



When I wake up in the abandoned building it's late afternoon judging by the sun and I feel new, like I have been slumbering in a cocoon and am now emerging strong; like being reborn. My clothes look the opposite of new however, stiff and caked in dark blood. I unzip my bag and pull out some of the few items of clothing I own and change into them, testing my muscles as I stretch, my mind swimming about what I should do next.

I've had doubts about finding Jasper ever since he didn't come for me six years ago, and they've only been compounded since things have gone so horribly awry for me since leaving the home. But when you hold onto something so tightly for twelve years it's hard to let it go. Maybe impossible. He's still all I want in this whole world. If he doesn't want me around, he'll have to tell me himself.

The public library has a few computer terminals with free Internet access and after cleaning up a bit in the bathroom I wait my turn patiently, hoping the name Jasper Braverman is still as unusual as it seemed when we were kids. After a few minutes I've learned only that either there is no Jasper Braverman in our hometown or he's unlisted. I expand my search, trying Philadelphia first. Jasper loved the Sixers when we were kids, and as a result, Philly, so it seems like a good place to start. There are three J. Bravermans with addresses listed in Philadelphia and all three have phone numbers attached. The library is closing soon, so I write everything down and head to the train yard, stopping at the only working pay phone I see to try the numbers. If none of these work I'll have to go back tomorrow and try again. Keep trying until I find him.

I have to psych myself up to make the call, and can only finally do it when I convince myself that I'm going to hang up when someone answers, or at least pretend not to be me. The first number goes directly to a voicemail box with a woman's voice, she's called Jen. The second is a disconnected number and I hold my breath as the third number clicks over to voicemail. I

recognize his voice even before he says his name and my breath catches between my chest and freedom.

*You've reached Jasper Braverman. I'm unable to take your call at this time, please leave a message at the beep.*

I hang up.

It's amazing.

I can hear that same twelve-year-old brother I so looked up to, but now he sounds more like my father. All gravely but kind. I'd forgotten he had sounded that way and there's a little strangled sound in my throat for a moment as I remember. I hang up and call three more times to listen to his voice. And his voice alone is enough to have my heart beating triple time as I wait for a train headed to Philly. Finally, in the depths of night I'm able to jump on one passing through in the right direction.

Trying to sleep in the car, I can't help but fantasize about meeting Jasper for the first time again. He's 24. Will I recognize him as I recognized his voice? Will he recognize me? Will he still blame me for the accident?



I can't read Adrian's face. It's a bunch of percentages of things like surprise, fear, love, and hate, but it doesn't add up to a hundred percent and no one emotion seems to be winning.

"Lola?" he says, holding his arm and staring at me. I can't believe he can't smell the blood. It's all I can smell.

"Adrian," I say, dropping my head, resigned but unhappy. I realize now I've been playing mental roulette in my head ...*'if he doesn't show up, I let him go, if he shows he's gotta die'* that kinda thing. He still doesn't appear to have seen the carnage around him, and there's still no

romantic reunion upon realizing I am *not* in fact dead. What the hell does a girl have to do to get a movie style happy-ish ending?

I'm not prepared to die a third time for it.

Adrian sees the gun in my hand and then notices the chaos of the room. You wouldn't think it would take long to process four dead bodies in a room, but I like to think his happiness to see me makes him a little extra slow, heaven knows he wasn't that quick to begin with.

"What...what have you done?"

"What have I done? What have I done? You've got to be kidding me. You people left me for dead once and killed me and dumped in the desert and stole all my shit once, I'm pretty sure I'm on the high moral ground here. This is practically self-defense at this point...and if it's not then it's at least like...justifiable homicide." I watch him taking stock of the room, and his relief is obvious when he sees that Felice's body is absent. "Don't get your hopes up Adrian – I did her first," I say, my voice hard and flat. His face falls.

"Lola...are you going to kill me too?" His face has that puppy dog look that I'd first fallen for, but I raise the gun and point it at him anyway.

"I'll make it fast, okay?" I offer softly. He starts to cry a little bit, which actually annoys me, but I can't deny that my hand is shaking, which has never happened before, not since getting my powers, and really not even when I killed Delia. He closes his eyes.

"Okay," he says, his voice trying to hide a tremble, his cheeks wet. That kinda kills me, that he says that. It's much better than trying to appeal to me with a last ditch 'I love you Lola' (though that would have been nice to hear, truth be told). I can't help but admire the fact that he isn't begging, isn't stooping, isn't trying to play me. At the last second I turn the gun and shoot him in the meaty bit of his thigh instead of between the eyes. I'm out the skylight with my bag of loot before he's had a chance to open his eyes back up and scream.

If anyone were to ask me if I cried into my helmet as I was leaving Vegas I would have said no, but I did. Adrian broke my heart and I'm surprised that it had been so easy for him to do. Just because I am the way I am, and I am as strong as I am, I guess doesn't mean I'm totally invulnerable. I like to think it also means that maybe I'm not as bad as I always think I am inside. If I can care about Adrian, enough to make his betrayal something worth crying over, then maybe I'm not as broken as I thought. I don't know how I feel about that.

So I just ride the motorcycle faster, and try to leave all of it in my dust. I'll be in Los Angeles in a few hours, and all of this nonsense will be behind me. Perhaps that's the only way to get rid of those feelings...to ride away from them, to leave them with the carnage in the backroom. I certainly don't know what to do with them if I hold onto them.

I don't make it to L.A. Not even close actually. I stop 90 miles outside of Vegas, in this shitty little town called Baker, which is famous for this giant kind of run down looking thermometer. Apparently it's the largest in the world, or the U.S., or something. It's super unimpressive and I blow right past it and into the nearest convenience store. My hands were shaking on the road and I'm telling myself it's from hunger. Which it could be. Or it could be the slaughter I left in my wake back in Vegas. I'm trying to not let it get to me, but it's really the first time that I've just bathed in blood. And my hands are shaking.

So what.

After using the grimy looking bathroom at a 76 station I grab a diet coke and stalk the aisles for junk food. I barely look at what I'm grabbing, just picking up handfuls of the most brightly colored packages until my arms are nearly full. At the register I drop the load unceremoniously on the counter holding onto what looks like a package of chocolate cupcakes and ripping them open with my teeth, the diet coke balancing in my other hand. The cashier has her back to me and her feet up on a stool, a cell phone glued to her ear. She's snapping her gum

and talking at the same time, which should be impossible, but apparently isn't. I'm not really in a hurry and my eyes are still hungry so I run my hands across more shiny packages of sugar and eavesdrop.

"No! I'm telling you it was SO gross...Yeah, a spike through his thing...YES! I swear Julie..."

My ears perk up and I lean back to look at her, eyebrows raised.

"Well no...I didn't get a picture. They made us turn our cell phones off, duh, otherwise it would be like all over YouTube and crap. But I have the flyer...no, of course it doesn't show that, but it shows...other stuff..." she gets quiet, listening to her friend. I stand at the counter, drumming my fingers impatiently on the Formica, while I lick cupcake off my fingers. The girl pretends not to notice me, so I throw a Skor bar at her. It hits her right in her bleached blonde head and she sits up.

"Hey!" she says looking pissed and rubbing the back of her head with her free hand, though it couldn't have possibly hurt.

"Yeah. HEY. Can I buy this crap or what?"

"Uh, yeah, can you hold on a freakin' second?"

"Yeah, um, I've already *been* holding."

She sighs dramatically and rolls her eyes, making her instantly at least three times less attractive.

"Jule - I gotta go. Yeah, I'll call you back," she stands up, the flyer still in her hand and she starts ringing me up, hitting the keys extra hard, I suppose so I will know how extra annoyed she is with me. She's probably my age, but I feel a lot older.

"What were you talking about...Molly?" I ask, reading her nametag.

"Um. Like none of your business."

“What is this?” I ask, snatching the flyer from her hand with lightning speed.

“Hey!” she shouts for the second time. She’s surprised, but also maybe a little scared and it quiets her down considerably. I’m always surprised by which people have good instincts and which don’t. I wouldn’t have pegged peroxide brained Molly as even knowing what instinct is, but she’s feeling like prey very suddenly; it comes off of her in waves that I can almost taste. It’s the kind of thing that can save a person’s life, maybe. I look away from Molly and her large prey eyes and examine the flyer. It’s for a carnival sideshow and front and center is a man tattooed head to toe and pierced dozens of times that I can see. But that’s not what really catches my eye. There are over-the-top names for all sorts of freaks, and on the bottom left it says, “*Strongest Woman Alive!*” I look back at Molly.

“Where was this?”

“Uh. Phoenix. I was in Phoenix this weekend to see my brother...the address is um...at the bottom,” she trails off and looks away. I stare at the words “*strongest woman alive*” like they’re written in my own personal language, one that nobody else can understand. Molly shifts her weight uneasily. “Your total is \$19.01.”

I drop a twenty on the counter. It’s crumpled from my palm. I hadn’t realized I’d been squeezing it. “I’m taking this,” I say, holding up the flyer, and grabbing my plastic bag of treats. She opens her mouth as if to protest and thinks better of it, casting her eyes to her shoes and waiting for me to leave.

Once I’m on the road again I hope the words from the flyer will fade away, but if anything they burn brighter in my brain.

Just outside of Barstow I turn suddenly onto 1-40 headed for Needles/Phoenix. It’s going to take me in the opposite direction of Los Angeles, but there’s nothing specific driving me to

L.A. anyway, and since reading those three words I pretty much can't think of anything more important than being in a room with the "strongest woman alive."

Should be interesting.