

Excerpt from *Little Warlord* by Roni Simunovic (In original document: page 29–34 of 169)

Ben woke up the day before his eighteenth birthday with a hole in his shoulder and blood soaking into his second-favourite sweater. He swore and sat up. The blood hadn't gotten through the towel he'd laid under him but the pain was unimaginable. He tried to tug off his sweatshirt without lifting his arm, but it didn't make it any better. He dry-swallowed another codeine and used a mirror to look at the bloodstained bandage wrapped around his shoulder. He wasn't sure if he should be horrified or excited by the brutal scar it would leave when it healed.

He flopped back to the bed and checked his phone. It was nine in the morning; he had mass at ten. He had one text from Dee, sent a couple hours ago: `text me wen yer free
ill do yer banduges agen.`

He texted back, **it hurts worse than yesterday, is that possible??**

`ya. yer arms guna fall off`

fuck you. i'll text you when mass is over ok?

`no prob say hi to soph fore me`

Ben taped more gauze to his wound and donned his Sunday best, tied his hair back and pulled his crucifix out from where it usually lied safe under his shirt. He checked the shiny real estate calendar that hung on the wall next to his desk and made an X in pencil over the current date. Tomorrow's was circled three times over.

He packed a bag with a change of clothes, brushed his teeth and bounded downstairs. Sophie sat at one end of the kitchen table with the Sunday paper and a grimy mug of coffee. Ben's little brother, Liam, sat opposite her with a bowl of soggy Cheerios and an open book. Liam was his *little* brother in age only; he was thirteen and already taller than Ben. He had dark, shaggy hair and dark skin and he looked more like Sophie's kid than Ben did, who looked too much like Telly to look like anyone else. Liam had been adopted by Telly and Sophie two years ago after a year of fostering, from the same orphanage on 12th Street that Dee grew up in.

Ben chirped, "Morning, Mom. Sup, sportsfan." He grabbed an apple off a stack of them in a bowl. "Isn't it too early to be reading for fun?"

Liam said, "I always read when I eat."

"Sure. How's your pre-season going?"

Liam slapped his book down on the table top. "Great! I've been skating first line at practice and if I keep it up I might be first line for real soon."

"Oh, no shit? Congrats. And your season starts ..."

"September, ish." Liam attacked his cereal. "Start coming to my games and maybe you'd know."

"I'm busy."

"*Mom* comes."

"I really do," Sophie said.

"Alright, I get it. I'll try."

"Did you get your homework done last night like you said?" Sophie asked.

Ben wasn't enrolled in summer classes like Sophie and Liam thought he was. He hadn't been to school since the first week of eleventh grade. He got Sophie's contact number changed to the bakery's number and convinced Nadesh to pretend to be his mom whenever the school called and eventually, they stopped trying. He wouldn't get anything out of failing another grade that he wouldn't get out of spending time at Mirrors. He was supposed to have graduated already.

"Yeah, totally."

Sophie said, "You'd better not be lying to me, Benja. My parents didn't come to this shithole country so my ungrateful kid could bunk off class."

"I swear, it'll be done for Monday."

"And *I* swear I'll send you back to Juanacatlán. You'll go live with your great-grandma, I swear it."

"You know I'd starve, my Spanish sucks."

“All the more reason to go. Connect with your roots. Please, skip class. Gimme the good son I always wanted.” She jabbed Liam in the ribs. “No ice in Mexico, hockey boy.”

Liam laughed. “There is too! I saw them at Worlds last year!”

Ben mumbled, “Dee says hi, by the way.”

Sophie whipped towards him. “Yeah? When’s he coming over?”

“Uh, I dunno. Later this month, maybe. He’s busy.”

She looked back down at her paper. “Right. Both of you, always busy.”

Dee and Sophie, along with Telly, had been best friends for Ben’s entire life. Dee had stopped coming around when he started dating Ben.

“Soon, though,” Ben said, and Sophie didn’t look up.

Liam asked, “What are you doing after mass? Wanna play PlayStation or something?”

“I might not be home ‘til late.” Ben threw his apple core in the trash and bending down to do so made his shoulder twinge in pain; he glanced down to check for blood. “But, sure, though. I mean, don’t wait up, but ...”

Liam looked down at his cereal. “Sure thing.”

“I shouldn’t be too late.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll text you.”

“Sure. Go get your shoes on, we’re gonna be late.”

Sunday mass was held in a small, stuffy church that boiled hot in the August sun and reeked of wool and hairspray, but Ben went enthusiastically every week. He sat between Sophie and Liam in the second pew from the front and tried to ignore the pain throbbing in his shoulder, now so bad his eyes watered. He sat up ramrod straight because it helped ease the tension. Next to him, Liam jiggled his knee over and over again. Ben closed his eyes and opened them again and watched their well-meaning but gawky pastor shuffle through a sheaf of papers

at the altar. The pastor's name was Father Balmoral and Ben remembered, in the weeks after Telly's death—after Declan Briden hung him off the end of a dock and drowned him in the lake—how Balmoral would bring bland casseroles to their front door and let Ben sit silently in the church with the screaming, howling emptiness of his grief for hours on end because being there was the only thing that made him feel better. Ben thought about Telly more on Sunday than any other day. Sophie now sat where Telly used to sit. She seemed smaller and more hunched since his death, and sat with her dark, tiny hands folded in her lap. She had once been the biggest, loudest presence in any given room, but widowhood had shrunk her and made her quiet. She listened to Balmoral's sermon with her eyes closed and had acrid coffee breath. Ben fiddled with his crucifix and pain drummed in his wound like someone tapping more and more insistently on his shoulder with every passing second.

His phone buzzed in his pocket. Sophie shot him a look and he mouthed an apology.

The text was from Dee: Im around the corner when yer dun.

—

Outside, Dee was sweating through his shirt. The heat was blistering and he wore a plaid flannel shirt rolled most of the way down his forearms to hide his scars. Sweat slid down the back of his neck and he flipped his cheap plastic phone around in his hands, watching the side of the church from around the corner. After a time, people poured out onto the street, their summery outfits wrinkled and flat. Ben and Sophie and Liam appeared in a throng and Dee shrunk back into the shadows of a tree down the street. It was weird to see Ben in his Sunday best, with his shirt buttoned right to the throat and his hair twisted back with a real hair tie and not a sticky rubber band. He had his arm around Sophie's shoulders and was yammering to Liam. The three of them stopped at the corner and Ben pulled his phone out and gestured down the street, and Sophie's bushy eyebrows furrowed angrily. Ben put his hands on his hips. Sophie

did the same. After a few more moments, Ben took off down the street towards Dee and Sophie and Liam turned and headed the other way, out of sight.

“Hullo,” Ben said as he approached. “Hiding behind a tree like some fuckin’ weirdo. Got any smokes?”

“Hi.” Dee tossed him his pack. Ben took two smokes out, tucked one behind his ear and lit the other, then passed the pack back. They strode slowly down the sidewalk side-by-side, away from the church. “I wasn’t hiding, I was in the shade.”

Ben said, “You know you can talk to them. Liam and Mom.”

“I know, I just didn’t want to.”

“Mom misses the shit out of you. She was asking when you’re gonna come by.”

“I know.”

“You were best friends. Before.”

“I *know*, I just—it’s not easy, alright? It’s weird now.”

“Because you wanna bone her son?”

“Christ, Ben, shut up.” Dee lit a smoke. He pushed his sleeves up to his elbows and Ben took off his cardigan and stuffed it in his backpack. “I didn’t think you’d wanna hang out, I thought you had to put your whole Sunday away as the Lord’s day or whatever.”

“Nah, it doesn’t matter.”

“Doesn’t it? How would he feel if he knew you were skipping your day of rest to do illegal junk?”

“I think he’s chill with it. Back in olden days you couldn’t buy anything or leave the house, and that can’t be right, so whatever. And he made me like this anyways, so it’s his fault as much as it is mine. Speaking of which.” He elbowed Dee in the side. “You sure got here early. Miss me?”

“Call it being excited you’re not dead. How’s your shoulder?”

“Fucking awful, I can hardly think. It’s fulla puss and yellow.”

“Gross. I’ll re-wrap it for you at Mirrors, we’ve got that antiseptic stuff.”

“Okay, cool. Am I gonna be able to do chin-ups with this?”

“I wouldn’t. You just got shot, you can’t take a week off?”

“I dunno. No.”

“You’ve been working out a lot lately.”

Ben picked at his nails. “Yeah, so what? I’ve always been tiny, sue me for wanting to be able to haul your knocked-out ass out of fire.”

Dee rubbed his nose to hide his smile. “That’d be helpful.”

“Sure happens often enough.”

“That’s not my fault.”

“I know.”

They both went quiet. Dee ashed his cigarette into a planter they walked by. Ben stomped the ground when he walked, a habit he had. Then he said, “I remember the first time we kissed with tongue.”

“God, do you say stuff just to hear yourself talk? You do not remember.”

“Do too! I was sitting on the tail of your van and you had a wicked concussion—it was the day that big dude knocked you out and tried to cut off your hand—and it was all cloudy and wet, and we made out for like five minutes.”

“You’re making that up.”

“I swear. I can’t believe you don’t remember.”

“Why would I?”

“Cause you’re obsessed with me, that’s why.” Ben squinted up at him, his eyes brown like tree bark or dry soil or Ikea furniture. “Wanna do it again?”

Dee scratched his face. “We’ve made out since then.”

“Hardly. Do you want to or not?”

Dee glanced at him and thought, *I want you so bad it makes my teeth jump.*

He said, “No.”

“You do too.”

“Yeah, but that’s not the point.”

Ben kicked a rock and it skittered into the gutter. “My birthday’s tomorrow.”

“I know.”

“I *know* you know.” He shook his head. “Fuck, sorry. I’m being a brat.”

Dee laughed and dropped his arm over Ben’s shoulders and squeezed him. “You’re always a brat. Don’t worry about it.”

Ben leaned into his side as they walked. “Since I’m already being a brat, can I ask you something?”

“No.”

“When was the last time you had sex?”

Dee let him go. “Asshole. You remember when.”

“What? We—oh, you mean *whatsername?* You’re joking. So you haven’t since—”

“About this time last year.”

“I don’t believe you. You never went with anyone else?”

“I didn’t wanna see the look on your face when I told you I did.”

“I wouldn’t’ve been mad.”

Dee scoffed at him. “Yeah, right. How come you never fucked one of those stupid little jocks from school?”

“Didn’t think of it.”

“Bullshit. What about Liam’s hockey bros?”

“Also no.” He twiddled his cigarette around in his fingers. “But maybe I should’ve. At least I’d know what I’m doing.”

Dee knew that Ben thought about sex a lot, if he thought about it even half as much as he talked about it, but the idea that any of Ben’s anticipation was *nervous* stunned him into silence.

“Don’t worry about that shit,” he said eventually, clapping Ben on the back so awkwardly that Ben started laughing. “You’ll be—you’re fine. I’ve had way less sex than most people.”

“What? Since when?”

“Since always. I dunno, I’ve only had sex maybe a dozen times. Or half that. I don’t know, I never counted.”

“Why? That’s impossible, you’re—shit, *look* at you.”

“What do you mean, look at me? I got a face like an old catcher’s mitt.”

“Oh, fuck off.”

“I’m serious. When I was a kid I didn’t want anyone to know I was a bum, and then I didn’t want anyone to see my apartment, it’s—I mean, thank you, but my apartment is gross—and where was I ever gonna meet anyone, anyways? The fuck would we talk about? You know you’re the only one I can talk to.” He stubbed his cigarette out on a tree. “Besides, women make me nervous. Can we not talk about this?”

“You’re joking.”

“They’re beautiful! I never know what to say.”

“You’re a loser.”

“I know.” Dee closed his hand around the back of Ben’s neck, thumb at the base of his skull. “But you like me anyways.”

“Sure do,” Ben said quietly. This time the silence lasted twenty seconds, almost a full suburban block, until he asked, “Excited for *your* birthday?”

Dee blew a raspberry. “I fucking hate birthdays. You know I’m gonna be thirty?”

“Yeah, so what?”

“I’m a million years old.”

“Don’t be a downer,” Ben said. “It seems gross now, but when you’re forty you’ll be dating a twenty-eight-year-old and you’ll be the coolest guy around.”

Dee looked down at him. “I figure by ‘twenty-eight-year-old’ you’re talking about *you*.”

“Wh—yes!”

“That’s pretty cocky.”

“Hey! What, you think I’m gonna be dead?”

“No! Shut your mouth, don’t talk like that.”

“So you’re gonna break up with me, then?”

“We’re *not* talking about who I’m gonna be dating when I’m forty.”

They rounded a corner and Mirrors’ sandwich board sat on the sidewalk in front of them, painted black with chalkboard paint (the loaf of the day was black rye), and the lake shone glaring, bright white in the sun on the other side of the street, stretching endless into the horizon like an ocean.

Ben said, “Yeah, you’re right, we’re not talking about it, ‘cause there’s no need. ‘Cause you’re gonna be dating *me*.”

Dee rolled his eyes. Ben burst into the bakery and the bell above the door rattled. He hollered, “Naddy, I got shot!”

Nadesh was in the middle of ringing up a customer’s danish. The man with the danish jumped and Nadesh glared at Ben and hissed, “Keep your voice down!”

The man clutched the danish to his chest and hurried by Ben and Dee on his way out. Nadesh’s gold hijab glimmered so bright it nearly hurt. She asked, “Where’d you get shot?”

“Shoulder-neck-ish. *Blam!* Point blank.” Ben strode through the bakery’s small front room and vaulted over the counter to get to the back. Dee lifted the hinged gate and walked through normally. Nadesh snagged his sleeve.

“And where were *you* during all this?”

“I was ... also there.”

“You let him get shot!”

“We’ve all been shot! I’m an old man, I’m getting slow.”

“You’re not old!” Ben kicked him in the back of the knee. Dee swiped at him and he ducked. Nadesh flicked at Ben’s crucifix as he passed.

“Hey, hey, wait—look at you, my sweet little Catholic boy. You never come in on Sundays. All dressed up!”

Ben yanked the tie from his hair and shook it out. “Yeah, yeah, I’m changing.”

“Don’t get sassy with me, you *do* look cute.”

“I’m not going for cute.” He patted Dee on the chest and said, “Changing. Be right back,” then walked through into the back; the heavy metal door was propped open with a sack of flour to alleviate the heat in the back rooms. Nadesh side-eyed Dee knowingly, and he sucked his teeth and looked away.

She said, “You let him get shot.”

“I’m not his keeper.”

“Aren’t you?”

Dee didn’t know how to answer that. He left her hanging and slipped into the back room. The place was hot and wet like a sauna and reeked of sweat and Old Spice. Jeers erupted from the back where a group of guys sat watching *Jerry Springer* in various states of undress. Dee headed for the old gurney and the cabinet that medical supplies were kept in and knocked his shoulder into Jeffrey, who stood just inside the bakery door.

“Sorry, man.” Dee held his hands up. Jeffrey was glowering at him. Jeffrey was in his fifties and was wide-shouldered, sour and mean. The story was that Declan Briden or some affiliate thereof had let Jeffrey’s wife, a prominent local lawyer, die in the hospital after a car accident. But Jeffrey never talked to anyone but Telly, and then Telly died and Jeffrey was left with a permanent scowl, a worse attitude than he had before and some very thinly veiled hatred for Ben, whom he didn’t think was old enough or good enough to be doing anything that Telly had done. Jeffrey was twenty years’ Dee’s senior, so Dee smiled and nodded and tried to step by him without starting shit, but Jeffrey took a step back and kept frowning. Dee stood up straight—something he avoided doing outside of intentional intimidation, always self-conscious about his height—and stared down at Jeffrey.

“You need something?”

Jeffrey moved his jaw back and forth. "I'm giving you my resignation. Or something."

Jeffrey had worked with Telly since before Dee met him and no one hated Briden more than Jeffrey did. The guys joked that he threw darts at a photo of him. Dee couldn't believe that he was bowing out now, when they finally had guys feeding them secrets from inside Briden companies, and guys like Colm who could find arms dealers and orchestrate hits on Briden bars.

Dee said, "You oughta talk to the boss about this. He'll be out in a sec." He avoided calling Ben by his name in front of anyone because it seemed too intimate and everyone remembered when, only a couple years ago, Dee called Ben *kiddo*, exclusively.

Jeffrey said, "That kid ain't no boss of mine."

Dee was in no fucking mood. He knew exactly what Jeffrey thought of him, that he was some weak, overgrown soft-cock, and there was no way that it would go well.

"Jeff, listen—"

"No, *you* listen," he said, jabbing Dee in the chest. "I came into this thing thinking I'd be working under Telly, and that was all fine and good, he was—God, he was a great man, he could have done anything—and I was proud to call him *boss*, twenty years younger than me and I did it, not a thought." He leaned in conspiratorially, as if sharing a secret, and anger licked white-hot at the back of Dee's throat. "But God-be-fucking-damned if I'm gonna answer to his cold-blooded faggot of a son."

Dee grabbed the front of Jeffrey's stained tank top, yanked it up under his chin and ran him back into the wall. Jeffrey snarled at him and Dee pushed his forearm under his throat and spoke in a quiet, incensed hiss.

"That kid has saved your ass more times than I can fucking count and I haven't even been paying attention. He'd take or give a bullet for anyone in this room and he *has*, and you know it, so show him some fucking respect because he's the bravest—"

Jeffrey jammed his elbow into Dee's stomach and winded him, and he spat, "Did you believe all that bullshit before you started fucking him in the ass?"

Dee wound his fist back. Jeffrey didn't even flinch. Dee's mind got caught in a loop of *Telly wouldn't want me to do this, Ben wouldn't want me to do this, I'll embarrass him, I'll embarrass myself, don't hit him, don't hit him—*

“Dee!”

Ben stood in the locker room doorway in a big white t-shirt and jeans, his backpack slung over his shoulder. Dee dropped his arm from Jeffrey's throat and every guy in the other room was looking at them.

Jeffrey snarled under his breath: “Pussy.”

“Get away from him,” Ben snapped at Dee. Dee didn't question him in front of anyone, and rarely when they were alone, and stepped back. Ben said to Jeffrey, “Don't ever come back here. You wanna work for Telly again? Go fucking join him.”

Jeffrey spat on the concrete floor at Ben's feet, turned and stormed out. No one moved. The only sound in the room was the electric fan whirring away on the coffee table and, distantly, a toothpaste commercial on TV. Ben whirled around to face everyone. No one bothered pretending they hadn't been looking and stared plainly back.

“Shouldn't you be doing something?” Ben tried, and for the first time since Dee could remember, no one gave him shit. They turned back to the TV and their card games.

“Hey.” Colm, perched on the arm of one of the couches, got Ben's attention. Colm was the closest to Ben's age at twenty-four and the only one, save Dee, who seemed to care much about Ben. In the wake of Telly's death, Ben was just a short kid with Telly's nose, a sharp temper and a dead dad. No one liked talking to him much. Colm said, “That dude was a nasty son of a fuck. Don't stress.”

Ben scratched his arm. “Thanks.”

Dee stood still pulsing with anger in the dark hallway by the locker room. Ben trotted towards the medical corner, hopped up on the gurney and peeled off his shirt. The bandages wrapped around his shoulder and chest were blotched with yellow and pink and stunk in the heat. He looked at Dee and said, “Fix my shoulder.”

Dee nodded. He got a spool of gauze, a cloth, ointment and rubbing alcohol from the cupboard and set them on the gurney next to Ben.

“I’m sorry,” he said, all in a rush. He wasn’t sure if he was apologizing for not hitting Jeffrey or for nearly hitting him—he’d been spending too much time with Ben, he never used to get so angry. Ben looked up at him, his mouth set. He was the only person Dee had ever met who could look intimidating while looking *up* at someone. Dee tried not to look at his bare chest or stomach or arms but he caught the glint of the detailed gold crucifix resting against his sternum. Dee thought it was upsettingly detailed. Jesus’ little golden crown of thorns, his melty face. Ben’s skin was golden, too, but different, tanned. Nearly hairless.

“Cold-blooded,” Ben said as Dee started peeling blood-wet bandages off his hunched form. “That’s what he said. The faggot thing is whatever, but *cold-blooded*. They think I don’t give a shit?”

He sounded miserable and Dee didn’t know what to say. He went on.

“When I first started coming here, Dad said, these guys are gonna pick on you because you’re short and skinny. If they say *jump* you don’t say *how high*, you jump twice as high as *they* could ever jump so they never doubt you again. If they run, you run faster, you shoot straighter, you do smarter shit. He said it’s stacked against me, being small and sort of dumb, so I gotta be ruthless to shut everyone up, and that sometimes being Telly Benjamin’s son is gonna do me favours and sometimes it isn’t, and I gotta know when is which.” He twitched with pain as Dee peeled off the last bandage. “I know it was just ‘cause he was short too, but whatever. I wonder if anyone ever told *him* all that.”

The top of Ben’s shoulder was swollen and red and pierced through with Dee’s shoddy stitching, but it didn’t look infected. It would leave a brutal scar. Dee looked at the pristine slope of his other shoulder, heavy with regret.

Ben went on. “But I guess maybe I went too far with all that if they think none of this means something to me. Cold-blooded. Like I’m not doing it for *them*.”

“I don't know what they think,” Dee said. He splashed rubbing alcohol on a rag and touched it gingerly to his wound. He followed it with ointment. “I'm uh, biased.” Dee said the word like he only half-knew what it meant, which, for him, was true of a lot of words.

Ben touched his knees to Dee's sides and let his boot trail down his leg. “So I've heard. How biased are we talking?”

Their heads were bent towards each other. Dee's fingers danced nervously against Ben's bare arm and even that felt clandestine. He could smell Ben's hair, his breath and the bleachy medicine smell of the alcohol and ointment and all of it made his heart race for no good reason.

“Really biased,” he whispered.

“Are you okay?” Ben let his boot ride higher, gathering Dee in between his legs. “Seriously. I'm sorry for bugging you earlier, I—”

“Scared,” Dee said, quieter than anything. He ran his hand up the column of Ben's neck and back into his hair, sifting it between his fingers. “I'm just scared.”

“You're not scared of anything.”

“I'm scared of *you*.”

“Don't be, no one's gonna see. Kiss me.”

“I shouldn't.”

“I heard what you said about me to Jeff, that was sweet as hell. Who'd bust a guy's jaw for someone he won't even kiss?”

“Not here.”

Ben snagged his fingers in Dee's shirt and leaned up. Dee leaned down, his eyes falling shut, and their lips met and the hairs on the backs of Dee's arms stood up. When Dee was fourteen, he'd snuck into a parking-lot carnival and rode a rickety rollercoaster that he was sure would fly apart while he was on it, smashing him to the pavement at breakneck speed under a pile of rubble. Kissing Ben felt like that. It felt like the first time he slit someone's throat, like the

first time he shot up. He kept the kiss timid but Ben fisted his hands in his shirt and sucked his bottom lip, then bit it hard enough to sting.

There was the sound of crashing glass and the unmistakable *TINK tink tink* of a bouncing grenade.

Nadesh screamed, "*Get down!*" her voice broken, and then the heat and explosion blasted through the propped-open door. Everything seemed to go slowly. The guys in the other room scrambled to their feet, vaulted over the back of the couch and headed for the racks of guns. Dee slipped turning towards the door as a second grenade flew into the back room.

Dee grabbed the edge of the gurney and flipped it over, knocking Ben into the corner to trap him between the gurney and the wall. Ben screamed something at him, he couldn't hear what, and he sprinted for the live grenade and kicked it towards the open alley door. He knew it was stupid, but his only other option was to jump on it. Everyone else dropped. Ben shouted louder than Dee did. The grenade went off in the doorway in a blast of heat and light and sound and the whole building shook. Dee was on his back on the ground and heard guns clack over his ringing ears as everyone tried to rush into the bakery. A big palm laid over his heart, and then it was gone. He smelled burnt flesh and couldn't see through all the smoke, couldn't think through the searing pain. Little hands under his arms, pulling him up off the floor. His beat-up runner was smoking and wet with blood, but it wasn't a stump, nothing was missing. Ben's face hung over his, his eyes wide and panicky.

"C'mon, get up, you're okay," he babbled, pushing him off the concrete to sit.

"Can you hear anything?"

"Dee, *move*, we gotta get out of here!"

"You gotta help them—"

"They just lobbed it and ran, they're fine, I gotta get you to a doctor, *where are your fucking keys?*"

"I'm not—" Dee struggled to get away and plant his weight on his good foot, but Ben twisted his fist in the collar of his shirt. "I'm not going to a hospital, I can't, I'm not—"

Ben shoved his shoulder under Dee's, put an arm around him and tugged him to his feet. Something shattered in the bakery and there was the *rat-tat-tat* of gunfire. Ben patted all his pockets for the keys to his van.

"We're gonna call that guy, alright? The one Vic knows, he works out of his house, he'll fix you up." Dee tried not to shake with pain. He leaned heavily on Ben, who took it. "I'm not gonna let your fucking foot rot off just 'cause you're scared."

"I'm not scared!"

"Then *move!*"

Nadesh bolted into the back room and slammed the door shut behind her, knocking the dead bolts closed. She held a heavy silver pistol in both hands and her headscarf and sweatshirt were dusted with broken glass. She pressed her back to the closed door as if that would help keep it shut.

"What are you—Dee, your *foot!*"

"We can't stay, I'm taking him to Joe's, uptown," Ben said quickly. "Shit, I'm glad you're okay."

"I'm fine! Get him out of here, no one'll blame you."

"We'll go out the back, I'll call in an hour."

"I'll tell the guys. They'll be fine."

"You swear? Promise you'll call if anything happens, I—"

"Go!"

Ben took Dee's weight as best as he could as they made their way out the door and down the narrow alley. Dee was sweating with pain but he was conscious. They made it to the weed-ridden square of a parking lot in Mirrors' back alley and Ben realized Dee had left his van at home, and stood still, staring at the space it should have been.

Dee dropped his chin onto the top of Ben's head.

"Sorry in advance about tomorrow."