

# Blood Is Thicker than Venom

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From set *Outlaws of Thunder Junction*

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It's dark, the bedroom overlooking Saddlebrush lit by candlelight and the glow of the moon, when Annie Flash leaves a stranger's bed. Everything about the moment hangs in the in-between, where familiarity can no longer be feigned. It seems appropriate for a moment like this to be overstuffed with shadows. As she redresses, another sits up in bed.

"You ain't gotta run outta here."

*Ain't gotta* is a separate sentiment from *shouldn't*. And while Annie supposes she doesn't have to leave, she should, and she is.

"Sorry, Jordan. I got my own bed to keep warm." The fringe on her boots, beaded with bone and turquoise, rattles when she tugs them on.

The shadow cocks its head. "Jody. Name's Jody."

"Oh, right. Sorry."

Annie ain't sorry, same as she didn't forget Jody's name or any detail of the sad backstory he'd whittled her. Jody Carpenter, who'd left his old life behind a year earlier when the only woman he'd ever loved died slow and painful in their bed.

Annie rises, tossing her braid over her shoulder.

"S'alright." The shadow leans closer. "I'm just saying—your bed could probably survive without you for one night."

Neither Jody nor his shadow sees Annie wince, too good at keeping her cool to tip her hand. But the phrasing of his invitation makes her stomach gurgle. She needs to get home, and quick.

"I hope you didn't get the wrong idea," Annie laments. She reaches over to the bedside table to grab her thunder blaster—a piddling little thing compared to what she used to carry, but a weapon, nonetheless. "I'm not lookin' for anything except what I got."

Tucking the blaster into its holster at her thigh, she glances at Jody's face. He's handsome, with silver curls and dark green eyes, full lips and stubble—but there's never been a man handsome enough to hold her attention. Of all the lies Annie might tell, that's one truth.

Jody raises an eyebrow and leans back, resting against his pillows and folding his hands over his bare stomach. "I'm not, either."

She gives him a once-over at the unexpected rebuff. "Oh?"

"I had my great love. I'm just passin' the time." He shrugs. "Don't mean you can't sleep with your head on my chest. We're still *people*."

Jody has the audacity to wink when he adds, "Even if I don't wanna be your boyfriend."

"Hmm." She considers the offer. She *knows* she can't stay, and for more reasons than one. Like how she's needed elsewhere. Or how she'd have to lose her fool mind to fall asleep vulnerable to a stranger. Still. It ain't the worst thing in the world to imagine how things might be different if she could say yes. If her life was the kind of life that'd let her spend the night with nice, handsome widowers with warm, rough hands.

Ah, hell. No use fantasizing. It is what it is.

"I'll see you around, Joey." She tips her hat at him before getting gone. Behind her, she swears the shadow chuckles.

Down the stairs and outside into the belly of Saddlebrush's main square, the moonlight is brighter than in Jody's dusty bedroom. The glimmer casts a fog on the sleeping town, hollowed except for Annie herself. For a moment, she pretends she's the only one in the world, just her and the dark and the moon and the shadows the three of them make.

The moment passes. Annie catches movement in the distance, a slithering shadow crawling through her periphery. Her head jerks in the direction of the dunes stretched out on the outskirts of town, and her mismatched eyes narrow to make out the shape more clearly.

But there's nothing. Whatever Annie thought she saw, it's either gone or never was. The dunes are as still and empty as the rest of this place.

Unease makes her teeth gnash. She considers using her gift, the sight of her golden right eye, to search the dunes more closely.

Frustrated with herself for even considering it, she turns away and storms in the direction of home. There's nothing out there. Her paranoia's getting worse, always thinking there's some boogeyman lurking around the corner.

Course, in her defense, there usually is. At least there *has* been, up till now. And even if Saddlebrush *looks* abandoned, there's no knowing who's hiding in the darkened windows and doorways. She needs to get home.

Jody might get to be a person, but Annie is a weapon. She can't get dull.

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Home is a long enough walk that Annie's thighs are well burning by the time it comes into view. Her left leg—always actin' up—gives a particularly pointed twitch as she starts toward her front door. The badlands farm hasn't been home for long, but it's something. Maybe someday she'll call this place home and mean it.

"Hey, you," she drawls as she approaches the barn.

All her life, Annie's been around animals, learning how to tame one creature or another, but none of 'em have ever stumped her quite like Fortune. She ain't sure where he came from or what he is, but she knows he's hers and she's his. Built like an eighteen-hand stallion, with a coat as red as clay and horns curled up from his skull, Fortune has dark eyes like twin canyons.

"You holdin' down the fort?" she asks, blunt nails scratching a greeting down his neck.

The question is rhetorical, and it ain't. Annie don't expect Fortune to take care of the farm while she's gone. And *yet*. He nickers, stomping one foot and tilting his head to look in her eyes more closely.

"Don't start. I wasn't gone that long."

He huffs, shaking his head until her hand falls away.

“Besides, I can take care of myself. Don’t have a fit. You’re getting more paranoid than I am.”

Fortune slowly leans his head back as if offended. Fair enough.

“Alright, alright. I’m sorry.” Annie sighs and glances up at the farmhouse. Even though she don’t make the conscious decision to check, her eyes go straight to one window in particular. She’s not surprised to see there’s a yellow light glowing inside. Despite the lateness of the hour, a shadow shifts in the room beyond the curtains. “He been awake this whole time?”

Fortune bobs his head.

“Alright. I’ll take it from here. You get some sleep.” She swats at his side. “We gotta head into town again tomorrow, and I don’t need you wandering off under me. It’s easy enough for you to get turned around when you’re in your best state.”

Offended again, Fortune turns and trots away from her. Annie chuckles and mumbles, “I love you, too,” before heading inside.

There’s a kind of too-quiet in the house that makes the hair on Annie’s nape stand, even though she knows it don’t mean nothing. The house is always this quiet. It ain’t like the badlands themselves, where even in the latest hour there are critters skittering beyond view, trilling and squawking at each other. It ain’t like Saddlebrush after dark, neither, where there’s still life behind every doorway, even if it’s snoring.

Nah, there ain’t much life left in Annie’s home. Place feels like a tomb when the hour creeps late enough. The thought makes her want to cry, but she don’t let herself. No time for it, anyway.

Down the hall, her fingers tighten around a door handle, steeling herself for what’s inside. A deep breath in. Pushing it out slow between her teeth.

Tommy is in bed when she walks in his room, awake and staring out the window. He don’t bother looking at her when she walks in. That ain’t nothing new, though. Her nephew does a whole lot of not looking at her these days. Annie can’t say she blames him.

Face gaunt, brown skin two shades paler than it oughta be, black hair gone oily and thin at the sides, Tommy ain’t nothing like he was when he first moved in with her. When Annie first got him involved in her life and all the trouble that came with it ...

Now, a layer of sweat coats every inch of him she can see. Even still, he’s shivering hard enough to rattle his teeth, knuckles white as he grips the sides of his bed. She wonders if he’s trying to hold himself still or stay quiet. Neither’s working. While he shakes, a low groan emits from his chest, a rattling behind his ribcage that makes her wanna scream and yank her own hair out.

“The pain bad tonight?” she asks, taking off her hat and setting it down on the chair next to his bed. The chair she sleeps in more nights than she does her own room. Tommy winces, as if the sound of her voice makes the pain worse, and nods.

Refusing to notice the quiet way he contorts his energy away from her, Annie makes her way to the standing cabinet in the corner. Inside, there’s a shelf of bandages, antiseptic, herbal remedies, and—what she’s after—a bottle of swirling blue smoke, the strongest pain reliever this side of the Multiverse.

They’re down to a quarter of the bottle. She sighs and curls her hand around the neck, carrying it over to Tommy’s bedside. That’s why she’ll be headed into town in the morning. A quarter of a bottle should still get them through a week or so, but Annie never risks getting this close to empty without a backup. She’d gone into town that morning for the same reason, but the alchemist was sold out—said the newest shipment would arrive at dawn. So, Annie will, too.

“Here.” She holds the bottle under his nose and uncorks it, watching as Tommy inhales deep, dragging the blue smoke into his lungs. Once he’s gotten a full breath, she pushes the cork back in tight, careful not to let any extra escape.

He shudders, maybe in relief, maybe in disgust at her proximity to him, and his eyes slide closed.

Annie takes up her post at his bedside. She stays there all night.

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When the sun rises, casting the world beyond her window in a pale blue fog, Annie gives up the ruse of sleeping. Head overfull and throbbing, she gives Tommy one last look over—he’s finally deep asleep after fitful bouts of pain all night—before padding down the hall toward her own room.

Annie got even less sleep than her nephew did, but she doesn’t have the luxury of passing out at dawn. As soon as the thought crosses her mind, she silently curses herself. How callous, to think of his suffering as a *luxury*. She blames the sleep deprivation.

The air in her bedroom is hot and stale, and Annie cracks a window to let in the morning. She doesn’t know the last time she was in here longer than it took to get dressed. For all the newness of the farmhouse, all the ways it hasn’t yet settled into feeling like a home, there’s nowhere that’s as starkly clear as Annie’s room. It may as well belong to a ghost. She glances at the perfectly made bed, undisturbed for days on end, before sliding into her closet to change.

After changing, Annie takes care to undo her long braid, comb out her tresses, and rebraid them carefully. Into each section, she weaves a strand of beaded leather, pops of blue and white appearing in her dark hair like flowers blooming from soil. She considers herself in her mirror, head tilting at her own reflection, studying the sun-weathered lines etched at the corners of her mismatched eyes. With a sigh, Annie turns away and heads outside.

As soon as she opens the front door, she comes up short. She would’ve tumbled down the porch steps if she were any less observant. There’s a basket waiting on her stoop that sure as sin wasn’t there the night before, an unassuming tan wicker crate, like someone’d been on their way to a picnic and gotten turned around at her doorstep. Annie glances around the front field of the property like she might actually spot them, some stranger wandering around in her yard, looking for their basket.

Of course, there’s no one there. And when Annie lifts the lid of the crate to check its contents, she finds exactly the sort of thing she might’ve expected for a picnic—a loaf of still-warm bread, a jar of honey, another of fruit preserves, some cured meat. If this *wasn’t* abandoned by a lost picnicker, it must’ve been left as a gift. Maybe Jody stopped by to try and woo her with snacks. (Of all the half-baked proposals she’s been on the receiving end of in her time, that idea ain’t too shabby.)

She shuffles the basket inside, leaving it tucked just in the doorway, and tries to convince herself to feel fine about it all. But she can’t shake the tangle of knots her stomach has become. It ain’t that Jody showed up and left something for her that’s a problem—it’s that Annie was up all night and still didn’t hear no one creepin’ up on the house.

That’s pure careless right there. And carelessness is one thing Annie can’t afford.

Not again.

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Two fresh bottles of blue smoke acquired, Annie heads out onto Saddlebrush’s main square, sights set on the stable where she’d left Fortune. It’s been long past an hour since she first rose for the day, but the rest of the plane is just beginning to rise, curtains opening and dogs barking and kids being tossed outside to scuffle before breakfast. A thick layer of dew clings to everything, and the sun’s rays catch in

droplets like a thousand little prisms casting rainbow-tinted shadows. A smile, meant just for herself, tugs at the corner of Annie's mouth.

"Now, I didn't even know you could do that," croons a familiar voice, halting her.

She raises one thick, dark eyebrow and turns her head to Jody. He's smirking at her, arms crossed over his chest—no longer bare, but hidden behind a black button-down.

"Do what?"

"Smile."

Annie'd like to wring his neck. "Don't read too much into it. It's a nice day out is all. You ain't the one put the smile on my face, Joey."

Undeterred, Jody's smirk only gets wilier. "You were pretty happy last night."

"Last night was fine until you started gettin' clingy," Annie shrugs. "And then, the picnic basket? Really? If you think I'm the kinda woman who'd crawl back into your bed for a nice loaf of bread ..."

The confusion on Jody's face has Annie's words shriveling up. She frowns. He could be feigning ignorance, but what good would that serve him? A courtship ain't gonna work if no one knows who's doing the courting.

"You didn't leave food on my doorstep this morning?"

"Annie, I enjoyed your company a great deal. But I enjoy my sleep even more." Jody chuckles, something so fond in his expression that it makes her suspicious. "And I most definitely do not bake bread. S'probably just somebody else in town. You've been the subject of a lot of whisper-tree gossiping, you know."

Annie's nose crinkles. "I certainly did not."

And she don't like it one bit. *What kind of things must they be saying? What story have they twisted about where she comes from and the things she's done?*

"People 'round here are worried about y'all, out there all alone. I'd guess somebody decided they needed to offer an olive branch—so to speak."

*Oh.*

Well ... that sure is different than she was expecting. Annie swallows. For the second time that morning, her stomach winds itself up into a tangled nest. But this time, it don't exactly feel like nerves. It's something else. Something she ain't felt in a long time, and don't know how to look straight at.

Not that she gets a chance, anyway. Before Annie can respond to Jody's words, the main square breaks into a chorus of screams.

Her head snaps back, eyes searching the direction of the chaos, already gripping her blaster and yanking it free of its holster. Townsfolk are running in her direction, parents snatching babies off the street, couples pushing at each other to speed the other up.

Behind them, something massive slinks closer.

Jody's hand connects with Annie's sternum, nearly knocking the wind out of her as he pulls her into the general store. A crowd floods in with them, threatening to force Annie to the back. With her free hand, she grips Jody's wrist and jerks it away, sorta hoping it hurts when she does. She don't need no one to rescue her, and most surely not him. Pushing past bodies, Annie don't stop throwing elbows until she reaches the front windows, looking out into the now abandoned main square.

*Almost* abandoned. Abandoned by people, anyway.

Sliding on its gold-plated belly, skin like thick armor, an enormous rattlewurm slithers through the streets of Saddlebrush. It opens and closes its mouth, flashing giant teeth. Annie's hand tightens around her weapon, muscles tensing for a fight she doesn't want but won't back down from.



Art by: Filip Burburan

No fight comes, though. The monster, unable to find food out in the open, continues on its path, slinking through the square and out on the other side of the buildings, back into the sand dunes it came from.

The sand dunes. Annie remembers the shadow from the night before, and her throat clenches. If she'd have listened to her instincts last night, if she'd bothered to investigate further, this wouldn't have happened today.

But it's fine, right? It don't sound like anyone got hurt.

Jody's pushing through people to get to her, but Annie is the first one to slip back outside. She quickens, an almost imperceptible tremble in her weak left leg as it struggles to keep up with the pace set by her right, impatient to get to the stables. When she does reach them, she heaves a sigh of relief, breath mingling with the scent of manure and hay. Fortune watches her from his stall, expression grim, and snorts out a greeting.

"Didn't like that," Annie mumbles, gently palming his face. "Spooked you, too?"

Another snort. He shoves his head into her hand, and she runs her fingertip along the ridges of one horn.

In many ways, Fortune is her only companion. Something happening to him would be unbearable. But he's fine. Everything is fine. Annie need not carry the burden of guilt for not investigating the rattlewurm sooner. This time, her inaction came without any consequence.

As soon as she has the thought, a child screams from outside the barn doors.

Nothing needs to be exchanged between Fortune and her—already on the same page, they move in sync, heading out of the stable and back into the square.

The crowds have begun to return, townsfolk migrating out into the center of the courtyard. All around her, people check on their neighbors, look for their friends, and exchange embraces as the adrenaline begins to fade.

Annie's chest tightens. She ignores it.

Near the center of the crowds, one cloister has formed, a gaggle surrounding a little girl—the girl screaming her head off. She can't be more than nine, thin as a whip and pale as moonlight. Her boney body rattles.

A boy, maybe a decade older, holds her. They've the same upturned nose and smattering of freckles. To the onlookers, he explains, "I thought I yanked her away quick enough, but it—it got to her."

A wave of sympathetic mumbling rolls over the crowd.

"Knew this was gonna happen."

"Was only a matter of time."

"Thing's been getting closer for days."

"Poor Mira."

"Poor Bo."

Annie knows the conversation that ain't hers. Still, she looks to the boy—Bo—and asks, "Why ain't anybody just killed the thing?"

Bo's lips part. She watches him struggle to come up with an answer.

When nothing comes, someone offers, "How would we do that? It's ... it's huge."

"Everything dies." Annie runs her thumb along the handle of her blaster.

Mira gives another squeal of pain. Annie hardly knows what she's doing before she's doing it, reaching into the pocket of her jacket and pulling out the fresh bottles of blue smoke. She uncorks it, stepping forward to press it beneath Mira's nose.

"Take a breath," she instructs.

The girl does, shaking all the while. Even as Annie watches her, it ain't just her she's seeing. This never would've happened if she'd listened to her gut and taken care of the problem the night before.

Her molars grind together. Fortune knocks his head into her shoulder, but she won't meet his eyes.

When she recorks and puts away the bottle, Annie says, "I'll do it."

"What?"

"I'll kill the thing."

Another whisper sweeps across the square, this time more frenzied.

Bo holds Mira tighter. "I'll come with you. I want to help. She's my sister—I, I have to help."

Others nod, calling out to volunteer. Annie ignores the burning in her throat.

Voice gruff, she says, “Fine. We leave from the badlands at dawn sharp tomorrow.”

Too aware of the grateful stares, Annie grabs Fortune’s reins and gets the hell out of there.

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Now, that was a plum stupid decision.

The longer the day drags on, the more Annie starts to wonder what got inside her head. That rattlewurm is a big problem, but not hers. She can keep her own safe—mostly—and she don’t offer up her services lightly. Yet here she is, the night before, packing up a rucksack to take into the dunes the next morning. She tosses in the cured meats from the mystery picnic basket.

Truth be told, she knows exactly why she did this. ‘Cause she was lookin’ at Mira, but she was seeing Tommy. She was staring at that girl, envenomed by the snake, and thinking about her nephew, and the chronic pain he’s carrying from her own careless, stupid mistake.

It ain’t like killing this thing is gonna make things right between her and Tommy. But there’s some part of her that sees Akul’s face, the vicious Hellspur leader who put Tommy’s life on the line because of Annie’s misstep. Maybe if she kills this monster, she can kill the part of Akul that’s been haunting her since that night.

Plum stupid. But too late to back out.

Her pacing is interrupted by a low groan from down the hall. Annie doesn’t hesitate, dropping what she’s doing and moving toward her nephew’s room. Her hands are already reaching for the blue smoke bottle in the cupboard before she asks, “Pain flaring up?”

But when she offers the bottle to him, he tilts his head away, upper lip curling as if disgusted.

“You don’t want medicine?”

“No,” he grits out.

Annie frowns, trying to find the unspoken explanation hidden on her nephew’s face.

“Tired ... all the time.” His knuckles go bone-white as he struggles to make words happen.

One of the effects of the blue smoke is the fatigue that comes with it. It’s supposed to be a perk, helping people sleep despite the pain, something Tommy couldn’t do without it. It shouldn’t take her by surprise that he’d get sick of it and wanna taper off. He’s all but lived in this room since they moved to the farmhouse. But it still makes her queasy.

“Alright.” She don’t argue, even if she’d like to. Tommy’s grown, and she’s already proven she shouldn’t make his choices for him.

As she puts the bottle away, she says, “I ain’t gonna be around tomorrow. Agreed to take care of a rattlewurm that’s terrorizing Saddlebrush.”

Tommy doesn’t respond. Annie busies herself with tidying the contents of the cabinet. She don’t shake easily, but Tommy manages to do it without trying. “Heading out with some wannabe cowboys at first light. Not sure when I’ll be home. Before the day’s end, though.”

He still don’t say anything. Finally, Annie forces herself to close the cabinet and turn back. His face is set like stone, expression unreadable.



When the silence drags on, Annie sets her shoulders and sees herself out. She can't be sure if it's the pain in his body or the anger in his heart that's got Tommy as twisted up as he is. Either way, it all comes back to her.

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"Now, what in the world is your old ass doin' here?" are the first words out of Annie's mouth the next day when she steps onto her porch and finds Jody waiting with Bo and the others.

The widower grins, unbothered. "Sorry, I musta got confused when I saw you were leading the troops—this ain't an outing for the senior center?"

Despite herself, Annie cracks the briefest hint of a smile. "Now, I'll remind you, papaw, only one of us has a blaster on 'em right now."

His grin widens. "Alright, alright. I'm just here to see off the departing heroes is all."

The term *departing heroes* makes her wanna roll her eyes all the way out of her skull, but she reckons that was his intention. Before she can retort, the door opens behind her. And when Annie turns, anything she might've had to say vanishes.

Tommy stands there, a walking stick tucked under his arm. He's pale, breath uneven, but he's up.

"You," Tommy growls, pointing a knobby finger at Bo.

"Me?" Bo's already pale cheeks lose any hint of color they had.

"You come back with my aunt. Or you don't come back. You hear me?"

"Um—no, I mean, yes, totally, understood. I won't let anything happen to her—and if I do, I will, um, I will lie down and die."

"Good." Tommy lowers his arm.

Annie don't know what to do with all that. She coulda predicted the morning going a hundred different ways and never seen that coming. The affection—gruff as it was—has been gone from her relationship with Tommy for a long time. It makes her want to weep to feel it again. *And ...* being doted on in front of a bunch of strangers makes her wanna peel her skin off.

"Let's get," she finally barks, turning to gather Fortune and get the show on the road.

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It takes less than an hour for Annie to decide Bo is the most endearing and annoying person she's ever met. The boy should *not* be out in the dunes hunting rattlewurms. And he seems to know that, cause he's nervous enough that he can't stop talking. By sunrise, Annie knows the kid's life story.

"So, our parents died a few months ago. I mean—our dad died seven years ago, actually, but our mom died earlier this year. Anyway. So, that happened. So, I guess, we're orphans. Or—I don't know, I'm not a kid anymore, I don't think I can be an orphan. And I guess Mira isn't really an orphan either, cause I'm taking care of her. Anyway, it's just us. You know, we're all we've got. Well—okay, us and the people in town, you know. They all helped our mom when we first got here, and then they helped us when she died. I don't know how we would've done it if we were actually *alone*. I mean, nobody can be seriously alone, right? Nobody can survive like that."

*Nobody, huh?*

Her people have shared Bo's sentiment since time immemorial. In the homeland that gave her life, everybody was family and family was everything. Hearing Bo talk about the way people in Saddle-

brush stepped up to take care of him and his sister—that's the way it woulda been back home. Youngins were everyone's responsibility. *Everyone* was everyone's responsibility.

That was the life Annie had known for a long time. And then it wasn't. Now, that part of her past feels like a dream she can't grasp the details of but can't shake off neither.

She thinks of the basket of food on her counter. The press of Jody's hand on her sternum.

To lose something as sacred as one's people is to die a little. She couldn't dare hope to feel anything like that again. The hope might be big enough to swallow her if she did.

As the rising sun paints the landscape, Annie pushes aside her thoughts to squint at the horizon. Movement shifts in the distance. If she didn't know what to look for, she might not notice it at all. It *still* could be nothing.

Her grip tightens on her blaster, expression grim. She can't risk getting closer without knowing for sure what's over there.

"This might look a little strange from the outside," she warns Bo. "Just keep quiet and trust there's things going on you can't see. Understood?"

"Uh—uh, yes? Sure."

That settled, Annie faces the direction of the indecipherable movement, and taps into her enhanced vision.

Her other senses dull. Although nothing happens on the outside, on the inside Annie is hurtled through space. Suddenly, she's a hundred yards away, standing atop a sandy mountain, looking down at shimmering scales. The rattlewurm burrows into the earth, disappearing almost entirely before popping free on the other side of a small dune. Nearby, there's an opening in the sand, the entrance to the creature's lair.

"Got you," she whispers, and her blaster grows warm in her hand, tethering her to her body.

Seconds from pulling back, Annie hesitates at a flash of bronze in her periphery. She watches, heart climbing into her mouth, as another rattlewurm emerges. This one is considerably smaller. It gives a cautious wiggle of its head, peeking out at its ... parent. The bigger rattlewurm shimmies, beckoning until the baby joins her. The two of them slide through the sand together, scales rubbing the warming earth.

Her heart, trapped at the back of her mouth, begins to pound harder.

No one is meant to survive alone.

And anyone backed into a corner will do what they've gotta do to beat the odds and make it out alive.

The rattlewurm isn't Akul. Annie can't get revenge for Tommy's pain by slaughtering the creature who hurt Mira. Back in her body, Annie realizes what she needs to do.

"You find it?" Bo asks.

"I did. Just up ahead." She snaps her blaster back into its holster. "Now, this is what we're gonna do ..."

Annie might've expected anger from the people of Saddlebrush, for her deciding to let the rattlewurm and its baby live, for corralling them deeper into the dunes where prey was more plentiful and people scarcer instead of exterminating them the way she'd promised. Not for the first time, the townsfolk take her by surprise by eagerly embracing a solution that doesn't involve bloodshed.

It's nightfall when Annie returns home, sore from a day well spent. She smiles when she says goodbye to the others, watching them ride off together. Fortune nudges her, nickering like laughter. She kisses the side of his face, then sends him into the barn.

Inside, she's still smiling when she hangs up her jacket.

"Success?"

Tommy's voice comes from around the corner, and Annie turns toward it.

He looks even better. He's standing in the hallway, hand curled around the top of his cane. Freshly showered?

"In its own way. There's some good people in this town, Tommy. I think we really might be able to build ourselves a life here. I ..."

He winces. Pain, but what kind?

Her eyes search him over again. This time, she notes the bag at his feet.

"You goin' somewhere?"

"Was just waiting so I could say goodbye."

"I—" She narrows her eyes at him, clasping her hands in front of herself. "No. Where are you going?"

"Home, auntie."

"This is your—"

"*Home*." He emphasizes, eyes burning with a fire Tommy ain't had since he started on the blue smoke. "Back to our people."

A masochistic silence hangs between them, begging to be shattered.

Tommy acquiesces. "I'm glad you're settling in here. But this *ain't* home. I dunno how to be part of this life you're talking about. And I need ..."

He looks at the floor. "I need *real* medicine."

Annie would have to be cruel beyond measure to fault him. It doesn't stop the way her chest threatens to come open at the seams.

"I understand." She nods. "But you can't go off in the dark on your own, at least stay until—"

"I've made arrangements. Jody, actually, helped me figure out a plan. He's a nice guy."

A nice guy whose neck Annie's gonna snap the next time she sees him.

"Okay." She swallows. "Well ... thank you for waiting. It was kind of you, considering."

"Considering?" Tommy frowns.

"How much you must hate me."

"Haseya ..."

Her breath catches in her throat as Tommy uses her *real* name, her Atiin name, the name her people gave to her. He steps forward and pulls her into an embrace. Annie would weep if she could breathe at all. He whispers, "I couldn't hate you. I love you. This just ... isn't where I'm supposed to be."

Is it where *she's* supposed to be? She don't know. She hopes, if she lets herself forgive her mistakes, if she leans in and builds something here, maybe it can be.

And maybe she's wrong again.

"I better head out." Tommy brushes his thumb against her face before picking up his bag. There's still a tremor in every moment, a clear thread of pain, but he's better than she's seen him in a long time.

He knows what he's doing.

"This isn't goodbye forever." He darkens the farmhouse doorway. "We'll see each other again."

"Blood can run, but it ends up right where it started," she agrees. "Till then."

As Tommy's shadow grows longer and longer down the path leading away from their home before finally disappearing, Annie becomes aware of a quiet truth. It settles like lead into her gut, suffocating the tangled knots of hope and fear, washing them all clean.

There's a good chance she *can* build the community she's been missing. These people can be her people; this life can be her life. But when she comes home at night, it's always gonna be Annie Flash and her ghosts.