneaking things away so her father wouldn’t notice. Then, when they left, he’d be ready.

Zippering his backpack, she put it back in his closet and shut the door, leaving the room exactly as it had been.

Lucy went back to the clinic when summoned, glad to have her lack of pregnancy confirmed, and took the bottle nutritional supplements given to her. She stopped by the gardening club, then the Young Pipefitters, making herself useful and smiling at the people she’d known her whole life, answering whispered questions about the surface with varying degrees of honesty. And that evening, she had plenty to tell her dad as the two of them ate dinner together. For dessert, they had jello cake, and she washed up, insisting that she didn’t mind, and that he should get some rest.

On day three, she took another bottle of water that she placed in her own backpack, which had been hanging from a hook in her closet, perfectly neat and tidy, not a scrap of paper or spare pencil in sight. She rolled up three changes of underclothes and socks for herself, and took a bar of soap from the back of their bathroom cabinet, tucking it into Norm’s bag. She then visited her old classroom, hugging the students that ran up to greet her and telling them nothing about the children she’d met on the surface, or the dog that had traveled with her who had become her family...hers and Coopers, and who loved playing with children, chasing them around the settlements and being chased until she was worn out.

On day four, Lucy took another bottle of water and placed it in her backpack, and went to one of the communal Vault supply closet to slip a second bar of soap into her boot, then into her own bag. From the bathroom, she took a spare washcloth, and from the kitchen, a can of chili, putting both in Norm’s. She wished she could sneak into the armory...get Norman a

weapon. He'd need one. But there were plenty of weapons on the surface, she reminded herself, and he hadn't been in the riflery club. She'd need to teach him to shoot first.

She visited her classroom again, talking to the woman who'd taken over for her and agreeing to be the assistant teacher for a while...at least until the council made the final decision on the assignments. She was in no hurry...didn't plan to stay very long. But she knew that getting back to work would go a long way in convincing her father that she was back to normal.

That night, Lucy dreamed about Baker, and their hotel room. She dreamed that she rolled over and Cooper was there to wrap an arm around her, her ear against his chest, the steady beat of his heart lulling her back to sleep. She dreamed of his lips pressed to her hair, and the long inhale that told her he was trying to breathe her in. It all felt so real that she could almost smell his clean clothes, fresh from being washed in the shower and left to dry, and the chemo he inhaled every day.

When she opened her eyes, tears were already running down her cheeks, and she had to bury her face in her pillow to stifle her sobs.

On day five, Lucy went back to work full time, helping children with their assignments and bustling around the classroom, answering questions and handing out spare pencils and paper and being the best assistant she could be. One little girl, Stacey, caught her arm as she passed and whispered "I missed you a lot," and she wanted to cry but made herself smile instead.

"I missed you too."

The head teacher was talking about the Civil War, and Lucy thought about Caesar's Legion and the Brotherhood of Steel...about Maximus and his squire and a doctor's head, implanted with something that could power a whole city. And then, when a little boy raised his hand, she tore her thoughts away from the surface and smiled as she called on him.

Before her dad returned to the apartment, she took another bottle of water and another washcloth, placing them in her own bag. She took one of Norman's vault suits from his closet and placed it in his. She thought about taking a carving knife from the kitchen but worried her dad would notice. Instead, she took a can of tuna from the back, along with a can of Cram, and put them in her bag.

She told her dad all about work and the children and the Civil War lesson, then listened to him talk about the mundane parts of being overseer. The paperwork. The water treatment system. How the crops were doing. She listened to all of it, asking questions and smiling and pretending until they were side by side at the sink, washing the dishes. Only then, did she risk a question, not daring to get her hopes up, but unable to completely stop herself. "Have you heard anything about Norm?"

"Oh yes. I almost forgot! I just messaged with him today, actually. Stephanie let him use the terminal in her office. They're all settling in really well. Crops are being planted as we speak. Stephanie says hi. So does Chet, of course." He gave her a rueful, knowing smile. "Norm too. He's really happy...seems to be finding his place over there. You know, he never did find purpose in 33. Maybe this is what he needed."

Lucy swallowed the lump in her throat. “Oh...maybe I can message with him too.”

“Of course, sweetie. Once things get back to normal, you can come to my office and talk with him. And maybe come harvest season, we can all get together. Celebrate the successful resettling of Vault 32 after what those raiders did.”

Lucy scrubbed the cloth over the carving knife in her hand and nodded, bringing out her creepy Vault Tec smile. “That would be great. I’d love that.”

“For now, you should just focus on getting back to work. Going back to your activities. Have you been to any of the fencing team practices yet? You were always so good at that. I’ll bet you could make it to Team A this year.”

“That’s a good idea. I’ll have to pop in later this week. I’m probably rusty, though.”

Later, in her room, Lucy forced herself to sit...didn’t allow herself to pace in case he knocked on her door and caught her. She had to think...to figure this out. Norman wasn’t in Vault 32. If he had been, it would have been easy for her father to bring him back...would have been as simple as opening the door. Even if her father hadn’t wanted to move him back to 33 for whatever reason, they would have been able to at least visit one another. And she knew he would have wanted to see her. Besides, families didn’t get split up like this. It just wasn’t done!

So she had to work under the assumption that he wasn’t in 32.

And he wasn’t in 33.

So unless he was on the surface, that only left one place where he could be.

Chapter 38

On day seven, halfway through what she hoped would be her last stretch of time in Vault 33, Lucy planned while she was supposed to be helping to grade essays on the end of Slavery in the American South, eyes skimming the words but not taking them in. She had a good amount of supplies for each of them, and she'd continue to add to them until it was time to leave. Only taking one can of food or one bottle of water a day should keep her father from noticing, especially since Lucy did most of the cooking.

It was maybe a gender roles thing. She didn't examine it too closely...didn't want to let herself think about anything but her plan lest her mind wander to Cooper.

Step one: gather supplies so that she and Norman would be able to leave the Vault with enough to live on until Cooper found them if he wasn't there yet when the two weeks were up. That one was already in progress. She'd wanted to talk to Chet...to see if he wanted to come too, but with him being in 32, there was no way to talk to him unless she found a way to break in, and she wasn't willing to risk that, especially since she didn't think Norm was in there.

Step two: act normal and convince her father that she was the same Lucy he'd always known. That, too, was in progress. She was back to work. She'd been attending her old clubs and activities and talking to her friends. And at dinner, the two of them chatted like old times, talking about work and the Vault and books and everything but what Lucy *wanted* to talk about.

Step three: get the key to the outer door *and* break into Vault 31 and hope that Norm was in there, and that she could get him out. There was no way of knowing what she should expect from Vault 31.

Circling a misspelled word with a red pen, Lucy tried to compile everything she knew about Vault 31. Her dad, Stephanie, and Betty had all come from there. They'd never talked about it, other than a few passing comments about a better education system and better mashed potatoes. People from Vault 31 tended to become overseers. Actually...since she'd been a child, she was pretty sure every overseer had been from Vault 31, even though the council had members from 33 or 32. Had Norm figured that out too?

If everyone from 31 was from before the war like Cooper, but they all looked the same as they had before...how were they being preserved? Were there guards? People that weren't from before the war living there?

Step four: see if Cooper's family was in Vault 31. If they were being preserved in there, she would get his daughter. Janey. She assumed the girl's last name was Howard, but apart from the fact that she loved dogs, Lucy knew almost nothing else about the little girl. His ex wife, on the other hand...she would leave her. Whatever revenge he wanted on her was between the two of them, and Lucy couldn't bring herself to try and get involved.

For the next two days, Lucy worked the problem of how to escape while, on the outside, trying to be as normal as possible. She went to work and gave each child one on one attention when she could. She chatted with the other members of the fencing club and phys ed team after work, and they caught her up on all the things she'd missed...practices and jokes and the worry they'd had for her. She wanted to tell them that she was okay...that they shouldn't worry about her even if she disappeared again. That, in fact, they should leave themselves.

Instead, she told them a couple of stories about the surface and the animals she'd seen...the heat of the sun and the burn of the wind, leaving out the parts about how much she missed it all. And at night, she dreamed about standing at the Vault door and knowing that Cooper was on the other side. She dreamed that the key was the lock and the button had been pressed, but the door refused to budge. She dreamed that she beat her hands against the metal until they bled.

On day ten, she and Ally, the head teacher who she'd known her whole life but hadn't spoken too very often, chatted over their lunch about the upcoming lessons on Reconstruction, which turned into a conversation about books they'd been reading.

"I mean...you must have missed reading so much! I know your family does a book club."

"Oh...there are books on the surface," Lucy told her. "Some aren't in very good shape, but I found a copy of Great Expectations."

Ally's eyes went wide. "People on the surface can read?"

Lucy caught herself before she could get offended on behalf of the people she'd met...the ones who had helped her and who had been kind to her. She shrugged instead. "Some can."

Maybe a settlement would need a teacher. She could do that. Maybe between that and helping out with the machinery, she could make enough money that Cooper wouldn't need to hunt people down just to make enough money for his vials. Maybe they could settle somewhere, her and Cooper and Norman, and they could be safe and happy. She'd caught glimpses of what Cooper was like when he could just rest for a while...she wanted to see more of that. Wanted to give it to him.

After school was over and the children had left, Lucy picked up the stay of homework essays left behind. "I'll grade these. You can go ahead if you want."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. Don't you have chess club?"

"You're a lifesaver, Lucy. Thank you!"

Lucy was pretty sure Ally and another woman on the chess club were really good friends...the kind that sometimes went back to her apartment after practice was over and watched movies together. It was kind of an open secret, but she wondered, with the push to resettle Vault 32, would more women be expected to get married and have children? Would Ally and

her very good friend be all but ordered to choose a man, or have one assigned to them, and have a baby? Would they raise their children together?

Once the classroom was empty, she pulled a piece of paper out of her notebook, ready to cover it with an exam if anyone walked in. Then, glancing up at the curtain covered windows, she began to write.

Vault Tec is lying to you. The Vaults aren't what they claim to be. There are people alive on the surface, good and bad. Reclamation day has already happened. The Vaults are a way for companies to experiment on people. Overseer Hank MacClean bombed a city, killing tens of thousands of people, because his wife learned the truth.

Lucy ripped the paper away from the rest and folded it, then wrote it again. Then she graded two more exams. Two more notes. Two more exams. She didn't know if anyone would ever read her words, or if she was wasting her time. Maybe someone would find her notes and just throw them away. Or maybe, just maybe, someone would stumble upon this piece of paper and start to question all of the things they'd been so sure of, like she had. Maybe they'd talk to their friends in secret, and those whispers would spread. Maybe Lucy could do something, even if it was small, to bring the Vaults down. Or at least this one.

That night, after she and her father ate together, talking about their days at work and Lucy's clubs and the unit the children were studying, they watched a movie on the sofa, using the little stationary bikes for exercise. Thankfully, it was an old horror movie and not a western...she didn't think she could bear to watch Cooper in a movie right now. She wondered what these actors and actresses had been like, and who the crew who had worked on the movie had been...what had happened to them. It had taken so many people and so much money to make a movie.

After he went to bed, kissing her hair before closing his bedroom door and wishing her a good night, Lucy took another bottle of water and a can of tuna, along with a sleeve of crackers, and snuck into Norman's bedroom. There, she thought, zipping Norman's bag. Food and water for a couple of days. Some food. Changes of clothes.

The next morning she took two toothbrush kits from the communal supply closet, slipping them into her boot, and then, because she couldn't help herself, she grabbed another bar of soap. Was it stealing if the closet was communal? Probably not. At least, that's what she told herself. After everything, Vault Tec could spare some extra soap.

Three days left, she thought as she zipped Norm's bag. She had gone back and forth on the next part of her plan...should she try to sneak out late at night? Or early in the morning? Or right in the middle of the day when people were at work? Early in the morning might be better, especially if she got up before her father woke up. He woke up every morning at 6:30. He left to go to work at 7:30.

In the library that afternoon, Lucy tried to plan it all out as she slipped her folded notes into the middle of various books she pretended to be reading. A terminal would be better, of course, but she didn't have access to one that her dad wouldn't be able to look through. If she left the apartment at 4 in the morning, the halls should be mostly empty. She would need to stash the backpacks somewhere...maybe one of the cleaning closets. Or her classroom? It

would be too suspicious if she were to walk around with one backpack, much less two. So if she could stash the backpacks the night before, then leave the apartment at 4, that would give her two and a half hours to get Norman and get out. Would that be enough?

There would be a notification when the outer door was opened...but maybe not when the door between 31 and 33 opened. She couldn't be sure...her dad might get a notification. It might wake him up. And she couldn't take that chance. If her father caught her now, she might never leave the Vault again. And Lucy was not going to die in this Vault.

So on day ten, after her father had gone to bed, Lucy took the biggest risk of all and went to the armory.

She had an excuse ready if anyone stopped her. She couldn't sleep. She'd been having nightmares about the surface and the most dangerous bounty hunter in the wastes. But she found herself alone in the halls...apparently everyone else was either in bed or at least in for the night. So she pushed the button that would let her into the armory a little after midnight, the sudden memory of the last time she'd stood in this doorway hitting her out of the blue. She'd been so sure that her Vault Tec backpack and a tranq gun would be enough...so sure that she would find her father and come home.

Well, in a way, she'd been right.

Some of their weapons had been recovered after the raiders had left, and there were a few guns hanging on the wall...not enough that one wouldn't be missed, though. She wasn't here for a gun, anyway, as much as she'd feel better having one. Instead, she headed straight for the tranq gun. She hadn't taken all of the darts when she'd left, and she was glad that there were still plenty in the case, because she only needed two.

She could just kill her father. She knew that. She could walk into his bedroom on the morning of day 14, plunge a knife into his neck, and be on her merry way. No one would notice his absence for a few hours. And it would make it all so much simpler. He deserved it. She knew that too. He'd killed so many people and he would kill her too, if he thought he needed to. But Lucy didn't know if she could actually do it...if she could look down at her sleeping father and murder him in cold blood. Even if he did deserve it. And she couldn't risk it...couldn't risk freezing up when she was so close to escaping.

Thus the tranq darts. Lucy stared down at them for a moment, squeezing them in her hand. She thought about grabbing the tranq gun too, but that was too likely to be missed if anyone bothered doing inventory. So she just pocketed the darts and turned around, breath catching as she came to a stumbling stop, a familiar face watching her from the doorway.

"Hey, Lucy."

"Hey, Reg," she whispered, making herself smile. Not the Vault Tec one...she'd already been caught, so it would be pointless. Instead, her smile was tired. Sad.

He gave her the same smile back.

"Can't sleep?"

Reg shook his head, eyes shifting to the guns on the wall behind her, maybe noticing that none were missing. "I guess you probably aren't sleeping too well either."

"Some nights are better than others."

"Is it true? What your dad told us?"

"Why are you asking?"

"You just...you seem...I don't know," he admitted, shrugging. "It might just be a feeling. But...it's...it's like something's going on. Something they're not telling us. Hank and Betty. And you were right. Norm went missing, and Betty told us that he moved to Vault 32...that he was chosen, but that doesn't make any sense because it would be splitting up a family! And he *wasn't* chosen. He wasn't on the list. Chet was. And the two of them had been spending a lot of time together. And..." He shook his head. "I don't know. I could be wrong. I'm probably wrong."

"Some of it was true. What my dad told you." She nodded a little, heart still beating too fast. But he hadn't sounded the alarm yet. Maybe...maybe that meant he wouldn't. Maybe that meant he was on her side, even just enough that he wouldn't tell on her. "I did travel across the wastes to find my dad and the woman that took him. Lee Moldaver. And that bounty hunter did capture me. He used me as bait for a giant fish monster thing and...he literally sold me to organ dealers..." she laughed a little, the sound hollow and tired. "And...the people, at first...they were so horrible. It's like every person I met wanted to kill me. And I was so scared so many times." Lucy sighed. "But then I found my dad and I learned the truth."

He just stared at her, looking as tired and afraid as she felt.

"My mom didn't die in a famine, Reg."

At that, he cocked his head, confused. "Yes she did. Lots of people did. Don't you remember?"

"I remember the famine. But that's not how my mom died. She found out that there were people living on the surface. Really living. They were building cities and growing food and...it was like reclamation day, but it had already happened without us. So she left the vault with me and Norm, and she met Moldaver in a city called Shady Sands. And I think they fell in love. When my dad found out, he tracked her down and tried to make her come back. But she wouldn't. So...he bombed the city."

Reg shook his head. "That...Lucy, that can't be..."

"He admitted to it. And I saw it. I saw the crater in the middle of the city. I met some of the people that survived it. A few of them were taken in by a local Vault."

"Vaults don't take in surface dwellers," he told her, voice weak.

“This one did. Because...listen, I know this is a lot. And I know...it was hard for me too. To accept all of this. But the Vaults are bad. They aren't to keep us safe. And the Vault I visited, Vault 4, did horrible experiments on people until they killed all the scientists that were running it. And...Reg...” Her eyes went hot as she tried to keep her composure. “That bounty hunter, the one that captured me, he knew my dad. And when he confronted him, my dad ran. He left me with the bounty hunter. Cooper. He ran and he left me behind.”

“None of this makes sense.” He was shaking his head, eyes wide and pleading.

“I know. I know it doesn't. But it's true. The Vaults are bad. My dad is bad. And I think Norman is in Vault 31.”

“So...what? You're going to use those to break into Vault 31? You'd need the key.”

“I know.”

“Then what? If what you're saying is true, even if you break into 31 and get Norm back, what then?”

“Then Norm and I leave the Vault for good.”

“You...Lucy, you can't...”

Her voice went hard. “Yes I can. And I will.”

“It's not safe!”

“I know. But it's better. Out there, you can be free. It's not right that we lock our doors and keep people out. It's not right that we get to be safe down here and everyone else has to struggle to survive. So...I'm going to try and make it better. I think Norm can help too. But Reg...it's okay if you don't believe me. Or...if you disagree. That's fine. Just please...don't tell anyone.”

“But...”

“I'm not putting anyone in danger. I won't hurt anyone. I just need to make sure my dad doesn't wake up and stop me.”

“How are you going to get the key?”

“I'm going to borrow it.”

He gave her a skeptical look.

“You said it yourself...something isn't right. They're lying to us.”

“But...you really want to leave? For good?”

She nodded. “I do. But my dad killed my mom for trying to leave, and he'll do the same to me if you tell him that you found me down here.” Lucy met his eyes, praying that he could

see how serious she was...what would happen to her if he didn't keep quiet.

In the end, it seemed he did, because he nodded. "Okay."

Lucy smiled, reaching out and touching his arm. "Thank you."

"You should get back to your apartment. Before your dad wakes up."

"Right." She didn't move, though...not yet. "What are you doing up? Really?"

"It's weird...Woody and I, we used to argue sometimes, you know? Over council stuff, mostly. But...it's hard to sleep, knowing he isn't here anymore."

She squeezed his arm. "I get that. I'm sorry. I know you were close."

"He didn't want to move. I don't think any of them did except maybe Stephanie, and she was just happy that she got to be overseer."

There was nothing she could say to that...she couldn't bring herself to think about Steph. Not when reminders of the woman who had been her friend were everywhere.

Back in her bedroom, Lucy tucked the two tranq darts in the bottom of her underwear drawer and set her alarm, then curled up in bed, holding her pillow to her chest and wishing it was Cooper. Closing her eyes, she imagined it was...imagined he was here with her. Imagined what she would say to him.

I just need to get the key...but I need to do that right before I break into 31. Otherwise the gatekeeper might tell people that the key is missing and then my dad will get suspicious. I have the bags ready to go...I have water and food, just in case you aren't here yet. And I have a tranq dart for my father. I just need to figure out how to get the key. Any ideas?

Well sweetheart, seeing as how this is all your imagination, no, I don't have any ideas. Other than maybe shooting anyone that gets in your way.

That night, she dreamed he was in the Vault with her, his arms wrapped around her, her head on his chest. And even though they were in her bedroom in the Vault, she felt perfectly safe in his arms. He would get them out. But even as she thought that, Cooper pressed his lips to her hair, hand rubbing up and down her back.

You don't need me to get you out, darlin'. You'll do that all on your own.

Lucy went to work on day twelve, and although she did her best to focus on her actual job, she found her mind drifting...found herself working the puzzle of how to get the key as she called on children and handed out assignments and wrote on the board. Jackson Robins was the gatekeeper. She didn't know him well, but she did know him...just like she knew everyone in the Vault. She could kill him, of course. She blamed Cooper for the fact that she was even considering that as an option, even if it wasn't one she would take. She could threaten him. Tie him up and put him in a closet. Hope no one found him for a few hours.

That was why she had the tranq dart after all.

But she had to time it just right...had to make double, triple sure that no one noticed the key was gone before she was gone. She only had one shot at this, after all.

After work, her feet automatically took her to her gymnastics practice. Somehow, it was almost normal again, living in the Vault. Not good. Not enough. She knew that much. But it was like her body knew this routine...knew how to survive down here. There were no threats waiting for her around every corner. No one in the Vault (minus her father) would try to kill her, or even deceive her. Everyone down here was so used to safety...it almost made her feel safe again.

But she wasn't. Even as she helped a little girl do a cartwheel, her mind on Jen the long walk between that shack and her farm, Lucy knew that. It felt safe, sure. It gave every appearance of safety. But none of it was real. And none of it was right. Even if it hadn't been for Cooper or Norm, she refused to live the rest of her life afraid to defy her father, taking hot showers and sleeping in a warm bed and knowing that there were so many people who would never get either of those things.

When she got back to the apartment, her father had a jello cake sitting on the kitchen table, his smile so genuine it took her aback. For just a second, Lucy wanted to believe it...wanted to forget everything and have her dad back. This was her father...the man who had raised her. He'd done science experiments with her and he'd taught her to read and when she'd had nightmares, he'd held her in his arms, rocking her back and forth and promising that she was okay. That he'd keep her safe.

But so much of it had been a lie. He would only keep her safe if she obeyed him without question. If she gave up her freedom and the man she loved and her dreams to get out of the Vault and live a real life. The pain of it was like her hunting knife twisting in her chest.

"Hey, sweetie. How was work?"

"It was good. Almost all of the children passed the last quiz. I think we'll need to spend one more day on this unit, but we're on track to have everyone move on to the next grade. Ally's great. They really love her."

"Well, I'm sure you'll hear this officially pretty soon but..." Her father wrapped an arm around her shoulders, leading her over to the cake. "The council has decided that you should have your job as head teacher back."

She had to be Vault Lucy. Quick.

"Really?"

He grinned. "They sure did. I'm so proud of you...you're working so hard." He squeezed her in a tight hug. "Everyone is impressed with how well you're doing, adjusting to life here at home again. And now that you're back on track with your job and we've put all of that...unfortunate business behind us, I was thinking...how would you feel about giving marriage another shot?"

She would feel great about it. In fact, she had plans to get back to the man everyone thought was her husband very soon.

She swallowed those thoughts. “Oh...I...if you think I should...” Vault Lucy always deferred to her father. He knew best. He always had her best interests at heart.

“I know your first husband didn’t...well, I know it didn’t work out. And I’m so sorry. I wouldn’t blame you for being nervous after what happened. But I promise, this time, I’ll go to 31 myself and choose someone. I’ll talk to the overseer and we’ll find you a husband. A good husband. A man you can love, and who will take care of you and your children.”

A good man. A man who would take care of her. A man she loved. A man who held her at night when it got cold or when they were together in a warm bed. A man who smiled at her like she was important. A man who didn’t care that she didn’t want to have children, even if she’d been told her whole life that she should.

Lucy smiled reflexively, nodding in agreement. “I’d love that.”

He kissed her hair, cutting a slice of the jello and serving it to her. Dessert before dinner, a special treat. Her reward for obeying, like a piece of jerky thrown to Dogmeat when Cooper told her to stay.

On day thirteen, Lucy stared at her ceiling in the morning before it was time to get up, heart pounding in her chest as she tried to take deep breaths to calm down. Again, she went over her plan. She had two bags full of supplies for her and Norman...she just needed to hide them. She’d decided on her classroom in her desk drawer. She would take one to work with her in the morning, and sneak one into the classroom that evening after everyone was in their apartment. Easy. Getting the key was going to be the hardest part...she hadn’t run into Jackson, nor did she have a reason to seek him out. If her dad saw her with him, he might get suspicious, so...maybe she would just have to go with her first plan...go to his apartment, tranq him, take the key, and cross her fingers. After all, she’d saved Cooper from raiders with a single clip and her hunting knife. Then, along with Nancy and Rhonda and Mindy, she’d taken down an entire camp of raiders with her hunting knife and the guns pulled from their corpses. She was a force to be reckoned with, and she was going to get that key and get out of this Vault or die trying.

Lucy carried her backpack to work, leaving extra early so her father wouldn’t see her. Once again, she had an excuse ready. Papers to grade. Desks to move. The children would work in groups today, so she wanted to get the room set up early. But the few people she did pass that morning just lifted a hand in greeting, smiling and wishing her a good morning.

And then she found Reg was waiting for her outside of her classroom. She faltered a little when she saw him, looking around to make sure they were alone, then made her face relax into a smile. “Good morning.”

“Hi, Lucy.”

“Still can’t sleep?”

“Not very well.” He hesitated, then followed her into the classroom, the door closing behind them. “School books?” he asked wryly, gesturing towards the bag she placed in the large bottom drawer of her desk. It barely shut with the bulky backpack inside, but she managed it.

“Something like that.”

“When are you leaving?”

She didn’t want to tell him...but what did it matter if he knew specifics? He could tell her father at any time...could have told him any time since he’d caught her in the armory, but as far as she knew, he hadn’t. “Tomorrow. Early.”

“What about the key?”

“I’m working on it.”

“Lucy...this is a bad idea. You know that, right?”

She smiled, shrugging a little. “It’s the only one I’ve got.”

“What if he catches you?”

“Then he’ll kill me.” Or, she thought, she would kill him first. “Now, do you want to help me move some desks?”

Chapter 39

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much to everyone who has left a comment! I appreciate you so much! I hope you all enjoy the new chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Day thirteen passed like every day before it, somehow dragging minute by minute, but then, as if by magic, the school day was over and the children were going back home to their apartments or to their after school activities. It would be her last day, she hoped. Her last day teaching these children. Her last day calling on them, one by one, to answer questions. Her last lunch with Ally, the two of them eating sandwiches at their desk while all the children ate together. Her last time grading one of their quizzes. Her last time accepting a hug from one of them, her arm around the little boy's shoulders before he ran out of the class, quickly switching to a walk when he reached the hallway, not wanting to be caught running by an adult and reprimanded.

Running in the hallways wasn't safe. You could run in the gym if you wanted to play, or around the track.

Her father had heard Cooper say it would take him two weeks to cross the distance between New Vegas and their Vault. But if he suspected anything, he was hiding it really well. When she got home from work and gardening club, she made dinner and served him, smiling and telling him about the little girl who had asked if she would help with her gymnastics, leaving out the pang of guilt she'd felt when she'd told the little girl yes. She didn't ask about Norman...had given up on her father by now. He had no plans to get Norm back, that much was obvious. So Lucy would simply have to do it herself.

After her father went to bed, she slipped into Norman's room, grabbed his backpack full of supplies, and carried it to her classroom. None of the handful of people out walking looked at her strangely...she just faced forward and smiled and looked like she knew exactly what she was doing, and that did the trick. Back at the apartment, she made herself a cup of coffee, being as quiet as she could, and ate some crackers with cheese and an apple. It might be a while before she had a full meal again, but the later it got, the harder it was to stomach food with the nerves fluttering in her stomach.

Lucy didn't sleep that night...didn't trust herself to close her eyes, even with her alarm on her PipBoy set. She knew she should sleep...that she should get what little rest she could, but she wasn't even tired. Her whole body felt flooded with adrenaline like she was being chased by a deathclaw or like she was hiding from raiders...sleep was the absolute last thing on her mind.

So she closed her door and scanned her bedroom like a looter. She had enough water and clothes, along with food for a few days. She didn't have any caps, so she'd just have to hope she could trade work for some if Cooper wasn't at the Vault yet. She'd thought about grabbing one of Cooper's movies, but a holotape or even a book would take up too much precious space in her already small bag, so she left all of those. She didn't own any jewelry. Didn't have any precious metals or weapons or pills sitting around to sell. Maybe her second packed Vault suit would get her some money. She planned on getting rid of them all anyway...they just made her stick out and besides, she wasn't a Vault dweller. Not anymore.

Once she'd finished her loop around her bedroom, Lucy made herself lay down and stay there, taking deep breaths and reminding herself that this was it...this was her last night in the Vault. She just had to do this one last job and then she was free. She still didn't sleep, but as the minutes ticked by, she felt her breathing even out, a calm descending over her. She was a badass. She took down raiders and deathclaws. She'd left her home and she'd become a new animal entirely and she wanted different things now. So she was going to go and get them.

At 3:55, Lucy climbed out of her childhood bed for what she hoped was the last time. She pulled her hunting knife from under her mattress and stuck it into her boot, the weight of it immediately reassuring. In her pockets were the tranq darts. In the bags she'd hidden away were everything she and Norman would need to survive for a while. She went to the kitchen first and pulled out their carving knife, sticking it into her other boot. A gift for Norman if she didn't cut off a toe first. He'd need some kind of weapon if they had to travel on their own for a while.

She hoped they wouldn't be alone. She hoped she would open the door and find Cooper waiting for her, that smirk on his face as he took her in.

Well well well little killer, sure took you long enough.

Just the thought made her smile as she stepped into her father's bedroom, tranq dart in hand. It was dark, his breathing steady, soft snores so familiar it brought tears to her eyes. This was it. If all went to plan, this was the last time she was ever going to see her father. He didn't deserve her love. She knew that now. But it wasn't a switch she could turn on and off. Maybe some part of her would always love the man who'd raised her...but the bigger part of her knew that she could never live with him again. And he wasn't going to let her go willingly.

So she brought the tranq dart down into his shoulder, meeting his eyes as they snapped open, his hand coming up automatically to the place where she'd pierced his skin. For what felt like a long time, they stared at each other, his mouth opening as if to speak, but no sound came out. And then, finally, his eyes drifted shut, his whole body going lax.

The timer had just started.

Lucy took his PipBoy from his bedside table and shut his bedroom door behind her.

Step one: make sure her father stayed asleep for a while. Done.

Step two: get the key.

Jackson lived in apartment 681. He wasn't married, and his dad was old...it should be easy to sneak into his apartment, tranq him, and get the key. She would have to move fast, though...no one should be awake but she couldn't afford any kind of delay. She slapped her hand against the button that would let her out of the apartment, and unlike in her dream, the door opened immediately...

Revealing Reg who was leaning against the wall across from her apartment door, apparently waiting for her.

She stopped short, eyes wide as her apartment door closed behind her.

"What..."

"This is a bad idea, Lucy."

Lucy let out a long breath. She didn't have time for this! "Reg, I'm sorry, but..."

"You'll die up there."

"Well I just stuck a tranq dart into my father so if he catches up to me, I'll die down here too."

"You did what?"

"I had to make sure he wouldn't notice I was gone. Listen, I don't have time..."

"Is that his PipBoy?"

"Yes, Reg. It is his PipBoy because I can't have him waking up from the alert when I open the door," she hissed. "Now, please..." She closed her eyes, rubbing a hand over her face. She didn't want to hurt Reg, but if he wouldn't let her pass...

"I'm not here to stop you."

She opened her eyes again, taken aback as she really looked at him. He looked so tired, hollows under his eyes from where he obviously hadn't been sleeping. He looked thinner too, somehow, like he hadn't been eating either.

"I miss Woody. And Davey. And everyone else. I've known them my whole life and now, because Betty decided, they're gone. We didn't vote on that. We didn't agree to it. She just decided it. And at any point, they could make me go too. They could change the rules and put me in a different Vault and..."

Even as he spoke, Lucy felt herself leaning away...edging towards taking a step, then another. She had to hurry! "Reg, I'm sorry, but..."

"Here." He held out a hand. Nestled in his palm was the key., and Lucy felt her jaw drop, breath catching.

“How did you...”

“I told Jackson I needed it for Council business last night, and that it would be returned to him in the morning.”

“But...if my dad finds out...”

“Just go. You don’t have long before he wakes up, right? Hurry.”

Her dad could kill him for this. That was the thought that kept her feet locked in place for an extra second, lips trembling. He might die because of her.

Reg took her hand and dropped the key into it, closing her fingers around it. “If you’re leaving, you’d better hurry.”

“I don’t know how to thank you,” she admitted, her voice a whisper.

His smile was tired. “Maybe now I’ll be able to sleep again.”

She wanted to just leave...to go and not look back. But she couldn't help reaching out to grab his arm, leaning in to whisper. “Listen...if you ever leave, which you really should, take a real gun and more water than you think you need. Get Woody to go with you. Get lots of people if you can. Find a settlement. We can do jobs in settlements for caps. Caps are the currency. Get rid of your vault suit. Sell it and get different clothes so you blend in.” He was just staring at her, blinking too many times as he tried to keep up. “It’s hard and it's scary but I promise you, it’s worth it.” She turned his arm, bringing up the map on his PipBoy and dropping a pin in the settlement where Elliot had helped her, and then another in Baker. “These two settlements have a lot of good people, and you might be able to find me there.” Lucy squeezed his arm and released it. “I hope I see you again someday.”

And then, knowing she’d already wasted too much time but not able to find it within herself to regret it, she started walking.

Lucy didn’t run, but she walked as quickly as would be socially acceptable down the hall and towards the room where they planted their crops and had their big ceremonies and Vault-wide meetings. It had been her favorite room once. Now she was hoping to see it for the last time. Even if the projector had still been working, the sun on the wall was nothing compared to the real one. You could feel the real sun...could feel the warmth beating down on you, even when it was too hot...even when your skin turned red and peeled away, the warmth of it could be relentless. But she wouldn’t trade it for anything.

Lucy threw her father’s PipBoy into the field of corn, not pausing to watch it disappear. Then, practically holding her breath, she put the key in place, flipping the switches and pressing down on the red button, and watched the door to Vault 31 roll to the side. Not willing to waste another second, she pushed down every bit of hesitation and strolled inside.

It wasn’t a normal Vault. She’d known that...it had to be different because people from before the war were kept alive in there somewhere. But this...she hadn’t been expecting this. There was no way she could have.

She walked inside past a stack of boxes and a mop, and through another set of open doors, eyes locked on the seemingly endless corridor that stretched out in the middle. On either side were three rows of...pods? Sleeping pods? She didn't know, but they were covered in glass and while some of them were empty, some seemed to have people inside. Sleeping people? Frozen people? The bottom row were tilted back like beds, the middle had people seemingly sitting upright, and the top row leaned forward, all of them giving her a slightly frosted view of the people who, she had to assume, had been kept there since before the great war.

Was Cooper's family in here?

Was Norman?

She looked around but saw no sign of her brother...but she did see what appeared to be a... brain? On a disk shaped robot. And it was coming towards her.

"Who goes there? You aren't Hank or Betty!"

She blinked, trying to shake herself out of her shock. She would just have to process this later. "My name is Lucy MacLean. I'm looking for my little brother. Norman MacLean. Is he here?"

"No, no no! You are not authorized to be in this Vault! You are not authorized to see any of this! Stop looking..."

"Is my little brother in here?" she repeated, taking a step forward.

"You are not authorized..."

Giving up, she walked past the robot, rolling her eyes when it pulled out a tranq dart and hopping down onto the extended metal platform. Just as she'd guessed, it couldn't roll itself down without a ramp.

"My name is Bud Askins. I am the overseer of Vault 31 and I am ordering you to get back here! Leave this Vault! Do not look at that! Do not look through the log of people who are still dormant! That information is not for you! Step away from the terminal! Come here so I can inject you with..."

Lucy tuned him out as she read through the list of names of the people who had been reactivated...Stephanie Harper. Betty Pearson. Ian Jackson. But on the other side, on the list of dormant people...Hank MacLean. Only that didn't make any sense because her father was unconscious in his room. So, she thought, heart racing as she worked it out as quickly as she could, if Norman had snuck in here and...and if he'd been locked inside somehow...

There was no food in here that she could see. No water. No kitchen.

Lucy touched her father's name and, hesitating for only a second, typed 'Activate.'

A distant hissing, and then one of the pods on the middle level moved forward, machinery pushing it forward like a Nuka Cola vending machine, the yellow railing at the end of the platform opening and giving it a place to rest. It was surprisingly loud and she winced at the

noise, hoping that no one was near the open Vault door. But she was only able to worry about that for a second because there, inside, was her brother's sleeping face.

"Norman," she whispered, lips trembling.

"You are not authorized to do this! I am contacting Overseer Hank MacLean!"

Behind her, the door slid shut, but Lucy didn't spare it a glance, just stared as the pod opened. For a second, Norm was still, chest rising and falling, face lax in sleep. Heart in her throat, she took a hesitant step forward...

And then her brother's eyes popped open, gasping as steam or frost or some other gas hissed around him. Lucy rushed forward, grabbing his arms.

"Norm? Norman?"

Norman stared at her for a second. "Lucy?" he whispered, disbelieving, and she nodded, cupping his face in her hand, then pulling him into a tight hug.

"Hey. It's okay. It's...God, Norm..." Voice breaking, she pressed a hand to the back of his hair. "Are you okay?"

"Lucy...how are you..."

"No time. I have so much to tell you..."

"Me too!" He looked around wildly, eyes landing on the brain of Bud Askins. "Betty... and...Mom's PipBoy..."

"But not now. Right now, we have to go."

"What do you mean?"

"Norm, Dad is bad. He's really bad."

"You found Dad?"

"It's a long story. But we have to leave the Vault right now before he wakes up. I have supplies for us."

He blinked, slowly sitting up, and she pulled him to his feet, hands out to steady him just in case. He took a slow step, then another. "How long was I in there?"

"When did you go in?"

"Um...a few weeks after you left?"

"Okay...so...maybe a month? Two? I've been back for two weeks. Dad said you moved to 32."

"No...I..."

“Listen, I know this is a lot, but I really need you to trust me, Norm. Please. Please. Just come with me and I’ll explain everything. We have to leave the Vault before Dad wakes up.”

“Why?”

“Because if he catches me before I leave, he’ll kill me.”

Norman’s eyes went wide, then darted to the corridor again. “Lucy...Dad wouldn’t...”

“When I was on the surface, he put a bounty out on me. Dead or alive. He killed mom.” He jerked back like she’d slapped him but there was no time for this conversation. “She... please, Norm, it’s too much to tell you right now,” she whispered, wiping a hand over her eyes to brush away the tears. “Just...come with me and I’ll tell you everything. We have to hurry.”

He stared at her, watching the tears run down her cheeks, and nodded. “Okay. Let’s go.”

She couldn’t help her smile...couldn’t help wrapping her arms around him and resting her cheek on the side of his head. He squeezed her back, and she could feel his hands shaking. When she pulled away, she held them in hers. “It’s going to be okay. I promise.”

“You aren’t going anywhere! I’ve notified Overseer MacLean...”

“Doesn’t matter,” she told Norman softly. “I tranqed him and took his PopBoy. Hold on.” She hurried over to the terminal, tapping on the list of people who hadn’t been woken up yet, scrolling through the names. There were so many.

“What are you doing?”

“I need to check something really quick. Can you help me?”

“Yeah. What are you looking for?”

“I need to find out if someone is here.”

“Who?”

“Her name is Janey. Or, maybe Jane. Janey Howard.”

He frowned a little to himself, thoughtful, then tapped on the terminal a few times, scrolling through the screens until the list of dormant took up the whole screen. “I don’t know if this is everyone...there’s some kind of security setting but...I can try.”

“Do not look through that list of people! You are not authorized to see this!”

They both ignored Bud Askins as Norman typed.

Janey Howard.

No results.

Jane Howard.

No results.

“Okay...okay,” she whispered, nodding to herself.

“Who’s Janey Howard?” Norm asked.

“She’s the daughter of my...friend. He’s looking for her.”

“There’s a lot of security...stuff I can’t see. It would take time to hack in but...it doesn’t look like she’s here.”

“Okay. That’ll have to be good enough for now. Let’s go.”

“You can’t leave!” the brain of Bud Askins told her, sounding almost amused. “I’ve alerted overseer Hank and locked the door.”

Lucy felt her jaw go tight and strode towards him. She would not fail. Not when she was this close. “Then unlock it.”

“That’s why I got into the pod. He locked the doors...”

“I am afraid I will not be unlocking the doors. You will simply have to wait for your overseer to deal with...”

Lucy crouched and pulled her hunting knife out of her boot. This had already taken too long. Bud went silent as she strode towards him, knife in hand, and she could practically feel Norm’s eyes on her.

“You’re going to open that door, right now. Or I’ll put this knife through what’s left of you,” she all but snarled. She was so close!

“You’d have to break the glass,” Bud informed her, voice a little weaker than before.

“Then I’ll break the fucking glass.”

She kept walking towards the robot, kicking out when it pointed a syringe at her and knocking it off the side. It rolled towards the lower platform where Norman still stood, falling between the slats and into whatever was in the lower levels. More people? She had no time to think about it.

“Lucy MacLean, daughter of Hank, I am ordering you...”

She slammed her knife into the glass. Nothing happened...it just skittered off the side, but he screamed anyway.

“Stop that! Don’t do that! You are not authorized...”

Breaking the glass wasn't going to work, so she put her knife back into her boot and grabbed the robot by the base, hefting it up. It was heavy, but she could manage.

"Put me down! You are not allowed to pick me up! You are not allowed to touch me! Lucy MacLean..."

"Norm? Do you think we could get the glass off? Or maybe we can dismantle the wiring at the bottom? That has to be what's keeping him alive."

"No! Do not touch my wiring!"

"Or maybe," she told him softly, her smile sharp as she carried the robot over to the edge of the platform. "We can just drop him. How far does this Vault go down? Far enough to break the glass? Or will you just be stuck down there."

"Stop! Put me down!"

"Of course. As soon as you open the door."

"Okay! Okay, I'll open the door!"

"You'd better hurry. We're almost to the edge. I don't think I'll be able to catch you if I accidentally drop you."

"It's opening! It's opening! Please, put me down!"

Only when the doors slid open once more did Lucy pause, the two of them only a few feet from the edge. Then, smiling to herself, she put the robot back down. "Thank you." Turning back to Norm, she held out a hand. His jaw had dropped, wide eyes fixed on her in disbelief.

"You...you were going to kill him?"

"If he didn't let us out? Maybe. Let's go." She held out a hand, smile softening when he took it, and tugged him towards the door.

"I'm afraid I can't let you do that."

Betty was in the doorway, gun in hand, because of course this place wasn't going to let her go without a fight. Not a tranq gun, Lucy realized as she tugged her brother behind her, arm out to protect him. She reached into her pocket, pulling out the tranq dart, and held it out to Norm. He took it.

"Oh Lucy. Norman. I never wanted it to come to this." Betty looked genuinely sad...as if this actually pained her. That only made Lucy angrier. How fucking dare she look sad after everything she and Vault Tec had done.

"You lied to us," Norm snapped from behind her. "Our whole lives! You...you said you buried Mom's PipBoy but that's how the raiders got in! And all this time, we were just... people to breed with! To be managed!"

“You were never meant to find out this way.”

“You practically raised us,” Norm whispered. “After our mom...how could you do this?”

“I did what I had to do for the good of our people.” She sighed, shaking her head. “Your father is on his way. We had a feeling you might try something like this. It wasn’t easy, waking him up. Lucy, where did you put his PipBoy?”

Lucy took off like a bullet from a gun, racing towards Betty as the woman brought her gun up and tried and failed to track her. She wouldn’t be expecting Lucy to resort to violence. She would be too afraid of missing and hitting one of the pods...she’d been in the riflery club but she didn’t go to practice nearly as often as Lucy did. She...

The bullet hit Lucy in the shoulder but she didn’t stop even when Norman screamed...barely felt it with the adrenaline rushing through her. Betty had pointed a gun at her. She’d lied to them for their entire lives. She was the primary fucking aggressor.

Lucy tackled her, slamming the both of them to the ground, the gun skittering a few feet away. Betty’s head hit the ground but Lucy didn’t care...barely noticed. Planting herself on Betty’s stomach, she pinned her arms down, and without even needing to be asked, Norm hurried over, stabbing the tranq dart into Betty’s neck. Honestly, Lucy had been thinking about going for the knife, but the woman went limp beneath her before she needed to.

And there was no way she’d be able to kill Betty when she was unconscious. Not even if she’d pointed a gun at them.

Suddenly, Norman’s eyes went wide and he was backing away. “Dad!”

A boot slammed into her side and she cried out, dropping on top of Betty’s unconscious body and looking up just in time to see her father reaching for the gun, not seeming to be in any hurry. His face was so cold...he was going to kill them. It appeared Lucy had run out of chances. She lunged for the gun, only managing to send it skittering away and over the edge as his foot landed on her wrist. The pain of it made her scream, tears springing to her eyes and dripping down her face, and she hated that he would have the satisfaction of seeing her cry as his foot ground down on her wrist.

“Dad! Stop! You’re hurting her!” Norman screamed, racing towards him, but their father caught him by the front of his Vault suit and shoved him away. Norm hit the ground hard, breath knocked out of him as he stared up at their father in shock. Their father had never hit them...had never even seemed like he might hit them. He’d rarely even raised his voice!

Lucy started to scramble to her feet, reaching for her knife, but the boot made contact with her head this time, and she dropped off of Betty and onto the floor, a high pitched ringing in her ear as she tried to focus...to think. He was going to kill her. Her body refused to respond to her for a moment and her eyes wanted to close and she couldn’t make herself get up. This was it.

No. This couldn’t be it!

“Oh Lucy...” Her dad knelt down beside her, shaking his head and looking so sad. “I wanted to believe it, you know? I really did. I wanted to believe that you were my daughter again.”

She opened her mouth to argue...to remind him that she *was* his daughter, and that he was hurting her, but his hand clamped around her throat, expression never changing. She pried at his fingers, whimpering and crying, shaking her head and gasping for air that didn't come, but he just leaned forward, putting his weight on her throat.

“I loved you so much, honey. You...you and your brother, you were everything to me. Everything I did, I did for you.”

Black spots appeared in Lucy's vision, and desperate, she twisted her body, raking her hands down his arms, tears pouring down her cheeks. This couldn't be it. Cooper was coming! He would wait for her outside! Who would tell him? How would he ever find out what had happened to her? How would Dogmeat ever understand? What about the people she'd met? Jen and Rhonda and Nancy and Mindy...even Max? Would they ever know how she'd died?

“I'm just sorry you...”

There was a blur and a crash...and then the weight of him disappeared, his body falling to the side as she gasped for air, so lightheaded she couldn't move for a moment.

“Lucy? Lucy?” Norm was hovering over her, a hand on her bleeding shoulder, the other hovering around her throat as she coughed. “God...Lucy...” He was crying, tears dripping from red-rimmed eyes as he brushed hair back from her face. “You're okay...Lucy...you're okay, right? Please be okay!”

“What...” she croaked, shuddering when just that effort hurt. She managed to turn her head, just a little, and right beside them, she found their father, unconscious, blood dripping from his temple. And beside him, on its side, the robot. The glass around the brain was cracked, fluid dripping slowly onto the floor.

Bud Askins.

“We have to go,” she gasped out. “We...we have to...”

“Okay. Come on, let's go. Here,” he murmured, wrapping an arm around her and easing her upright. “Are you okay?”

“I'm okay,” she whispered.

He was holding her then, face hidden in her shoulder, a wet spot growing here. “He was going to kill you,” he half sobbed, pulling away and shaking his head. “Lucy, he...Dad was just...he...”

“I know. It's okay,” she soothed, rubbing his back. Her other hand pressed to the side of her head where he'd kicked her, and she flinched when it came away wet with blood. That was something she'd have to deal with later, along with her left shoulder.

“Can you stand up?”

“Yeah...” She had to, so with his help she did, and the two limped their way towards the door to Vault 31. Every step made her head hurt worse and blood was dripping down her arm, but she didn’t have time to find a first aid kit just yet. There were no StimPacks in their bags...she hadn’t dared take theirs lest her dad notice it was missing. A couple of bandages and her menstrual cup, yes, but no StimPacks. But they could make due with a bandage, surely.

The second they were out of 31, she grabbed the key and pressed it into his palm. Dizzily, she held his hand in both of hers, closing his fingers around it. “Go. Open the outer door. I have to get our bags, and then I’ll meet you there.” She couldn’t risk him getting caught with her again. If their father woke up and found them, he’d kill both of them. Maybe he’d have a gun this time...she wouldn’t let him hurt her brother. Even if she didn’t get out, Norm would. “I’m right behind you.”

Even if she couldn’t be, Cooper would look out for him.

“Lucy...”

“You have to go now. Before he wakes up.” Reaching down into her boot, she pulled out the carving knife. “Take this too. Just in case.”

“I don’t know if I can do this.”

“Hey,” she whispered, mostly because it was as loud as she could make her voice. “It’s going to be okay. And...I won’t lie, things up there are so different. And scary. And sometimes, I hated it. Actually, a lot of the time, I hated it. But then I made friends and...and I found safe places where people protected each other and...it’s...it’s so big, Norman. It’s...more than you can imagine. There’s freedom. Real freedom. And...there’s this man. Cooper. The one who’s looking for his family. Dad made me leave him, but he’s on his way to the Vault. He’s...kind of rough around the edges,” she admitted, smiling weakly. “But he loves me. And we protect each other. He used to be a cowboy, if you can believe it. He has the hat and everything. And we have a dog.”

Norman huffed out a weak laugh. “You already found a new husband?”

She felt more tears spring to her eyes as she smiled. “Something like that. He’s...he takes getting used to. But he’s good. I promise. Now...” She squeezed his hands, then let go, taking a step back. “I’ll tell you everything later. Go. Wait for me outside.”

He hesitated, jaw tight as he glanced back at the door to Vault 31 which had closed behind them. Then he nodded, standing up straight, shoulders back. “Okay. Hurry.”

“I will. I love you.”

“Love you too.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! I'm justme--emily on Tumblr if you'd like to chat!

The Actor's Interlude (Part 2)

Chapter Notes

No amount of tweaking could make it so that this interlude chapter was properly spaced like the rest of them, so I hope no one minds the extra interlude! Sorry for the wait on this one! This is a really busy week at work! I hope you all enjoy the chapter :) Thank you so much to everyone who has been commenting!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It was apparently Cooper's turn to have nightmares about the Vault. He'd sure watched Lucy have them enough...had pulled her into his arms after, holding her or distracting her... whatever he could do. Over their brief time together, his body had remembered what it was to comfort someone. To love them. To want them to be okay. To protect them. How long had it been, he'd wondered a few times at night white she'd slept with her head on his chest, since someone had rested so easily in his presence? Since someone had put their head on his chest and slept in his arms?

A long fucking time.

This wasn't the first time he'd ever dreamed about a Vault, of course. Over the last two hundred plus years of traveling the wasteland and working as a bounty hunter, on the occasion that he got more than a couple hours of sleep, he often dreamed about waking up and finding himself in a Vault. Usually Vault 4 with those scientists who had once smiled and shaken his hand and then gone on to torture so many innocent people, all because they were so sure they had the right to do it.

Of course, that was *before* Lucy had mentioned the specifics of the horrors happening in Vault 4.

Sometimes, his dreams hadn't been nightmares. Sometimes, on a rare night when he'd gotten a full meal and had plenty of vials and had maybe even taken a few of the drugs he'd started to partake in over the years, although not so much now that he had Lucy to keep him company, he would tilt his hat over his face, close his eyes, and dream of a safe place. A good place. He'd dream of lying in a bed, knowing his little girl was in her own bedroom next door. He'd dream about walking down industrial gray halls and waving to neighbors. Dinners and helping Janey with homework and playing board games together. Hell, in one of the dreams, he'd walked Janey down the hall to her classroom and had found that his daughter's new teacher was none other than Ms MacLean.

That dream had quickly turned a bit more X rated, but it had been a good one nonetheless.

But since he'd walked out of New Vegas, his nightmares of the Vault were all about Lucy. Lucy with a knife in her side, eyes wide as she looked up at the faceless man she'd married, her white dress slowly turning red. Lucy, beating on the gear shaped outer door until her knuckles bled and calling for him...he was just on the other side...he was so close, but no matter how desperately he reached for her, he couldn't reach her. Lucy, curled up in a bed, crying for him. Begging him to save her. Begging him to hurry.

Of course, he knew better. Lucy MacLean wasn't sitting around crying for him to come rescue her. She was going to rescue her own damn self and ask why it had taken him so long to march his ass back across the Mojave desert. And he would smile and pull her into his arms and remind her that she'd gotten a free flight while he'd had to walk. Not that he begrudged her...hell, he would have flown her himself if he could have gotten his hands on one of those vertibirds.

Cooper cut across the desert this time, marching steadily forward, mind all but blank of everything except Lucy...her lips on his and her face hidden in his shoulder...the way she tasted and the way she felt, her skin so soft under his hands. The way she smiled at him, cuddling in close any chance she got. The sound of her laughter and the noises she made when he was inside of her and even the way she sounded when she was irritated. That feral snarl on her face when she'd stabbed that raider. The way she'd looked when her fist had made contact with that guard's face.

The sound of his name, a broken off cry when a raider had grabbed her by the hair and held a knife to her throat. How she'd clung to him after, crying and shaking, and how he could have held her for days if it hadn't been so important that they leave before the Legion showed up.

Her tearstained face as she'd slept in a bed for the first time in too long.

The way she'd lit up when she'd seen the food he'd found her.

Her lips on his for the first time...someone wanting *him* for the first time in longer than he could remember.

He'd tried to explain...had felt like he was being ripped in two when he'd tried to let her down easy...when he'd reminded her that this was a bad idea only to watch tears run down her cheeks as she'd tried to flee, embarrassment and hurt so clear on her face. He hadn't been able to bear it. And besides...who the hell was he to tell this woman what she should want?

So with only Dogmeat to keep him company, Cooper spent his days thinking of Lucy and how it would feel to hold her in his arms again, and at night, he spent hours in his dreams trying to rescue her.

He made good time, all the while remembering why exactly it had been so long since he'd been to New Vegas, apart from the whole 'buried alive' thing. It was a long fucking walk. A long, loney, boring walk, although the second part hadn't been a problem before he'd remembered what it was like to travel with someone. Most of the time, he and Lucy walked in comfortable silence during the day, although he talked more than her. Probably because she needed to ration her water. But it was different, having her nearby, arms occasionally

brushing, or her sometimes pointing out some animal or plant or hell, even just neat looking clouds. And she played with Dogmeat, tossing a stick for her or crouching down to hug her, kissing her on the head.

Even the dog seemed sadder without Lucy, curling up with him at night and occasionally bringing him a stick to throw, but usually just keeping her nose to the ground and finding her own meals throughout the day.

When he started getting closer to Baker, he wondered if he should stop, or maybe go to Rhonda and Nancy's farm for supplies instead. He knew for a fact he wouldn't be stopping at the farm where Jen's family lived...wasn't about to look those kids in the eye and try to explain this shit. He had plenty of caps thanks to the bounty Lucy's father had paid him, and he could wait a little while on vials...at least until he reached Jack's bar. He'd need enough water for Dogmeat, and then, when he got closer to her Vault, he'd need to have some on hand for Lucy and her brother...if she could get her brother out. There was no guarantee of that. He tried not to think about how heartbroken she'd be if she had to leave him behind. That was a bridge he'd cross if and when he came to it.

In the end, he decided to go to Baker. Rhonda and Nancy were a little too comfortable around him, not to mention Mindy, and he didn't want companionship. Not from them. He didn't want their questions or their worries...didn't know if he could stand them. If they saw him passing through without Lucy, they'd inevitably think the worst...might even break down or give him their condolences, and just the thought made him want to shoot something.

She wasn't dead. She was fine. She was just waiting for him. And he was on his way. Her daddy hadn't killed her. She was playing a part, and then she was going to break out of that place and he'd be there when she did.

No matter what his nightmares told him.

It was the middle of the day when he approached the entrance to Baker, Dogmeat on his heels. She'd liked this place, and so had Lucy. Lucy had asked if they could come back, and he fully intended to bring her back...to get a hotel room and stay there for a while. If he had it his way, Lucy would have hot showers and a bed to sleep in and all the food she wanted. Real food, not just dried jerky from whatever he managed to kill and baked bloatfly. He wondered briefly if she'd want a ranch...would want to raise chickens with him.

The guards out front both hesitated when he approached, then the boy on the left, who he thought he recognized from their last visit, caught sight of the dog and his eyes went wide. "Oh! It's you! The knight didn't find you?"

Cooper started to tell the boy that the knight had found them alright, but remembered Lucy's promise to the kid and figured he'd better honor it. "Nope. Managed to give him the slip."

"Wait...aren't you..." the other one started, but Cooper cut him off, voice dry.

"I am. Now would you be so kind as to step aside and allow me inside?"

It wasn't a given. As much as he'd been determined to protect Lucy from the moment she'd started traveling with him (it put him in mind of when he'd gotten his first puppy as a little kid. His parents had told him, you wanted this puppy, now you have to take care of it. He'd wanted this Vault dweller...now he had to take care of her) her presence had offered him some protection as well. If people liked her, and if they thought he was married to her, which they so often did, they were a little less likely to shoot on sight.

He had a feeling she knew that...that it was partly why she never corrected them. He liked to think that maybe she enjoyed the ruse too.

After a moment, the boy on the left stepped aside, nodding and gesturing for him to come in, but Cooper didn't miss how he looked for Lucy behind him, eyes searching the empty desert at his back. Instead of thinking about it, he bought a couple of bottles of water and headed for the bar. One bottle of moonshine, he thought, tossing Dogmeat a piece of jerky when she lay down on the porch without complaint. Lucy's absence was like a physical weight, but maybe, in this place full of memories of her, a drink would make it a little lighter.

If he was drinking, maybe he wouldn't think about taking her to a restaurant with her friends or holding her in the hotel bed. Maybe he wouldn't remember walking with her around a grocery store for the first time...she'd been so fascinated by the amount of food...and the bakery! She must have stared at the cakes for ten minutes before she'd chosen one, and he could have watched her stare for hours.

The bar was quiet, seeing as how it was the middle of the day, and Cooper took a seat on a stool, waving Percy over with a sigh as he dropped Lucy's pack by his feet, her hat hanging off the side by the chin strap. Of course this place only had the one bartender.

"I'll take a bottle of that moonshine if you've got it." He pulled out the caps, laying them on the bar, and caught the bottle Percy slid to him.

"I take it you made it to Vegas."

"We did," Cooper told him, taking a long drink. Somehow, the moonshine didn't taste quite as good as it had before, back when Lucy had been drinking beside him. Maybe it was a bad batch, he thought as he swallowed. Maybe Nancy was losing her touch.

Or maybe he was getting soft.

"It's a ruin. Nothing much left. Probably won't stay empty long, though." He took another drink. Thought about ordering a whiskey. But every minute he spent sitting in that bar was time he wasn't using to cross the distance between him and Lucy. He could drink when he found her.

"So I'm guessing you didn't find what you were looking for."

"Oh, we found it alright," he muttered.

"Is she..."

“She’s fine,” he snapped, squeezing the bottle.

Slowly, Percy nodded. Then he took off to the other side of the bar, continuing his work of cleaning glasses.

He finished his drink and got up without a word. He liked the bartender...and was surprised at the realization. He hadn’t thought much of other people in a while. Caring about people...hell, even thinking positively of them, was a hazard in his line of work. Sure, he’d accumulated a handful of friendly acquaintances over the years. Business partners and fellow bounty hunters and the occasional bartender or shopkeeper. But sparing too much thought for other people was a real good way to get yourself hurt.

Still, he couldn’t quite stop himself from nodding to Percy as he threw Lucy’s bag over his shoulder. “We’ll be back. Both of us.”

Percy nodded right back. “You’ll be welcome when you do.”

Outside, he found Dogmeat running around the street with a handful of kids, all of them laughing and screaming, her tail going a mile a minute, and he tried not to think about birthday parties or his own little girl...how she’d loved going to the park and playing with her friends. Adjusting the bag on his back, he stared out at the town, not wanting to watch the kids play. As the Ghoul, he’d had very few interactions with children, but as Lucy’s husband, he was finding himself around them more and more, mostly because of Dogmeat and her love for them.

His moral code was pretty loose, but one hard and fast rule was that he’d never hurt children. The occasional stupidly brave teenager that drew on him, sure. But kids under twelve were strictly off limits. That didn’t mean children ever wanted much to do with him, not that he blamed them. But something about having that dog with him apparently made him damn near approachable.

“Mr. MacLean?”

The voice was familiar, and when he searched the crowd, he quickly spotted the girl from before, Kira, hurrying towards. He had to bite his tongue to keep from snapping at her. It wasn’t her fault he hadn’t corrected anyone...that he’d let himself pretend that everyone was right and that he was Lucy’s husband. Besides, she’d warned them about that bounty on Lucy’s head, so he guessed he owed her.

“No time to talk, honey,” he told her simply. “I’m just passing through.”

“But...Lucy...”

He kept his eyes on Dogmeat. “That’s where I’m headed. I’m on my way to go get her.”

To save her. To kill her father. To get her out of that Vault once and for all.

“Is she okay?”

“She’s fine.” He tilted his hat forward, whistling for Dogmeat who stopped right in the middle of a game of chase and ran to his side. “See you around.”

It felt like the entire town paused to watch him leave, all of them noting Lucy’s absence.

Cooper didn’t light fires unless he had to...didn’t want to waste what little kindling he had. He’d already ripped up several of the pages from that book Lucy had given him, telling him casually that she didn’t like it so they could use it to make fires. She was like that with everything...just handed things over to him if she thought he might like them or be able to use them. He didn’t think there was a selfish bone in her body...she never even seemed to consider making him trade or buy something off her. That in itself was almost unheard of anymore.

He wondered if everyone in her Vault was like that.

Sometimes, when he dared, he let his mind drift back to their second meeting. He hadn’t intended to hurt the girl...not really. It had been strictly business. Intimidation meant to make her hand over the scientist’s head. And maybe he’d been a little irritated by that smile she’d given him, like they were old friends instead of two people who’d tried to shoot each other not that long ago. Still, he hadn’t planned on letting her drown. She’d just been convenient gulper bait. He’d pulled her out of the water often enough she could catch her breath...had pulled those nasty little parasites off of her, tossing them to Dogmeat for a snack. In fact, when he’d gotten the head back, he’d intended on leaving her be, so long as she didn’t draw on him.

When he let himself think of that day, he sometimes wondered what she would have done if he hadn’t put a rope around her neck, a half form planned to use her as a last resort if it came to it forming in the back of his own desperate mind. What if, instead, he’d told her that she’d broken something of his and she was going to pay him back for it. What if he’d told her those vials were the only thing keeping him alive? She would have gotten him the caps, he knew now. Would have done just about anything to get his medicine if she’d known how important they were despite the shootout.

Because she was a good fucking person.

She always tried to do the right thing. Always. Even if it ended with her hurt. If she’d had the caps she would have handed them over, the same way she’d handed him a Nuka Cola and a bottle of whiskey before they were anything more than two people walking in the same direction. Hell, she probably would have fucked someone for the caps if she’d needed to.

Over the next few days, he filled his canteen from whatever puddles he could and lived on jerky and radroaches. He only lit fires when he had to cook something, which was rare. Unlike Lucy, he could survive for the most part on irradiated water and raw meat. He only stopped for the night when it was dark enough to be dangerous. He used his inhaler when he needed to, but by the time he walked through the gate to the settlement where Elliot had saved Lucy’s life, he was starting to get uncomfortably low on vials. Thanks to Lucy taking out the Super Duper Mart drug and organ harvesting operation, he’d had enough for the trip to Vegas, even if he hadn’t topped off with Jack, but with only four vials left, he knew he’d need more for the remainder of his trip.

And Jack always had them.

The further east he went, the more people had at least heard of him, and plenty recognized him on sight. Ghouls were more common in this settlement, even if they weren't exactly beloved, so he got fewer looks as he made his way to Jack's bar. He didn't look at Elliot's clinic...didn't even glance in that direction. Dogmeat immediately took off to play with some kids and he didn't look in their direction either, or at the church where they'd stayed when she'd been hurt, back before he'd ever dreamed that she could love him...back when he'd already started to love her.

It was early evening when he stepped through the doors of the bar, hat tilted over his face as his eyes found the booth he'd ordered Lucy to stay in...an order she'd promptly ignored. Against his will, he remembered stepping out of the back, eyes automatically seeking her out before finding that booth empty. Remembered thinking that someone must have taken her...that she could have gone with someone and they could have hurt her or drugged her...

And then he'd found her outside buying soup.

Jack was with another customer, leaning in and chatting, an easy grin on her face. He'd first met her right before he'd started working with Dom Pedro, a girl of just sixteen helping to run her father's bar, and he'd liked her right off. She'd never acted afraid of him...had laughed at some snarky little thing he'd said and had always welcomed him inside the bar on the condition he didn't start any fights.

"I don't start 'em, sweetie. I just finish 'em."

She'd sighed at that, looking resigned and older than her age, and had thrown back a shot when her father hadn't been looking before going back to her work.

He'd been less fond of her when she'd been overtly flirting with Lucy, but he guessed he couldn't blame her. And she'd backed off pretty quick.

Mary had been working with her for as long as he'd known her, although he'd never been able to put a finger on exactly what their relationship was...business partners or lovers or maybe just friends. Either way, Jack made the drugs he needed and Mary usually kept her mouth shut around him, which was just fine with him. Only this time, as he walked into the bar, Mary lifted an eyebrow, barely glancing up as she wiped down the bar. "Jack, your Ghoul's here." Then, looking bored, she muttered to a customer, "wonder where the ghoul fucker is?"

Cooper didn't exactly decide to pull his gun or point it at her face...couldn't remember making any decisions around the sucker punch of agony and fury warring within him. "What the fuck did you just say?" Never mind that she'd called her the same thing the last time they'd been here. Never mind Lucy had done just fine standing up for herself. Never mind that Lucy didn't *care* if people called her a ghoul fucker.

Cooper cared. He loved her so fucking much and he missed her and no one was going to say shit about her right now, not where he could hear. Not when she was locked away in a Vault and could be...

She was fine. She had to be fine.

The room went silent, but then Jack was moving so fast she was nearly a blur, shoving Mary behind her, a hand out in a move that was so like Lucy it took Cooper's breath away.

"Please," his dealer begged. "Please, Ghoul."

He didn't move. Couldn't.

"Please. She'll go."

The hand holding the gun lowered, but he couldn't make himself look any less furious.

"Get out," Jack hissed at Mary, pointing to the back door. "Jesus, Mary. Go the fuck home and don't come back until tomorrow."

The minute Mary had left the building, everyone seemed to release a breath, and Jack slowly lowered her hands. "I'm sorry," she told him softly, and goddamnit, he didn't want her to look at him like that...like he was a person she liked and felt bad for.

"I don't give a fuck. I need vials."

She nodded. "Okay." Then, to a man sitting on a barstool. "I'll be right back. Watch the place."

He nodded, lifting his glass in acknowledgement, and Cooper followed Jack through the side door and through a hallway to the room where she did her magic. Her daddy had taught her to brew all kinds of things, and not just alcohol. She kept her vials in a red toolbox, picking the lock open every time since she'd lost the key back when she'd been a kid and had apparently never bothered to replace it.

"It's been almost thirty years since I've seen you, and here you are showing up at my bar twice in one year," she told him, voice only a little shaky and full of false cheer.

He grunted, watching her work the bobby pin in the lock of the toolbox that stood almost a foot taller than her.

"A knight came by here looking for her."

"Did he now?"

"A week or so after you left. Course, I've never met a Vault dweller in my life. Told him we couldn't help him."

He nodded, softening just a little.

"She alright?"

"She's fine." That was true. It had to be.

“My dad never fucked with the Brotherhood, and neither do it.”

“Whatever happened to your daddy, anyway?” He hadn’t known the man well, but he’d met him a few times. Less than Jack...she was usually the one working, and he was usually drunk in the back when Cooper stopped by.

She lifted a brow at him. He wasn’t usually one for personal questions. Still, after a moment, she answered. “He died six or so years back. Heart attack. Just dropped dead behind the bar one day.”

“Huh. Not a bad way to go.”

Jack snorted. “How many you want?”

“Two month’s supply.”

She started to count the vials, placing them carefully into a cloth bag. “You know, your friend seemed to like it here. I’ve got more moscato for her if she comes by again.” She gave him a cautious smile. “I’ll make sure Mary minds her manners.”

“We might,” he allowed with a nod. “She likes the settlement up in Baker better, though?”

“The fuck? What does Baker have that we don’t?”

“Showers,” he told her, unable to fight a grin.

“Well, you’ve got me there.”

“She’s got some plan to bring running water to the settlements that don’t have it. Wants to bring hot showers to the wastes.”

“Yeah? Can’t say I’ve ever had the pleasure.”

“Maybe this place will be first on her list.”

“Could she do it?”

He nodded, counting the caps out and placing them on the table. “I think she could do just about anything she set her mind to.”

“Huh.” Smiling, she pocketed the caps. “Well, it’s been a pleasure as always. Thank you for not shooting my wife.”

“Your...” Cooper shook his head. It didn’t matter. Still, he couldn’t help being curious. “If you’ve got a wife, why the hell were you acting like you wanted to fuck Lucy on the bar?”

“Because she’s a pretty little thing. And Mary and I see other people all the time. Hell, sometimes we share.” Jack grinned at him, lifting her eyebrows.

Cooper huffed. “Yeah, I’m not interested.”

She barked out a laugh. “Good. You’re not invited. But any time Lucy wants to join...”

He rolled his eyes, but smirked despite himself. “I don’t share, sweetie.”

Jack shrugged, unconcerned. “Fine. Bring her by, though. I’ll keep my hands to myself and Mary will keep her mouth shut. Cross my heart. Now...”. She pushed the drawer shut, and Cooper heard the lock click. “You want a drink for the road?”

He did.

Cooper didn’t stop at Filly. There was no need. He’d gotten some purified water after filling his flask at Jack’s place, and he had a couple of cans of Cram and baked beans, along with some jerky and some more of those cherry tomatoes he liked. That would be enough for a while, even if neither Lucy nor her brother had any provisions, which he assumed they would. He had plenty of caps too, along with Lucy’s stash. They’d be alright.

Every step closer to the Santa Monica pier made his heart beat a little faster, stomach clenching in anticipation. He’d promised her two weeks, and he was going to make good on that promise. The miles disappeared behind him as he marched steadily forward, and the closer he got, the more single minded he became.

Lucy, Lucy, Lucy.

She had nightmares about the Vault, but she was okay. She would get out. He would see her again...hold her in his arms again and kiss her and touch every part of her until he’d assured himself that she was okay. His Lucy.

On the morning of day fourteen, Cooper watched the ruins of the Ferris Wheel come into view with his heart in his throat.

When I stepped out of my Vault, I could see the ocean on my right.

He turned at the pier and kept the ocean on his right, scanning the landscape for any sign of the structure that could house a Vault as Dogmeat played in the water, chasing the waves and then being chased in return. Lucy would have loved watching her...would have wanted to join in the game.

There was a structure about a mile south of the pier, and the sight of it brought Cooper up short, breath catching for just a second. He put his lips around the inhaler, taking a long puff. Was this it? He kept walking, circling around the building to the old...wall? Built to keep out water? He couldn’t tell anymore. It was crumbling, and he was easily able to slip through the support columns. There were bodies littering the ground...people who’d been killed when the bombs had dropped. People who had beaten their fists against the outer door before finally giving up. People who’d tried to break in.

And then, when he turned the corner, there it was. Vault 33. The number he’d seen on her suit the first day they’d met, and several days since.

The sun was just starting to peak over the horizon as he and Dogmeat approached the front door. He'd guess it was close to five in the morning...when would she make her escape? Early in the morning might be safer, but for all he knew, all the Vaulties tucked themselves into bed at the mandatory lights out time of 8pm. Or maybe she'd sneak out in the middle of the night? But she knew traveling at night was dangerous...

He would just wait, he decided, leaning against the wall and tossing a piece of jerky to Dogmeat. She caught it midair, landing gracefully, her tail wagging as she leaned against Cooper's leg and devoured it. He was a patient man, thanks to years spent searching for his family, then several more years locked in a coffin underground. He could wait a few hours... hell, even a few days. And if Lucy didn't emerge from that Vault in, say, two days, he'd start dismantling.

Cooper didn't have to wait two days...he didn't even have to wait twenty minutes. Because no sooner had he gotten comfortable, hat tilted over his face, eyes on the ocean, did he hear the mechanical arm engage on the other side of the door. Standing upright, he took a hesitant stop towards the Vault, watching as the door shifted into place, then, slowly, began to roll out of the way.

He couldn't have helped his grin if he'd tried, something unclenching inside of him. She'd done it. He'd known she could do it. Lucy MacLean, his Vaultie, grade A badass, wouldn't let herself stay buried. She...

...wasn't the one that emerged from the Vault.

He stopped short, Dogmeat pausing beside him, as a young man scrambled out of the Vault, skidding to a stop just before he tumbled down the stairs. He had his hand over his eyes, trying to shield them from a sun he'd never seen, and then stumbled down the stairs, turning and backing away from the gaping maw of the Vault.

He was panting, still backing away, when he spun around, eyes landing first on the bodies, horror making his already big eyes grow wider, and then, finally, on Cooper and Dogmeat. The man froze then, mouth dropping open just a little, and Cooper got a good look at him. He was short, with dark brown hair combed back and just a hint of stubble on his face. He wore the same jumpsuit as Lucy, that bright yellow 33 right in the middle of his back, but the resemblance didn't stop there.

"Norman MacLean?" Cooper asked, stopping a few feet away.

His wide eyes got wider. "You...how..." Then he seemed to really take Cooper in, starting with his hat and drifting down, landing on the dog, the perception in his eyes taking Cooper aback. Then, to Cooper's surprise, the young man relaxed, letting out a sigh of something like relief. "Oh...you're Cooper?"

"Guilty as charged."

"Right. And the dog...she said there was a dog..." Norman nodded to himself, still looking disoriented but maybe a little less panicked. Dogmeat chose that moment to approach him

and he froze, eyes shooting to Cooper in a look so familiar he had to huff out a laugh. This was definitely Lucy's brother.

"She won't bite you. Just put your hand out. Let her smell you."

Hesitantly, Norman did, letting Dogmeat sniff his hand. He flinched, like she might just bite it off, but, tail wagging, she gave it a lick instead, and a little smile appeared on the boy's face.

"Where is she?" Cooper asked then, not able to hold off anymore.

Norman hesitated, looking back at the door again. "She's coming...she...she sent me first. She gave me the key."

"What about your daddy?"

Norman's eyes dropped to the ground, jaw tight. Then, in a soft haunted voice, he whispered, "He...he was unconscious. I hit him in the head with Bud Askins."

Cooper blinked at him, then shook his head when no amount of repeating the words in his own head made it any clearer. "What the fuck did you just say?"

"He's from before the war..."

"Oh believe me, I've had the pleasure."

"He's just a brain on a...robot? I think...I killed him? Bud. The glass broke."

"Bud's fucking buds," he muttered. "Should have figured he had something to do with all this."

"It doesn't matter. She should be here soon! But...she's hurt. He was choking her. Our dad. He would have killed her. And she said she was getting our stuff...but Betty shot her and..."

His head snapped up at that, brain only really processing the words 'choking' and 'shot.'
"What? Where?" he demanded.

"In Vault 31."

"No...Jesus...where was she shot?"

"Her arm...or her shoulder...it all happened so fast..."

Okay...arm, he could work with. He'd just have to get the bullet out. She was okay. She *would be* okay. She had to be. He had a StimPack. He could get more of them. He'd take care of it.

Norman glanced back at the Vault door again, shaking his head. "She's taking too long! I... if my dad woke up...I have to go back. I can't...I can't let him..."

Cooper caught his arm before he could take off. “Stay out here with the dog. I’ll go.” If Lucy would throw herself in front of a bullet for him, no telling what she’d do for her little brother. “Stay, Dogmeat. Watch him.”

Norman just stared at him for a moment, eyes shooting to his gun, then nodded. “He’s bad. My dad. He’s...he’s really bad. They all are. I never thought...but he was going to kill her.”

“Trust me, son. I’m aware.” He drew the gun, placing his saddle bag and Lucy’s pack on the ground, and started walking. “You stay there, you hear? Watch the bags. I’ll be right back.”

And then, hoping that Lucy’s brother was better at following directions than she was, Cooper Howard stepped into a Vault for the first time in a very long time.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! I'm justme--emily on Tumblr if you want to chat :).

The Actor's Interlude (Part 3)

Cooper had been inside Vaults before. He'd advertised for them after all. He could still remember walking down those halls, smiling into a camera and reciting his lines. He'd been proud of himself for getting the model number right after only two takes...the string of letters and numbers still meant nothing to him, but he'd muttered it to himself so many times that he could probably still recite it if he needed to. He remembered shaking hands with the scientists and meeting Bud Askins who was apparently behind at least some of this shit, and the wrap party at his house.

He'd smiled through all of it, sure that he was doing something, if not good, at least morally acceptable. He'd been doing it for his wife, after all. She'd asked him for a favor and he would have done anything for her. So he'd learned his lines and he'd walked into a Vault and he'd tried to sell it. He hadn't known, of course. If he had, he would have told her no. He would have tried harder to convince her to quit.

He would have asked for a divorce sooner.

How many innocent people had seen that commercial and signed up, he wondered as he stood in the elevator. How many had been tortured by the same scientists he'd shaken hands with? There had been a coup in Vault 4, he knew now. He hoped it was bloody. He hoped the test subjects had made those scientists suffer.

A quick shout to Norman had told him the number for the main floor, and he stared at the electric panel of numbers as the elevator took him down. So many floors...how many people lived here? How many lab rats did Vault 33 keep? What about 32? And how many were preserved in 31? People weren't being tortured in this one, at least as far as Lucy knew. She would have told him, he was sure. But he was pretty sure he'd been onto something when he'd said she was breeding stock. At least they seemed pretty well taken care of.

The elevator door opened to those same gray walls and a hallway lined with the occasional closed door and Vault Tec poster, featuring the stupid fucking Vault Boy. No people though...it was still early, so maybe the Vaulties were all still in bed, apart from Henry. And Betty, apparently. That name scratched at something in his brain and he wondered how he knew it. Pushing that thought away, he started to walk, gun at his side, ready. He didn't think any stray Vaulties would shoot him, but if he knew anything, it was that it was always better to be prepared. He tried not to think about the fact that he was in a Vault. Underground.

Lucy was hurt. She'd been shot. Her father had tried to kill her. And if her track record with trouble was anything to go by, Cooper would wager that he was trying again. The last time they'd been separated, it had been for less than a day, and even that had been too long. He still remembered exactly how it had felt to come to after that explosion, hat pulled over his face, Dogmeat whining and licking his hand until he'd finally brought it up to pet her.

“Alright, I’m up,” he’d grumbled, remembering immediately what had happened. The click of the landmine under Lucy’s foot. Moving as fast as he could to grab her...to shove her as far away as possible. But he hadn’t woken up in the same place that he’d fallen...he’d known that the second he’d pulled his hat from his face and had found himself surrounded by tires and near darkness.

Swearing under his breath, he’d gotten his elbows under himself, staring at the tires in confusion, then at Dogmeat when she’d continued to whine.

And that’s when he’d known something was wrong. He’d called for Lucy...had looked down and had found her gun beside him instead of his own. So, he’d thought, it had been her that had dragged him over there, and if she’d been able to do that, she must not be hurt too bad...but she hadn’t been there.

And then he’d seen the word she’d scratched into the ground. *Raiders*.

Then he’d found her hat on the ground. He’d seen the bodies and the footprints. And he’d realized that someone had taken her...someone that, if he had anything to say about it, wasn’t long for this world. He’d been right, as it had turned out.

He felt the same way about her daddy. Henry MacLean had hurt her. He’d put his hands around her throat...had apparently looked his daughter in the eye and had tried to kill her with his bare hands. A man like that...well, Cooper thought with a grin, killing him was practically his civic duty. Anyone would agree. It was justified.

And Cooper was going to enjoy it.

He moved slowly, keeping his footsteps as quiet as possible. The last thing he needed was to get lost in a Vault, but this place was fucking huge and he had no way of knowing where Lucy could be. He could always go back to the elevator and get Norman...have the kid lead him to where he thought Lucy might be, but he didn’t want to waste any time. Lucy’s asshole daddy had already tried to kill her once, and Cooper couldn’t let that happen again. He had to find her. He could find anyone.

And then, as if the universe had heard him, the sound of a familiar voice reached him.

“Just let me go.”

The words brought him up short, all thoughts of enjoying killing Henry MacLean disappearing. Lucy. Her voice was faint and far away, but he could tell it was hoarse. Pained. She was hurt. Those assholes had hurt her.

“You know I can’t do that.”

And there he was. The asshole in question.

“So...what? You’re going to kill me? Like you killed my mom?”

At that, Cooper was moving again, creeping down the corridor, gun ready.

“I told you, Lucy...she stopped being your mom when she abandoned us! Why can’t you understand that?”

“I won’t stay here. I’m leaving!”

“I can’t let you do that,” Henry told her, voice almost flat. Like he’d already accepted the death of his daughter...like he was planning on being the one to kill her.

“Why?” she asked, incredulous and pleading, and Cooper really was going to enjoy killing Henry MacLean, a thought that he only felt stronger about when he spoke again, voice dripping with condescension.

“Honey...you aren’t meant for life out there. It’ll kill you. I know you think you want it...”

“You don’t get to tell me what I want,” she interrupted, hoarse and livid. “Not anymore.”

Cooper followed her voice, pushing relentlessly forward, not taking the time to try and be quiet anymore.

Her daddy laughed a little to himself, and Cooper thought again about ripping out his tongue. “You think he’s out there? Waiting for you? *Cooper Howard*? Come on, honey. You have to know better than that. You were a job to him. He’s a bounty hunter. You were a bounty.”

“That’s not true.”

“I know you want to believe...”

“He loves me.” Lucy said it was an undeniable fact...like it was the truest thing in the world. “And if he’s not out there waiting for me, I’ll go find him.”

Cooper reached the open door where the voices were coming from, peering into the window. It was a classroom, he realized, just like in his dream. Little desks stood in tidy rows, a chalkboard at the front of the room. And there she was. Lucy. His Lucy. She was leaning against the wall, her left hand pressed to a growing red stain on her side. She had what looked like a backpack thrown over her shoulder, another resting at her feet, and she held her trusty hunting knife in her right hand, her expression cold...ready to fight.

That was his Lucy...his little killer. Always bringing a knife to a gunfight.

Across from her, Henry MacLean’s gun was pointed straight at her, and he had the nerve to look sad about it. “I loved you, Lucy. And you betrayed me...betrayed your family. Your community.” He shook his head, sadness morphing into disgust. “I am so disappointed in you.”

Cooper saw Lucy flinch, jaw tightening as her eyes dropped to the ground, and that, he decided, was his cue. He would get his answers another way. He doubted Henry knew much anyway, and that he’d be able to force that information out of him when he was outnumbered by Vaulties who may or may not be armed. He was pretty sure Lucy had mentioned weapons training. Henry’s finger moved to the trigger, and Cooper shot from the hip without

hesitation, watching with grim satisfaction as Henry MacLean dropped, collapsing to the ground before he ever knew what hit him.

Lucy screamed, flinching back at the noise of the gunshot, arm coming up as it to shield her face...and then, slowly, jerkily, she dropped her arm back down, just that movement making her grimace in obvious pain. She stared at the body of her father for a moment, uncomprehending, mouth open, breath coming in soft pants like she'd just run a race. And then, finally, after what felt like hours, she turned, and their eyes locked for the first time in fourteen days.

"Oh," she whispered, tears spilling over and running down her cheeks as she gave him a tremulous smile. "Hi."

"Good morning, Miss MacLean."

"That was really good timing."

"Well, sweetheart, we are notoriously lucky."

She choked out a laugh that sounded like a sob and he crossed the distance as quickly as humanly possible, pulling her into his arms, barely noticing the sound of her knife hitting the floor. He didn't squeeze her, all too aware of the smell of blood and the way she leaned against him, gripping the back of his jacket in a death grip, but he didn't think anything had ever felt better than just holding her in his arms.

"Cooper, Cooper..." She was crying, murmuring his name over and over, and he rubbed her back, rocking her a little as he held her. It had been too long...how had he gone this long without holding her? How had he gone two whole weeks without getting to hear her voice or feel her arms around him?

"Lucy," he whispered, reverent and soft and disbelieving. He kissed her hair, what was left of his nose nuzzling the top of her head as he breathed in, getting every bit of her scent he could. His Lucy...she was okay...but there was blood. Too much of it. Enough that he could smell it. She was bleeding. A lot. "Jesus, little killer, you look like you had to fight your way out of this Vault," he murmured, pulling away just enough to look at her.

"I did." Lucy tried to smile, swaying a little.

"You got a StimPack in either of those bags?"

She shook her head and he couldn't help noticing that she was leaning against him more and more by the second, fingers losing their grip on his jacket. "Couldn't...he would have noticed. If it went missing."

Blood loss. Shock. Adrenaline crash.

"Is there one in here?" he asked, more urgently now.

"Huh?"

“Lucy? Is there a StimPack in here?” When he pulled away just enough to look at her, her eyes were closing, her whole body listing to one side, and when he put a hand to the side of her head, it came back wet.

He swore, reaching back and grabbing a child sized chair and then easing Lucy down into it. Crouching in front of her, he brushed her hair away from her face, heart wrenching when she struggled to focus on him. He was going to have to find a StimPack...but he couldn't leave her.

“Cooper?”

“Yeah, sweetheart?”

“He tried to kill me.” She sounded so sad that Cooper wished he could kill him again.

“I know. Don’t worry, Luce. I took care of it.”

“But...you were going to ask him about your family.”

He shook his head. “It’s alright. I’ll find another way.”

“I looked for her...Norman helped. In 31. But...there’s too much security and Betty had a gun...” She closed her eyes and Cooper had to catch her before she fell, his hands careful on her shoulders.

“Is there a StimPack in this room?” he asked again, trying to stay calm...not wanting her to hear the panic in his voice. He had to find something...quick. And then he had to get her out of here! They were so close...

And then a voice came from his left. “Lucy?”

Cooper had his gun in his hand before he’d made the decision to pull it out, but it was just Norman standing in the doorway, staring wide eyed at his sister. “Thought I told you to stay,” he grumbled. “Jesus Christ, now I’ve got two of you to ignore me.”

Norman went on ignoring him, making a beeline for the desk at the front of the room and yanking at the drawers until they slid open, pulling one out completely and letting it fall to the floor without seeming to notice. Then, finally, he pulled a white box out of one of them, kicking a larger drawer out of the way, then dropping to his knees beside them. Opening the lid with practiced efficiency, he pulled out a StimPack nestled among bandages then, without an ounce of hesitation, stabbed Lucy in the shoulder with it.

She winced, eyes flying open as he depressed the plunger, and Cooper knew the medicine wouldn’t be enough but it would be a start.

“What are you doing?” she asked Norman, staring blearily from her brother to Cooper.

“I’m trying to keep you from bleeding to death,” he told her, voice sharp with what Cooper could tell was fear. “Did he shoot you?”

“What? Cooper didn’t...”

“Dad!” He pointed at the body on the ground like there might be any confusion. “Did Dad shoot you?”

“Oh...just a little. I told you to leave. You were supposed to wait outside.”

“Yeah, turns out your brother listens about as well as you, darlin’,” Cooper informed her, grabbing a pack of gauze from the first aid kit and pressing a square of it to Lucy’s temple. “What exactly does ‘just a little’ mean when it comes to shooting?”

“It...just grazed me. I think.”

He doubted that based on the amount of blood on her side. “I’m going to need an itemized list here. Where else are you hurt?”

“Um...head...”

“Got that. Where else?”

“He kicked her in the head. Stepped on her wrist. Kicked her in the ribs, right side. Betty shot her in the shoulder or the arm...looks like the shoulder.” Norman recited her injuries, voice flat, but Cooper wasn’t fooled. His hand held Lucy’s, lips trembling just a little, as he pulled the empty syringe out of her.

Cooper couldn’t think about all that...he might just waste a bullet shooting him again. “Alright. We need to get the hell out of here. Then I can fix you up. I’ve got StimPacks in my bag. And a knife for digging out bullets. I know that’s your favorite part, Vaultie.”

She gave him a weak smile, eyes a little more focused than before. “I missed you,” she murmured, and he pressed his lips to her forehead, giving in to the desire to pull her into his arms for just a second.

“Yeah, the walk back wasn’t nearly as exciting without you.”

“Sorry.”

“How was the flight?”

“I hated it. Never again.”

He chuckled. “Yeah?”

“It was too high.”

“Didn’t know you were scared of heights, Vaultie.”

“Neither did I. I’ve never been that high.”

He nodded to the first aid kit. "Think you can bring that?" he asked Norman who grabbed it, closing the lid and then throwing one of the backpacks over his shoulder. Cooper did the same with the other one, then reached out and caught Lucy's hand. "Alright sweetheart. Let's get out of here. Can you walk?"

"Yeah...I'm okay."

"Right. Next you're gonna tell me that ain't blood on your suit...they just decided to make them red."

She rolled her eyes, using his hand to pull herself to her feet, leaning on him when he wrapped an arm around her.

When he glanced back at her brother, he was staring down at his father, lips pressed together in a thin line, eyes narrow, and for just a second, Copper worried that this was going to be a problem. Then, something like disgust on his face, Norman spun around, heading for the door.

"How did dad catch up to you?" Norman demanded, turning and leading the way out of the room and down the corridor. Cooper grabbed Lucy's knife and followed, guiding Lucy with an arm around her shoulders. She was steadier on her feet than before, but he still didn't remove his arm...didn't want to, if he was being honest. In fact, her plan to stay in bed together for a week was looking better and better.

"I put them in the bottom drawers, but I couldn't get them open."

"That's probably because the backpacks were too heavy."

"Oh I'm sorry, I thought you might like to have water while we're walking through the wastes."

Norman shot her a look, but he dropped it when his eyes met hers, face twisting with worry instead.

"I'm fine," she tried to assure him, her own voice a little softer.

Her brother glared, face almost petulant. "No you're not."

Lucy sighed. "I *will be* fine."

He didn't argue with that, but he didn't look any happier than before, just led the way to the elevator, pressing the button and glancing back at them.

"Anyone else going to come after us?" Cooper wondered as the elevator opened.

"Maybe Betty. If she wakes up."

That's when it hit him. "That wouldn't be Betty Pearson, would it?"

Norman blinked at him, taken aback, then nodded. “Yeah. She used to be overseer. When they took our dad, she was *elected* overseer again.” He said the word ‘elected’ like he didn’t believe it, and Cooper couldn’t blame him. “You knew her?”

“I did. Back before the war. She worked for Vault Tec.”

Norman nodded, but his eyes didn’t leave Lucy for long. She was leaning against Cooper’s side, head resting on his shoulder, and he rested his cheek on the top of her head until they reached the top. He let Norman leave the elevator first, leading Lucy out after, then stopped short.

The Vault door was closed.

Cooper gripped Lucy tighter, a familiar claustrophobia threatening to take hold and choke him. The Vault door was closed. Why the hell was the Vault door closed? “What the fuck...” he started, but Norman pulled something out of his pocket and walked over to a podium, pushing buttons Cooper couldn’t see.

“I shut it behind us...I didn’t want anyone to come up here and take the key.” Norman flipped a switch, turning something on the console. “I tranqed Betty, but she could still wake up. And I didn’t know where our dad was.”

Cooper closed his eyes, shaking his head a little. Right. That made sense...didn’t mean he had to like the sight of a closed Vault door when he was inside.

The three of them hurried out, Norman, surprisingly, not so much as glancing back at the home he’d never left. Instead, he followed Cooper off to the side, the three of them making it to the beach before Cooper lowered Lucy to the ground, Dogmeat yipping in excitement and running circles around them, her eyes locked on Lucy.

“Hang on. You can see her in a minute,” he scolded, even as Lucy reached for the dog and scratched her behind the ears.

“We have to go...we can’t stay here,” she tried to tell him, face tilted up to the sun like a desperate houseplant. He pulled his gun from his holster, offering the grip to Norman who just stared at it for a moment, then met his eyes, brow furrowed in confusion.

“You know how to shoot a gun?”

“Everyone in the Vault goes through the extensive mandatory weapons training from the ages of...”

“A yes would suffice, son. You’re the lookout. Shoot anybody that comes after us. Take the dog.”

Norman nodded, taking the gun and turning towards the Vault door, apparently needing no more instructions. After a reluctant glance at Lucy, Dogmeat followed him.

“We need to move...”

“Your brother’s on guard duty. I need to make sure you don’t pass out from blood loss because I’m not carrying you all the way to the closest settlement.” That was a bluff. He’d absolutely carry her. Judging by the smile on her face, she knew that too, but she stopped arguing and let him unzip her suit.

The skin around her throat was red and it would bruise, but she was still breathing so that needed to take a back seat to the rest of it. Her head wasn’t bleeding too much, but he’d probably want to make sure she stayed conscious for a while and watch her for signs of a worsening concussion. Her shoulder bled sluggishly. He had to get the bullet out. And when he pulled the zipper down further, helping her ease the suit off her shoulders, he could see the bullet hole in her side. There was an exit wound...and plenty of blood.

“Thought the Vaults were supposed to be safe,” he grumbled, taking her right hand in his, gently probing around her wrist. She winced but she could move her fingers, so that was something. He’d need to wrap it.

“They are. Unless you try to leave.”

Cooper grunted in agreement, grabbing her pack and pulling out the bottle of whiskey they’d been using to clean out wounds for a while now. It was getting close to empty, but he would give her another StimPack once he got the bullet out.

Lucy’s eyes fluttered a little, closing and staying that way before he shook her. “Nope. No sleeping yet. You’ve got to catch me up. Tell me about your little Vault adventure.”

“It was awful.”

He snorted, easing her back against one of the support columns. “Really? Here I thought you loved hot showers.”

“The showers were nice,” she admitted as Cooper scooted closer, pressing the tip of the knife against her shoulder. He was going to have to invest in a pair of tweezers. She clenched her jaw, but a pained whine escaped anyway. “My bed...” she gasped out, trying to stay focused.

“Right. We should have made a pit stop at your bedroom.” He tried to make his voice casual as he managed to get the knife behind the bullet. Again, her eyes seemed like they might stay closed, tears running down her cheeks as she fought not to scream, but he squeezed her good shoulder. “Not yet, sweetheart. Stay awake. Almost...”

She did scream then, back arching a little when he reached in with his fingers, pulling the bullet out.

Cooper pulled her upright, hiding her face in his shoulder as she shook, tears soaking his shirt. “Worst part,” he warned her, then dumped about half of the remaining whiskey onto her shoulder. Her scream was muffled against his shoulder this time, and the moment he was done, he rubbed a hand up and down her back, lips pressing to the side of her head. “Fucking Betty. Should have killed her when I had the chance.”

Lucy choked out a little laugh, and he eased her back against the column. “You said...she worked with your wife?”

“Yeah. She was an assistant. My wife was higher up.”

“Do you...think...” She brought a weak hand up, wiping under her eyes. “They went in order? Lowest to highest?”

“Maybe...it’s worth looking into *after* you’re healed up. One more,” he warned, and she nodded, closing her eyes and taking deep breaths as he moved to her side. He didn’t bother trying to make her open them, placing his glove in her hand and waiting for her to bite down before he dumped the rest of the alcohol into the wound there. She sank her teeth into it, more tears running down her cheeks, a muffled scream making its way out around her teeth. “There. All done,” he promised, resting his hand on her stomach as she caught her breath, grimacing and pulling his glove out of her mouth. Once she’d relaxed some, he pulled out a StimPack and stuck it in her side above the wound that still bled, watching as her skin started to knit itself together, the redness around her neck fading some too. “How’s that?”

”Better.”

Next was the gauze, and he taped some to her side and her shoulder, then wrapped a bandage around her wrist. There wasn’t much he could do for her head or her throat but hope the StimPack worked its magic. Almost as soon as he’d finished wrapping her wrist, she started to sit up, but he pressed a hand on her good shoulder. “Hold on, sweetheart. We’ve got all the time in the world. Take it easy for a second.”

She pressed her lips together, nodding and staring out at the ocean for a moment. She looked so tired...he’d hoped that she’d at least get to rest in the Vault, but she looked just as tired as the day they’d been separated. He shifted to sit beside her, wrapping an arm around her shoulders, and she rested her head against his.

“Cooper?”

“Yeah, sweetheart?”

“I’m sorry that the first time I told you that I loved you it was when my dad was about to take me away.”

He huffed out a little laugh, wondering if this woman would ever stop surprising him. He’d expected something about her daddy, or maybe even one of the friends she was leaving behind. “Oh sweetheart...that wasn’t the first time,” he informed her.

“What?” she asked, tilting her head like Dogmeat.

“It was probably about the third.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Well, the first time was when you were drunk in Baker.”

She flushed, cheeks turning a delicate pink. “Oh...I don’t remember that.”

“The second was in your sleep.” He still remembered it like it was yesterday...the murmured words against his shirt, the feeling of her in his arms...

His whispered response, knowing she was asleep but saying it anyway.

“How do you know I was talking to you?”

“Well, because you said the words ‘Cooper, I love you.’”

“I could have been talking to a different Cooper?”

“Oh really?” he asked, lifting his brow and fighting a smile.

“Yes.”

“How many Coopers do you know?”

“Well...maybe I was talking to Gary Cooper. In my dream," she informed him smugly.

He nodded, all fake understanding. “Ah, yes, your good friend and lover, early 1900’s film star, Gary Cooper.”

She giggled, and the sound was like a drug shooting through him. “Exactly.”

“Who you call exclusively by his last name.”

Laughing, she caught his hand and squeezed it, and Cooper couldn’t help himself anymore.

“I love you, Lucy MacLean. I have loved you for a long fucking time.”

“I know,” she whispered, making him chuckle.

“And I plan on continuing to do so for as long as you’ll let me.”

She nodded. “Me too.”

“Then it seems we are on the same page.”

“An honest exchange.” Lucy nuzzled closer, face hidden against his neck, and if it hadn’t been for the Vault behind them and her little brother standing guard, Cooper thought he could have stayed right there forever.

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