

**Twice Fired.**

Liv H. Scott

“He’s an old friend,” she says. I watch as her thumbs smooth over the clay, press into it, shaping it as it spins. The wet, messy excess goo drips over her fingers and onto that stone wheel.

“He’s dangerous,” I state. I hardly ever try to figure out what she’s making before it’s made, but today I’m already guessing it’s some kind of pitcher. April snorts and lifts her foot off the pedal. The wheel stops turning, and she pushes fly away hairs back into her messy bun. The clay smudges through her hair, painting the dark strands red-brown.

“And you’re not?” she teases. I smile at that. “I’ve known Charles since Kindergarten.” “Charles?” I ask, reaching out to stick a finger in the side of her clay ball. She swats at my hand, and I grin wider.

“Fine. Loon,” she says. “I hate that you call him that.”

“But it fits. He’s straight from the loony bin. He’s not right in the head.”

The wheel begins spinning again, her fingers smoothing over the imperfection I put there. Her fingers are covered in red clay, her arms speckled and stained from making plates and pitchers and bowls that she sells at the local crafts market. Her pottery is always different than the rest. Her clay is red-brown because she’s adamant about sticking a handful of Arizona dirt into it. She likes the way it looks. It reminds her customers of where they bought the pottery.

“He doesn’t have friends, April. He walks around with a loaded gun in his pocket, and a piece of gum in his mouth, and everyone knows he’s hardwired for crime because he doesn’t blink before beating someone up. He doesn’t even pause afterwards, just goes on chewing his

gum and whistling. Normal people would pause. Normal people would realize what they've just done," I say.

"Hand me that sponge?" she motions behind me. I twist around to pick the little yellow disk out of its bucket of clay muck water. It really tends to bother me, how messy her studio is sometimes. That's clay, she tells me. I hand her the sponge and April leans in to plant her lips against mine.

"Loon wouldn't hurt me," she whispers against my skin.

"I'm more worried about him not protecting you. He's got a lot of enemies."

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I let out the shaky breath I've been holding. The trucks engine pops and wheezes as the night air whistles through its radiator. Just over two weeks ago, April Iglesias was shot in the head two blocks from her house, and she died.

I repeat these facts to myself to try and make my queasy stomach go away. I'm going to be sick. I think. I feel like it anyway. I feel like this a lot lately. Like anything I try to put in my stomach is just going to come right back up, like anything I try to keep inside isn't going to stay. I take a deep breath. Thank god for Tylenol.

I force myself to look out the windshield at the dying sun. It sits low on the horizon, and streaks of red and pink and orange radiate out from it. I remind myself that April liked sunsets and the color orange, but all I'm thinking of is how pretty the sun died the day she got shot. How she must have pointed it out to him, grabbed the sleeve of his jacket and pointed.

This is my favorite, she would have said, I love the way it lights up the dirt, and you can see how red it all is.

I have to force myself to breathe again or I'll start thinking about her getting shot, and the fact that he was there. He was there, and he did nothing. I know he did nothing. It was bad enough I had to see him in the hospital, his shirt dripping red.

"Bluff, Bluff, no. Wait." He'd reached out to grab my sleeve. I didn't know then if it was his or her blood on him and rubbing onto me. I'd tried to pull out of his grip, but he just grabbed my jacket and forced me into a chair.

"Her parents came to ID," he'd said. "They blame the gang. They blame the Crazies. Go on home. You can see her tomorrow."

They blame you. He didn't want to say it but I could see it in the tense line of his mouth. Her parents blamed me. They always have.

He slipped a piece of gum into my hand, foil cold against my skin. I didn't want to listen to him, but he'd been around these things all his life. He walked with a loaded gun. He'd shot someone before. I was just a kid with a gun and no bullets. I was just a kid whose girlfriend got shot. So I went home.

It was bad enough I had to see him there, but then he had to show his face at the funeral. I knew he was there to remind me, to remind me that he had been there that night she had gotten shot and he was safe and she'd probably pointed out the sunset to him and he hadn't done a single thing to keep her safe. I would have done something. Instead I bought the box, and the land, and we stood around in a drizzle one morning and watched them load her into the ground.

I remember pulling a cigarette from my pack, lighting it. I remember the smoke filling my lungs as a man dropped the first shovelful of red dusty dirt on top of that plain coffin.

I'd seen them together before. It was when I had to do a quick stop by at the gang's garage. Just dropping off rent money, and so I took April along. We were out for lunch anyway,

she said she didn't mind but I had always got an uneasy feeling taking her around the Gang. I was in the shop's office, and L.A. was counting, and I looked up and out the window. There they were. April and Loon, both smiling, both standing with that easy feel. Their shoulders loose, their hands occasionally touching the other's arm. I shouldn't have been angry, but I was.

Loon's fingers rested on her shoulder when the counting was done and I could storm out into the garage.

"Charles, Stop!" April's voice was light, playful as if she was talking to a brother or cousin. Loon toyed with the ends of her dark hair, and she pushed his fingers away, beaming at me. "Lunch?" she asked.

"Yeah," I'd kind of grunted. Loon smiled at me, and he said something like 'go get em tiger' or something just as stupid. I can't remember exactly, I just remember wanting to deck the kid's lights out.

Guns are messy. I remember being told this when I helped pull my first drug bust. The Gang leader had slapped a cold heavy piece of metal in my hand. I was thirteen. Loon had been with us then, because he'd always been good at these sort of things. I remember him chucking my nose. Guns are messy. That's why yours isn't loaded, he'd said behind the leaders back. He'd winked, and his eyes were like old empty glass bottles. You wouldn't like cleaning up messes. It's never pretty. Besides, you look like you could do it. That's all you need. The ability to look like someone who will shoot another person, you look serious.

Right now I know that I look more than just serious. I've already made up my mind about what I'm going to do. My stomach's been so uneasy lately because you don't just buy bullets the same way you buy eggs or milk. I've never carried bullets in my gun, because I've never had to. Except now I have a reason. I know things. Like why April got shot, who she was with when it

happened. Sometimes I wish these were things I didn't know, but I guess knowing or not, he was still there.

I didn't know I really wanted to do this until this afternoon. Seeing him in the gang's garage on Cherry, smiling.

Loon has a wide merciless smile, the kind that pulls back your lips and bares your teeth and gums. Just like April's, except when she smiled, her eyes lit up all dark and welcoming. Loon's eyes were like the broken shards of glass that riddled parking lots and alleyways, the remnants of some drunkard's stupid sodden ideas stuck up among the gravel.

I've been to enough funerals to know that people shouldn't smile during, or after. People who actually care don't smile. We're too busy missing someone. We're too busy trying to adjust to life without tie dye crop tops, and sock feet Saturdays. A life where the red dust tracked on the living room carpet comes from our own two boots, and not the dirty hands of our live-in potter. People do not smile, when after everything they find a pair of jeans with a smudge of clay on them.

So I couldn't take it when he smiled in that garage, and whistled, and didn't seem to care that he had just buried a friend. That he had been the last one to see her, the last one to hear her coo about the sunlight, and the dirt, and this shit town.

Loon wasn't just there, either. He'd always been there. He wasn't lurking in the shadows, or tailing us, but he liked to crop up out of nowhere with his jaw working a piece of gum and his eyes threatening everyone's tires. He said he knew everything about April, and maybe he did. They talked, they smiled at each other like it was some kind of contest. You hurt her, I'll break your legs. So maybe I was a little jealous, or he was, but he was there when she got shot and it sure as hell wasn't an accident.

The radiator is actually silent now. I think about flipping the car on to check the time, we said we'd meet up at 10. Instead I just shove my shoulder into the door so it opens. Who cares if I'm a little late?

In my pocket there is a wadded up gum wrapper. On the wrapper there is an address scribbled out in Sharpie. I unfold it and touch the gun in my pocket. It's warming up under my touch.

I'd left it up to Loon to decide where, and he'd picked the alley between Ace's Hardware, and Rick's Pawn shop. It is just a block away. I walk. It's maybe 70 degrees, and that's about as cold as it gets in Arizona.

The sun has completely extinguished. This is one of the reasons I told him 10. April made everything about the sunset, all her art work. All the paintings on her plates, all the carvings in her vases. She had neat little stories about them, this was the first sunset she'd seen, this was the one she loved most, the one she'd watched with her father who never took the time to watch sunsets. I can't even look at the sun anymore.

I don't see the magic she saw. I just see a great ball of fire that bakes up the ground, and the trees, and the people until we all have a furious rage under our skin that makes us do something stupid. Stupid like not saving a girl's life.

At least in the dark, I don't have to see it. Any of it. The buildings just look like looming grey stucco giants. You can't see the cracks, or fissures, or sand storm damage. You can't see all the places where a bullet, or maybe an iron crowbar, has nicked a hole in the clay.

I hook my fingers into my pockets, and run them against the cold metal edge of that gun. I've never held it loaded, never shot it either, but it can't be too hard. It's just a trigger. You just pull your finger, and bam. Someone's dead.

And I could do it too. Because I'm a serious guy. I don't lie to people, I just do what I have to do to survive.

I remember Loon saying this to me the day we put her in the ground. He wasn't smiling either. He wanted me to take the day off, to stay at home, to stay clear of the really heavy jobs that needed to be done. Leave the real dog shit to him. I told him I couldn't do that, I needed the money. Flat out he told me I was the most serious guy he knew, and then cuffed me over the ear hard enough to knock me out.

I'll never forget that. Maybe because I had to wake up sore, and remember that the guy who couldn't save her life had just decked me. He knew he couldn't just tell me to stay out of things. I hate him for that. I think.

I kick an empty squashed can across the cracked pavement. It tumbles along, until it hits a sewer grate and plunks down into the muck beneath. When it rains here, all the red dust turns to sticky red muck. As if it wasn't hard enough to keep from tracking it in your home in the first place, after it rains you have to scrub at it with a toothbrush. Work it out of all the little kinks in your shoes before you can even think about stepping inside your apartment.

Right now it's just dust. Right now it's just annoying. Gathering in clouds, and choking down the streets. It covers everything from the weeds that grow in the cracks of the asphalt to the broken glass that litters the storefront sidewalk. I know these stores. These are stores that pay protection to the Crazies, mostly when I or someone like me has to come shake them. These are stores that April would dream of.

Two blocks from here is an abandoned and broken little shop that she would say she was going to buy. She always detailed her plans for cleaning it up. Sweeping, putting new glass in the window, I could patch the drywall while she painted on the windows. She never budged. She

always wanted that shop, the one with the broken windows on the wrong side of town. No matter what I said.

My stomach is all sick again. Like someone sucker punched me in the gut, and I've just gotten back the ability to gulp air, and all I want to do is toss my cookies. April Iglesias wasn't just shot, and she wasn't just some high school girl, and she wasn't alone. Everybody's somebody's someone. April was mine.

The street is pretty quiet because everyone is in their home, and everyone who's dangerous has yet to come out. Of course, no one ever comes down this street anyway. Unless they need something. Like a good heaping dose of broken glass, shoddy graffiti and pigeon shit. The reality is that half the town is covered in pigeon shit, just here no one so much as thinks to clean it off the sidewalk.

I run my thumb over the warm, worn handle of the gun and turn towards the alleyway. My shoes make soft crunching sounds on the concrete and asphalt.

"You look worse and worse every time I see you, Bluff." Loon whistles low. He stands in the alley, jaw working over a piece of gum. "Whatcha want to talk about?"

My fingers curl over the warm handle. "April Iglesias," I say. I watch as he blinks, his jaw rolls over the gum.

"O-k." He nods to the hand shoved in my pocket. Loon joined up with the gang a few years before I did. He's walked the streets a lot more than me, and I wouldn't put it past him to know how to spot when someone's packing heat.

"They say she was dead before she hit the ground," he says. "I'm telling you this because I think you want to know. I mean, it was probably painless. To go that fast. She probably didn't feel a thing. You should know that."

I want to hit him. I want to feel his stomach yield under my fist, and all his guts bruise. I want to feel the bone of my fingers sink into his intestines, and chip on his hip. I want the satisfaction of knowing he's going to wake up tomorrow and piss blood. That I can do that to him.

I've hit a lot of people before. You can get really used to the feel of skin and shirts under you knuckles, and the way the skin splits. There's something so personal about a fist to the jaw, or stomach, but I want to get him the way he let April get gone. I'm going to stick the muzzle of this gun into his stomach and pull the trigger.

"Her doctors, they said she wouldn't have felt a thing. Like falling asleep. Just- gone. Like that. It would have been quick, faster than saying 'put that gun away, man'. So fast you can't hardly even think. It was that fast."

I glare at Loon and his eyes just flick to my pocket. I think about the funeral, about watching them put that black box in the ground. It wasn't an open casket. Everyone around here does open casket funerals. It gives everybody a chance to say goodbye, one last time. There's only one reason you wouldn't, and that's because some dumb shit mortician doesn't want to try and reconstruct a face. The gun feels like fire against my palm. I have to pull the thing from my pocket before I sweat so much I can't even hold it.

"You don't carry a loaded gun." Loon breathes but he doesn't sound too convinced. My fingers are loose and slippery against the hot metal. "That's why we call you Bluff."

I picture myself ramming the gun into his stomach, pulling the trigger. I've been told stomach wounds are painful. That you don't actually die of the bullet, but the infection of your own organs. I imagine the way the back of the alley will splatter with blood, and guts, and flesh when I pull the trigger. He won't die right away, but it'll hurt. He'll be bleeding, dying, and

maybe I'll say something about justice before lighting up a cigarette and walking away, like they do in all the movies. I'll just leave him there, bleeding and festering in the broken glass and the red dust.

"You were with her that night." The gun is heavier now. I never realized the weight six bullets could give, but it's enough to drag the thing down in my hand.

"I was walking her home," he says. "You don't want to do this, Bluff." Loon's fingers twist into my jacket collar. "Premeditated murder is Life, or you fry."

Loon's breath is cool against my face, minty from the gum. I stare at him, the sweat between my palm and the metal of the gun is clammy. I want to shoot him. I really do.

"Bullshit." I am thinking about April. She was a good kid. She went to school. She worked. She was going to get out of this town someday. We were both going to get out of this town.

"Don't be stupid." Loon shakes my collar; I feel my teeth clack together sharply. "You think this is about her? You think this wasn't an accident, that I let her get shot? Do you? Because, listen Bluff, really listen. You kill me here, now, and you will go in. You have every incentive, every reason to be upset, but Bluff, you don't want this. I know you don't want this. You don't want to go to jail. You really don't."

I've never shot a gun before, but I've heard plenty. A gun shot is a lot quieter from your bedroom window, muffled between plaster, insulation, and siding than it is from the street where it's shot.

For a split second I believe I've killed him. I've shot Loon, and he's bleeding in a grubby alley on the wrong side of town with a vicious stomach wound.

I think I realize what I've just done, that maybe he's let go of me, that he's stepped away and his hands are pressing to his stomach as if he's trying to keep everything together. He's trying to stop the blood.

"Help me." Maybe he says it; maybe he just stares up at me with those glass bottle eyes so full of surprise. Either way I don't do anything. Either way I just watch his knees give out, and his hands become all gooey with that red muck. I think about how his shirt was smeared and bloody in the hospital, how that's a different kind of tragedy.

I think about how I had to buy April's box because she lived with me, and how Loon lives alone. I think about all the blank paperwork there will be, and a box all lacquered up in some funeral house showroom that's never going to hold his body. One of the gang members works for the funeral home. Shovels ash out of the ovens. We worked a job together one time, shaking rent out of a gas station just outside of town. He was a really quiet fellow, I mean he talked quiet.

*When nobody comes for the body then we just burn them up. Ash takes up a lot less room than a body. You can funnel it into an old can and stick it on a shelf, mark it with a name. If no one comes for them in a few years you can use it to top off the other vases when they aren't quite full enough.* He'd tapped his cigarette out in the ash tray, steadied his hands on the wheel and shot me a quick look. He told me a lot of things that day, and a lot of it I forgot but not that.

"Christ," I don't know if I say it, or if Loon says it, but I believe I've shot him. I can't shake the picture of a Folger's can on a rusty old shelf. Loon in that can, and in five years someone's pulling out a handful of his teeth and hair and hand.

"Christ." I say it this time.