

CHAPTER ONE

Saul walked into the house lit by unconfident lights, down a corridor with night-blackened windows, past splotches of peeling white paint, and into a dark room. A man named was sitting back in a leather chair, looking at a plasma screen on the far wall, where images flickered and morphed, wicked, neon. Saul glanced at the black pit bull in the corner and the gleaming gun on the desk. And then he turned and saw Piper sitting on a rotten couch with her elbows on her knees and one hand curled around her opposite fist. She wouldn't raise her head to look at him.

"I got your sunlight," Saul said to the man, taking a small velvet bag out his blazer pocket.

The man's thumb kept pecking at the controller in his hand. His character onscreen sliced a sword through a slow riot of neon hues. "Bout time."

Saul tossed the bag on the desk. Piper's eyes followed it. The man put his controller down. The pit bull's heavy panting filled a sudden silence. The man pulled the tiny drawstring of the bag. A thick beam of sunlight blasted upward, bathing the man's dark face from underneath, his closed eyelids and blade-sharp nose.

Saul fiddled with a quarter in his pocket.

A tendril curled off the beam, and then it all flickered and vanished. The man sat back and ran both hands down his face. He reached forward and picked up his gun, and pointed it at Piper.

"She's all yours," he said. "Do with her what you will."

"She doesn't belong to me. Doesn't belong to you either."

"Course not," the man said with a wicked smile, lazily his gun around. "She belongs to chemicals."

Saul didn't react to the gun. No one would hurt him. He was the only person who could pinch sunlight from the sky.

The man dropped the gun, picked up his controller, and slumped back into his chair. Saul turned to Piper. Thin light from the TV shone on her reddish-blond hair, and her green eyes that still refused to meet his.

“You coming?” Saul asked.

Her head fell, and she exhaled, and then she got up and followed him out of the house, into the Seattle night. Pavement glistened from recent rain. Saul walked with his fists in his black blazer pockets. He usually wore a black blazer, even in late July. Piper walked with her head down, hands halfway down the back pockets of her jeans.

“I’m getting tired of saving your ass because you can’t wait four days for me to get some sunlight to you,” he said.

“It’s been a rough week,” she said.

“They’re all rough.”

Yellow sodium lights lit them. Saul looked into the bland black sky and the blacker trees and wondered if fireflies would ever migrate farther than the Rocky Mountains.

“Especially when you have chronic depression,” Piper said. “And your four-year-old son has his first asthma attack and the first thing he does is ask where Saul is, and not his father, who only God knows the whereabouts of.”

He hit a button on his car keys, and his blue Camry parked along the curb chirped as it unlocked. “Bet he isn’t trapped in a cocaine dealer’s house with the laziest pit bull I’ve ever seen.”

She flicked her eyes to him for the first time. “You think I don’t feel bad about this?” she asked.

“I think you feel very bad about it,” he said, opening his door and ducking into the car.

“Good.”

“I think I feel bad about it too.”

His door shut, and her door shut, and there was a sudden stillness as the chorus of crickets cut off, and he turned his keys in the ignition.

“Because you hate losing my money,” she said, sliding the seatbelt over her red blouse.

“Fuck your money,” he said, bursting off the curb and down the dark street. “I hate losing you.”