

Delilah

Book Two of the Ring of Fire series
sample chapter

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It's late by the time I get to Mom's house. She takes one look at me and nearly jumps out of her skin. My knees are weak. I lean into the banister as I gaze up at the head of the stairs to the door of what used to be my room. There is something I need to do, and God help me, I don't like it.

"Good God, Baby, what the hell happened to you?"

"John happened to me, Mom." I wrap my arm over the banister to help steady myself. Everything hurt, especially my gut. I need to get a handle on things if I'm ever going to finish what I started. Already, I feel defeated. There is no doubt I look the part. My knees finally lock to keep me at least somewhat stable.

"Come in here and sit before you fall down," she takes my arm to guide me into the living room.

"No, I can't," I resist, regardless how inviting the overstuffed chair appears.

"Now will you leave him?" Mom prods. "I told you before I'd help. Whatever you need. You're a lot worse off than I ever was, the next time may put him over the edge and you in a coffin."

"Please, Mom, I came over to see Tony."

"Baby, wake up. John beat you again. You have to get away."

"Great, Mom, how can you tell? Black eye? Split lip?" I know she only wants to help. She probably has more scars than I do. I glance at the one just above her right cheekbone. That hit, nearly taking the eye with it, left her with a slight twitch in the upper cheek.

"I'll call the police."

"No, don't, please. Whatever they do is only going to be short term anyway. You didn't need them twenty years ago, I don't need them now?"

"You need to get a restraining order."

"Mom? Really? A lousy piece of paper? No, it's better this way. It's the same as when Dad finally up and left. You stopped being hurt. I stopped feeling the pain. Only the names have changed."

"What are you going to do?"

"Where's Tony?"

"I got him to bed an hour ago. He's probably still awake. When you're out, he never settles down 'til late."

I head upstairs as fast as my wobbly legs will carry me. I open the door to the bedroom slow and easy. The light from the hallway lights up his face. He's wide awake with a smile to match. He jumps out of bed and runs to give me a hug. I realize now I need to sit. His bed seems so far away.

"Mommy, can we live here at Grandma's?"

"Baby, there's something we need to talk about."

He has the kind of withdrawn look he gets when I say we need to talk. Whether by instinct or managing to figure things ahead of me, I can never understand which, somehow he knows the news isn't good. I guess that's when he got a better look at me.

"Mommy, did Daddy hit you again?"

"We had a fight, Baby. But that's not for you to worry about."

His eyes begin to water. A tear trails down a cheek. He's doing it to me the way he always does

when I spill my guts. It's like being in a confessional. Tony just has that way about him. But not this time. There's no way I can tell him what I've been through. Christ, pistol whipped by Jenny and smacked around by my husband, all in the same night.

"Baby, Mommy has to leave for a while."

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going to find a place where we can go and get away. You know, together, you and me."

"I want to come too."

"Baby, I'd love to bring you, but I have to figure this out for the two of us."

"How long?" He clings onto me and won't let go. He holds on tight, arms wrapped about my neck, right where the crick is at its worst, and damn near choking me besides. He cries.

"Not long, a while." I cry too. I've never left him like this before. My heart feels like it's being torn out. Christ, how can I do this to him? How can I do this to me?

"Mommy?"

"Yeah, Baby?"

"I want to go with you."

"You can't, Baby, I'm sorry." He's totally blurred and out of focus. "I know it's hard for you to understand, but it's really better this way."

"Why? Why is it better?"

"It'll be faster. I'll find us a place and I'll be back."

"No."

"Have I ever let you down before?"

He shakes his head.

"Well, I'm not going to let you down now. I'll be back. I promise."

"Is Daddy coming, too?"

"Baby. Don't worry. You know Daddy and I don't get along sometimes. I'm going to find a place just for the two of us, OK?"

"Grandma, too?"

"Yeah, Baby, Grandma, too. Let me straighten out your covers."

I ease him back on the bed and pull the sheet and blanket to his chin.

"We'll get through this, Baby, just like we always have." I wipe his tears and kiss his forehead. I take one of the roses from the vase on the nightstand, holding it between my fingers. I rotate it slow and easy, measuring the soft delicate petals against the confusion and utter craziness that brought us here like this. Little boys don't care much for girly things, maybe someday he'll understand. "You know why I always keep flowers in your room?"

He shrugs.

"Well, when I was little, Grandma always made sure there were flowers in my room. They always smelled so nice. Kind of helped make things just a little bit better. You like them?"

He shrugs.

"It's OK, Baby." I kiss his forehead again. "I know it's not a boy thing. Someday you'll get what I mean." I put the rose in his hand, and for a moment hold his hand in mine. "Don't worry, Baby? Try and go to sleep. I'll be back, I promise."

I take one last look at him before the door latches in place. Then I stand there, forehead pressed against the trim of the door jamb. Tears trail down my cheeks and drip on the floor. Everything is a blur except the image of Tony that's etched into my brain. After a few minutes, I make my way downstairs and into the living room just as Mom comes out from the kitchen.

"Well, now can you tell me what's going on?"

"I'm leaving."

"Just like that? What about Tony?"

"Can he stay with you, not long, just a while? I'll find a place for us. Somewhere away from Tranquility."

"You know he can stay here as long as it takes. But where are you going?"

“Don’t you get it? I don’t want Tony growing up in this house. I’m scared to death he might learn about the little girl who hid in her bedroom nearly every night while her parents fought and carried on like a couple of maniacs and have the same kind of childhood memories latch onto him like the ones I have? It’s already started. It can only get worse.”

“Baby, you know as well as I that after your Dad left that night, we were finally free.”

“To do what? Be scared the rest of our lives? Knowing that anytime he could come back and start his shit all over again? I’m tired of living like this. All of us need to go where he can’t find us.”

“So where are you going?”

“I don’t know. West.”

“That narrows it down to about forty states. I need a better clue than that.”

“That’s all I have for now.”