

H E I R
by aj earle

The news of her father's death reaches Bubblegum in a dirty diner, the fifth cup of rancid coffee and a paper map sitting out in front of her.

The burner phone she picked up in Amarillo rings twice, then beeps once. A text.

Dad's dead.

She deftly types a response.

You kill him?

A few more seconds and then another beep.

Very funny.

...

It takes her nearly ten and a half hours to make it through the Panhandle into middle-of-fucking-nowhere Wyoming, driving clean straight through Colorado overnight. When Bubblegum finally reaches her father's ranch, she hardly recognizes her half-sister.

The brat of a girl stands on the porch as she pulls the truck around, the fourteen-year-old child on the cusp of horrid teenagehood. Arms crossed, mouth contorted in a pubescent growl - Bubblegum recognizes that face from all the girls who had leered at her in high school.

Haughty.

Hubristic.

Hormonal.

"The fuck you lookin' at?" she mutters to herself now, parking the stolen car in front of the house.

Bullseye sits in the rearview mirror and he laughs a low chuckle.

Should've stayed in fuckin' Texas, Bubblegum.

"Wow, took you long enough," Charlotte sneers as Bubblegum makes her way into the groaning home. Bubblegum closes the heavy door behind her and turns, eyebrows shooting up

her gritty forehead. In the light of the hallway, it's as if she's gazing into a distorted mirror: Charlotte's tight ponytail shocks her features into knifelike sharpness and her too-tight dress hugs at all the non-curves she's trying to accentuate.

Bullseye's voice slithers out from the darkness of her mind to lick at Bubblegum's ear: *Fourteen and a full blown fuckin' idiot, darlin'.*

Bubblegum pulls the too-big flannel around herself, the familiar smell of him on the lapel.

She wonders if anyone had found his body yet.

"How long did it take you?" Charlotte sneers. "Nine hours? Ten? You said you'd be here in *eight.*"

"Good to see you too, Charlie-Girl," Bubblegum responds, ignoring the whine. She adjusts the backpack she had taken with her from the Panhandle, shouldering it and walking into the living room.

It smells like her father.

Musty.

Cave-like.

Primal.

The girl watches Bubblegum with an uncomfortable stare.

"It's *Charlotte,*" she corrects with a hiss.

A flash of panic colors Charlotte's face as the older girl turns slowly back to her. There is a long moment of silence as Bubblegum's hand finds the knife in her pocket, feels the blade rusted with Bullseye's blood.

She misses him.

Charlotte stands before her, teeth bared and mid-snarl. Bubblegum knows that rage, the simmering heat of anger sitting just below the surface of the girl's muddy-green eyes.

It's as if she's about to say something -

But then a low hum starts from down the hallway, building into a terrible moan.

It reverberates into Bubblegum's mind as it shakes her ribcage, grasping at her insides with grimey fingers. A sticky darkness blurs her vision, black encroaching on the sides of her eyesight.

Charlotte stumbles against her and she catches the girl. The windows vibrate with an unseen force, the lamps flickering lightly before the wail finally subsides. The house shudders in response.

Bubblegum blinks, her sight returning.

The girls look at one another, steadying themselves.

"What the fuck was that?" Bubblegum breathes.

Charlotte is painted with sweat, panic and fear rolling off her in waves.

"Dad."

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The basement is dark and dank, the winter chill creeping in from the cold Wyoming wind. Bubblegum takes each stair with a deliberate step, the air growing thick as she descends. Charlotte is right behind her, hesitant.

"You told me Dad was dead," Bubblegum whispers, annoyed.

"I *thought* he was," Charlotte whispers back. "I stabbed him like, five times."

"Did you even fuckin' aim?"

The pair reach the bottom of the stairs, staring into the inky black.

"Dad?" Bubblegum calls out. "You down here?"

Oh, darlin', Bullseye purrs.

Something's *definitely down here*.

Bubblegum never really liked her father.

She likes him even *less* now.

A shadow shifts, darkness pressing upon darkness as a figure makes its way out of the gloom.

He's bleeding, red gushing from his wounds. He crawls towards the two, stained fingers clawing at the concrete floor. Dirty hair matted against his scalp, bruises scattering his face and arms.

"Ch-Charlotte - " he manages, blood thick on his tongue. "Ch-Char - "

"Shh," Bubblegum coos, bending low. "It's okay. Shh."

The older man with the too-long hair looks up at her, muddy-green eyes staring into nothingness. His mouth opens, blood and black pouring from his gums. The low groan begins again, louder now without the basement door to stifle him. It shakes Bubblegum to her core, the awful sound grating against her ear drums. What kind of fucked up supernatural shit -

"How long has he been like this?" Bubblegum asks the girl behind her, shouting over their father's groan.

"A day? Two, maybe," Charlotte answers, stepping forward.

An ordinary kitchen knife is in her hand, the blade dull and matte.

She drives the blade into the man's back without warning, the tool working hard to dig through the ragged clothes and skin. Their father's wail gives way to a scream, high-pitched and animalistic. The shuddering falters, releasing the girls from the horrid darkness invading their eyesight.

"No, no!" Bubblegum shouts, grabbing the forearm of her idiot sister. "Jesus fuckin' Christ - *no*."

The man whimpers as the blade is pulled free from his body.

Charlotte huffs and drops the knife onto the floor with a loud clang. She crosses her arms in annoyance. "No?"

"Not like that, Charlie-Girl," Bubblegum breathes.

Her own knife burns hot in her pocket.

"Like *this*."

...

It takes about two more hours to finish.

Bubblegum takes apart her father with icy efficiency.

First his head, sawing through his neck. The crunch of his vertebrae is almost like tinkling bells, the bones snapping as Bubblegum wrenches it free from his body.

Then come his limbs, the sisters *cutting cutting cutting* through sinew and bone and the fleshy bit of his joints. He doesn't moan anymore, not after the deep slice from her knife into his lungs. He doesn't see either, not after Charlie-Girl plucked his eyes from their sockets and crushed them underneath her sneakers.

The sisters work in tandem, transforming the basement into their personal slaughterhouse. Lit only by the twin flashlights found underneath the kitchen sink, Bubblegum hums along with Bullseye as she chops the fingers from her father's hands.

"You know he never showed up to my softball games," Charlie-Girl says, tossing a foot into a garbage bag. She clicks her tongue. "Fuckin' rude, right?"

"That *is* fuckin' rude," Bubblegum agrees, prying the wedding ring from a rogue appendage.

Gold plated.

Cheap.

Charlie-Girl kicks the meat from the open ribcage, splattering blood and grime onto the floor.

"Hear that, Dad? You're fuckin' *RUDE!*"

Bullseye chuckles along Bubblegum's spine.

Well, well, well, sounds just like ya.

...

"Those are gonna be your coffin nails, girl."

Bubblegum settles into the neighboring porch chair as Charlie-Girl takes another drag on a cigarette. She taps her half-sister on the knee. "Gimme one."

Charlie-Girl rummages through her pocket and tosses the almost-crushed pack to her. Bubblegum shakes a cigarette out and lights it, inhaling smoke and copper.

The Wyoming winter takes a temperature plunge, bits of glittery snow starting to nestle into the pair's red-streaked hair.

"You know what I'm feeling right now?" the girl whispers, tapping ash into the wind.

She glances to her older sister, muddy-green eyes glinting.

"Absolutely fuckin' nothing. Not a goddamn thing."

She laughs, grabbing her belly and snorting. Tears form into her eyes and she wipes them away, staining her face with more dirt and blood.

Bubblegum smiles as Bullseye whistles low.

"That's my girl."