I Will Follow You Into the Dark

by Aireabella

Summary

Having lost their home at the prison, their family, and friends, Daryl and Beth are forced to set out on their own. The brutality of their world and their survival instincts will set them on a course to form a bond they never expected.

This story will follow the exploits of Daryl Dixon and Beth Greene after the fall of the prison in the Season 4 Midseason Finale.

~*~ First Place Winner of the 2016 Moonshine Awards in the Work In Progress Category
~*~

(This fic was started in January of 2014. I am beginning to cross post here)
Beth continued to sing the song softly to herself as she gathered up the sticks and twigs to help supplement the wood Daryl had gathered for their fire. Even though he had told her to stay put in the hunting cabin they had stumbled on several weeks before, she couldn't allow him to bear the entire burden of their existence. This was the least she could do while he hunted to keep them fed, and she hadn't wandered too far from the little log structure, had she? Her wandering thoughts and preoccupation had distracted her from her song, so she quietly picked it up again.

"If I die young, bury me in satin..."

She had a feeling that very soon, the words of the song would become the story of her life, but she found solace in the comfort the positive tone of the ballad encompassed. Beth paused her song when she heard footsteps behind her. Not having been accompanied by the stench of decay, she knew that Daryl had found her and not a walker. She took a moment to gather her thoughts before she turned to face him and explain; she had hoped to return to the cabin before him to avoid such a conversation.

"I know you told me to stay put..." Her thought trailed off as she turned and found not an angry Daryl but three gaunt strangers with danger reflecting in their eyes.

They all had guns in hand, but they didn't brandish them aggressively as she posed less than a threat.
Beth felt her stomach drop as the largest of the men took a few steps towards her and smiled charmingly. She dropped her armful of kindling, forgotten, to the ground and took two tentative steps backwards.

"Hey there, pretty girl...who would've thought that such a beautiful voice would belong to someone with the face of an angel." He spoke as an educated man might, a man who in a different world would not be dangerous to her, but their world drove people to such horrendous acts of barbarism. His tone was, however, one that a hunter might use to calm a frightened animal before he went in for the kill.

Beth was frozen. She should run...or should she? She realized so many times she was not built for this world. While she was frozen, the stranger had made it within an arms length of her with the other two closing the distance.

"A pretty thing like you shouldn't be out here all alone. You need someone to protect you." He reached out to touch her hair, and she jerked away sharply, reaching for the knife at her waist.

"I'm not alone. Daryl is hunting," Beth asserted with the most confident voice she could muster, her hand closing on the hilt of her blade.

"Awww sweetheart, I wouldn't do that if I were you," the stranger suggested, his smile broadening. Beth considered her options, but not quickly enough. She found herself flat on the ground, the air gone from her lungs, unable to speak or scream or even cry. She thrashed about and made contact with her attacker's face a few times before he had her weighted down and ordered one of his companions to pin her arms above her head. The final of the three moved behind the man on top of her to get a good view of the action, smile spread from ear to ear.

This isn't happening...This isn't happening...THIS ISN'T HAPPENING she screamed inside her head as she willed her breath to return.

"There now sweetheart...calm down...shhh...that's not so bad, is it?" He whispered, his face just a few short inches from hers. He reached out and tucked a stray blonde lock behind her ear.

Just then, Beth's lungs finally began to work again, short, ragged gasps replaced by the deep intake of autumn air. She released the loudest screech she could manage, no doubt setting off a thunderous throb in the ears of the man on top of her. She was repaid with a backhand across the face that resulted in falling stars in her vision and left the strong taste of iron and warmth of blood in her mouth. She could only pray that Daryl was close enough to have heard her because any chance for her to get out of this situation alive without Daryl's intervention quickly disappeared.

"Is that how you wanna play this you stupid little bitch?!" He screamed at her. Beth couldn't tell if he was angry or inflamed by her outcry, but something burned bright in his eyes.

"Daryl! Daryl...Daryl Help Me!" Beth hoped hard that if she continued screaming, Daryl would be able to locate her. She cringed and attempted to thrash as she felt rough, angry hands fumbling with the button at the low slung waist of her jeans. "Daryl...Daryl!"

"Go on, scream for your little high school sweetheart," the man pinning her arms above her head laughed out. "We'll make zombie chow outta him when he gets here and write a tragic end to your little teenage fairytale."

"DARYL!"
Daryl smiled as he tucked his fifth squirrel through his belt. They might be dumb with a brain no bigger than a walnut, but they were smart enough to stay out of the mouths of walkers...just not quick enough to dodge his bolts. And at least Beth liked squirrel fried up all nice and juicy...or if she didn't, she didn't complain none about it. He couldn't say that about many girls like her he had ever met...not that he had met many girls like her in his lifetime...and then women in general didn't like squirrel, why he didn't know, probably because they were just so damn complicated...the women, not the squirrels.

*Five is enough for today. Best not take more than we need,* Daryl thought to himself.

The squirrels supplemented by the remaining dry goods they'd found stashed in the cabin would keep them fed in meat until the day after next. As he bent to reload his crossbow, a squirrel jumped into a low branch just above his head and started chattering angrily at him. Looking up, Daryl quickly spotted the fat red.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah...I hear yah. Keep on screaming, your day's comin'!" Daryl answered the complaining creature.

A scream...one not from an animal...rang out through the woods and set everything to silence.

"Beth..." Daryl breathed to himself as his heart hit the ground.

Without a second thought, he set off through the woods in the direction of the scream at a full run. He reached the edge of the tree line at a tiny clearing where he saw Beth and her situation before she called out for him again in terror. He thanked whatever power was out there listening that Beth was surrounded by the living and not overtaken by the walking dead. He wasn't too late.

"Daryl! Daryl...Daryl Help Me!"

*Three men...one armed...two with guns on the ground.*

"Daryl...Daryl!"

"Go on, scream for your little high school sweetheart. We'll make zombie chow outta him when he gets here and write a tragic end to your little teenage fairytale."

"DARYL!"

*Two focused on Beth, the lookout not even watching...Dumbass... They're all ready to die.*

There was nothing left for Daryl to do but what he did best.
Chapter 2

Beth had been given a strict Christian upbringing, but the world had changed. She couldn’t remember seeing anything more beautiful than the crossbow bolt sprouting out of the watcher’s neck. He subsequently dropped to the ground futilely grasping at the instrument of his impending death. In the next instant, Daryl appeared, yanking the scalp of her attacker, baring his neck and fluidly opening his throat, leaving a red smile from ear to ear. Daryl was like an artist in his prime. No...more like an avenging angel sent from God who put not only precision but passion into his work. The blood sprayed her face and chest as Daryl threw the convulsing body off of her, but she didn't flinch from it. She had been granted life. Daryl reached down and pulled her roughly to her feet.

"Get behind me and stay there!" He spat out, taking his free arm and pushing her directly behind him. His other hand retained its deadly grasp on his bloody hunting knife.

The man who had brutally pinned her arms to the ground stood with his hands spread wide, palms up in a placating manner. His gun lay on the ground a few feet from him, but he appeared as frozen as Beth had been when her assailants first came upon her.

"Dude...Whoa...wait..." the last attacker standing managed as Daryl lethally changed grips on his knife."We can work something out. We didn't know that she belonged to anyone...not anyone like you..." he attempted to plead his case.

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"...didn't know that she belonged to anyone...not anyone like you..."

The words and their meaning made him snap. He’d never shied away from violence when it was called for, but he had never seen red...until now. Before he realized what had happened, Daryl found himself plunging his knife into the ruin of his victim’s chest again and again and again. The purpose of the stabbing had long ago faded as life had left the body beneath him, but it still sated his need to defeat the human evils that ran rampant in their fucked up world. When he finally came to his senses, he remained perched over the mush that had been a man, and in one final act of retribution, he sent his knife crunching through the skull. It was necessary, but it sure in the hell did feel good too. When he went to wipe the blood from his face with the back of his hand, it was no good. He was covered from the waist up, but he was able to wipe his blade on the side of his thigh where his pants were still clean.

Standing and looking back, he saw that Beth was exactly where he had told her to stay.

Pfft! A little late for that...

His first instinct was to put her in her place for not listening to him when he told her to stay in the cabin, but seeing her standing there covered in another man's blood returned him to protect mode.

"You okay?" He questioned softly, approaching her slowly, not knowing if she was as calm as she appeared.

She nodded her head in an affirmative.
"Any of the blood yours?"

"I...no...all theirs I think." Beth's voice was quavering. He knew that once the adrenaline ran out, she would be a total mess.

"Looks like some's yours..." he’d closed the distance and reached out to examine her split lip. Beth winced at his touch.

This realization that she was feeling pain landed her back into reality. She reached up and found her cheek swollen as well.

"You good a minute...then we'll get you back and clean you up." Daryl didn't wait for an answer but went to work making sure everyone who was dead would stay dead before Beth turned into an emotional wreck. He grabbed up the guns and precious ammo the dead had carried. God knows they needed the fire power after having lost everything except what they carried when the prison fell.

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* Did he save me...I'm okay, right? Beth hoped this was real, that she had been sparred the horrible fate of the day. Sometimes everything seemed so unreal. If she could just wake up from this nightmare, everything would be okay...she would be at home with Maggie, and Mama and Shawn would be there too...and Daddy... Beth reached up, touching her lip. The pain was real. She pulled her fingers away from her face seeing the crimson liquid that stained them. The blood was real.

And Daddy's dead...

Beth watched Daryl finish the dead men and collect the guns and extra magazines that could be their salvation...at least until they weren't. Daryl was so good at this, so strong...she wasn't. In some of the more depressed moments of her early teens, she had come to what she believed was a genius conclusion about life. Life was simply a slow march towards death. Lately, the pace of that march had picked up beyond comprehension. She just wanted it to stop...it had to slow down. How was Daryl so strong?

Daddy is dead...

Beth sank down to the ground.

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Sure as sunrise, Beth had broken. When Daryl turned around, he found her sitting on the ground, arms tight around her knees, face buried in her thighs. She was literally a ball of emotion. Now feeling secure and heavily armed, Daryl could attempt to offer Beth what little comfort he could, putting aside any thought of scolding her for not listening, at least in her current state. He went to his knees in front of her, reaching out and gently touching her shoulder. She barely responded.
"You okay?"

No answer.

"You're gonna be okay...I promise."

Shit, did he just say that? He never made promises he couldn't keep.

*Looks like I'm just gonna have to keep this one.*

"I promise, Beth...I'll keep you safe until I die..."

Beth finally looked up and him, bloody and puffy from tears. She threw herself at him so hard that he was sent back on his heels, forced to brace himself with a hand on the ground behind him. Once he had righted the both of them, he put an arm around her in comfort and with the other gently stroked her hair. He wasn't used to being close to others, but he realized they needed one another, and giving comfort was part of that equation. And he never realized someone so small could hold someone so hard.

"Please don't die..." Beth managed just above a whisper, face buried in his chest.

"I promise...I'll stay alive as long as I can." Daryl realized a long time ago that a man was only as good as his word, and he intended to be a good man.
Chapter 3

By the time Daryl got them back to the cabin, he felt like the poster boy for some damned romance novel, loaded down with three dead men's semi-autos, all their extra mags, his crossbow slung across his back, and tiny Beth limp like a rag doll in his arms. In what fucked up world was he the hero? When he set Beth in front of the crude fireplace, she drew up her knees and buried her head again, sobbing silently. He went to work warming the water over the fire then approached Beth with a clean damp rag.

"Here now Beth, we need to get you cleaned up...see how bad off you are and get your hurts fixed."

Beth looked up to where he was kneeling in front of her and made no move to protest as she had been like to do. He started with her hands, wiping each finger and her palms softly to acclimate her to the process. Daryl knew she had to be in some sort of a state of shock, and after being attacked and handled so roughly by three men, the last thing he wanted was to make her feel like he was violating her too. Maggie had suffered a similar assault at the hands of the Governor, and she hadn't gotten past it easily... and Maggie was the stronger of the two sisters. When he made it to her face, he left her busted lip and swollen cheek 'til last. He winced when she winced, having suffered similar hurts over the years. But he was a man, and that was expected. No woman should ever suffer such a wound.

"Thank you..." Beth managed, touching her hand to his against her face. Fine, delicate, gentle Beth.

"Mmm-hmm...don't think nothin' of it." Daryl released her face and she his hand. What else was there to say in this fucked up situation? "I'm gonna go outside and get myself cleaned up." He knew he must be a bloody nightmare. "Go and get yourself a flannel from the stash in the closet. Throw your bloody shirt in the fire. I don't think you can save it."

Outside the cabin, Daryl took a bucket of cool water from the rain barrel. He splashed water on his face and ran it through his hair, looking down and realizing his shirt was a lost cause too. Removing it, he was able to wash off the blood that had soaked through to his chest and arms. He took a deep breath, taking a moment to gather his thoughts and give Beth some privacy to change. This was rough...this must be what it felt like to have someone need you on the most essential level. Merle had never needed him, and sure, he had been an integral part of their small group and later the ill-fated community at the prison, but this was so much different...so much more immediate. Beth needed him to survive.

I need her too.

When did he realize that? Or had he known it all along? He could make it on his own, had his entire life. He would've been safer on his own, but when the prison fell, his basic instinct to survive had been overridden by his need to protect, save, and perhaps ensure that he wouldn't be alone. A slight breeze chilled his wet skin and dropped Daryl face first back into the gravity of their situation. It was fall, and the cold weather was a nice respite from Georgia summers. But it was getting too cold, too fast. The fire in the cabin should at this point be a necessity for cooking, not for warmth from the chill of night. Early fall often signaled a harsh winter for their region. Harsh winter in a normal world meant inconvenience...in their world, it could mean death. He needed a game plan and quick. Daryl grabbed his ruined shirt and went back inside with purpose.
When Daryl came back into the cabin, he was clean and shirtless. He came close to the fire near where she sat on the floor, tossing his ruined shirt in it to burn.

"You okay?" He asked.

Beth nodded and felt a blush rise on her cheeks at the sight of him shirtless, why she didn't know. Perhaps it was from her tragic inexperience with boys, much less men...and she had never seen Daryl topless either. He crossed quickly to the makeshift closet where the former occupant kept his formidable collection of flannel shirts. This was when she noticed the myriad of scars across his back. She didn't know much about Daryl's past or life before the apocalypse; he had never been very forthcoming about it, but how cruel was it that life had never been beautiful for him. Perhaps that was why he was so strong, how he adjusted so easily when things went from bad to worse to a living nightmare. His life had always been cruel.

Daryl buttoned his new flannel with deft fingers as he came back towards the fire. He seated himself on the tattered remnants of the couch, leaning down, his elbows on his knees. She turned fully around to face him, the fire flickering hot against her back.

"My Daddy's dead." She didn't know if it was a question, statement, or an answer. Perhaps she just needed to vocalize it to begin letting go. Their world afforded very little time to mourn.

"Sorry, Beth..." They had all lost so many that words were less than useless, but what else did he have to offer.

"And Maggie and Glenn and Rick and Carl. We lost all of them too..." Beth continued, her voice seemed a little less unsteady.

"Just 'cause somethin's lost doesn't mean you won't find it again," he reassured Beth and himself in the same turn. If they were alive, they could possibly come together again. And the lot she'd just mentioned, if anyone could cheat death, it was those som'bithches, even the Asian who had grown a pair and turned Last Samurai on their asses.

"How will we ever find them?" Beth's voice finally reached a tone of acceptance.

"Beth, the truth is, our top priority has to be each other and keeping alive until I figure things out. We can't be focusing all our energy on finding them until things get better for us," he asserted. He was the adult after all.

"I didn't save...I couldn't find...Judith...we just left her behind...and she...she needed me." Lil' Asskicker. How many more people did he have to lose? The next one sure in the hell wasn't gonna be Beth. He went to his knees on the floor in front of her and took her hands firmly in his.

"Listen up. There ain't nothin we can do about that now. We did the only thing we could." Daryl's words were reassuring, stern and certain, even if he didn't feel those things. "And the truth is, that baby wasn't yours and you had no responsibility to her, but you probably felt like she was yours and she didn't have no other mother but you. It feels like your heart's been hacked out of your chest...I
know, I've been there...but we gotta keep moving forward."

Beth looked down, away from his intense gaze. Daryl let one of her hands go and gently raised her chin again.

"You're gonna make a good mom one day." That was one thing he knew for a fact.

A small, sad smile spread across her lips.

"Daryl, our world is over. I'll never make it there..."

"Listen Blondie...this isn't how the world ends. Life goes on, and we're not going out without one hell of a fight. I think we've proved we still got some fight left in us. You do want to live, don't you Beth?" He didn't mean to be as fierce as he sounded, but someone had to rally the troops.

"I don't want to die...so what now?"

"What is it that you're always running around saying? 'We've all got jobs to do'? Well, here's the plan. Your job is to stay alive. My job is to keep you alive, got it?"

Beth nodded.

"Good. Now don't go makin' my job harder than it has to be by trying to get yourself killed."

She nodded again with no complaint or argument, but he wasn't entirely sure that she meant it.

"That means that you don't just listen to what I tell you, but you do what I tell you when I tell you, do you understand?" He was being harsh, but the gravity of their situation called for it.

"Yes, I understand."

Unexpectedly, Beth embraced him, and in a pure need for human contact, Daryl hugged back.

Please don't make me lose anyone else...her...
Daryl sat at the stone hearth poking at a stubborn log that refused to catch. Too cold...it was far too cold. Beth was resting on one of the pallets they’d made near the fire huddled under a threadbare blanket. The cabin had served its purpose, but he had become too complacent. They’d been here what, two weeks since the prison had come crashing down around them. Daryl ticked off the days in his head and realized they were closer to three weeks than two. He didn't have a problem staying in one place...hell, that was what they needed, but the reason he’d allowed them to stay was all wrong...the hope of reconnecting with the group. Against all good judgment, knowingly or not, they had sacrificed safety for sentiment. They were too close to the prison and the herd that had been attracted to it, no more than ten miles as a crow flies by his estimation. They were too close to major roads for his liking. And the cabin was far from secure...he couldn't fortify it if he tried. There was also a good chance that someone would be out looking for the scum he had to kill. If they were lucky, they wouldn't start looking until the late morning or early afternoon.

He told Beth earlier that Maggie, Glenn, Rick, and Carl could still be alive, and that might well be true, but with the way things had gone to hell in a hand basket, everyone scattered at the prison, and the time that had passed, there was no tellin' if they would ever meet up again. It was just too far fetched. They had had some lucky breaks in the past, but most of those had ultimately ended in tragedy. He had to be realistic now for both Beth and himself. They needed a secure place to hole up for the winter. Stockpile some food. Get some guns and ammo. Stay away from others who would drag them down. And he needed to make some sort of life for Beth in this fucked up world. They both needed it, and he was the only one at this point who was likely to be able to give that to her.

Beth turned over to face the fire. Even though she hadn't made any noise, he could see her cheeks stained with tears.

"You too cold?"

Beth shook her head no, but Daryl knew better. She was fragile at the best of times, down right breakable the rest, although she had resilience of spirit and the will to live in the most messed up situations. Maybe slitting her wrist back at the farm had toughened her resolve. He got up, grabbing his blanket, and laid it over her huddled body.

"What about you...you'll get cold, won't you?" Beth resisted even as she pulled the blanket tighter around herself.

"You need to get some rest. We're packing up and leavin' at first light," Daryl replied, resuming his perch on the hearth.

"It's my fault...that we have to leave here..." Beth offered something somewhere between a question and an admission.

"Nah, Lil' Bit. In this world nothin's really anybody's fault. Shi...stuff happens." He poked the fire more as the stubborn log finally caught on.

"But we could have stayed here..." Beth continued.

"We could've never stayed here. We should've never stayed so long. I can't keep us safe here. We can't live a fantasy, and today was our wake up call." She was listening intently, hanging on his every word. "I'll find us somewhere safe to shelter for the winter. If we're not on the run, we can regain our strength, stock up on supplies, and see what spring brings."
"And if we stay in one place, the others might be able to find us. Isn't that what they say? If you're lost, stay in one place until you're found?" There was a tragic tinge of hope in her young voice.

"Yeah, somethin’ like that."

The truth was, they weren't the ones who were lost. And he didn't even know if the others would be looking for them. They could very well assume that Beth was dead because who would've guessed she escaped with him? If they thought he was alone, they knew he could take care of himself melting into the wilderness, and they would be looking out for themselves, Glenn for Maggie, Rick for Carl, and the others for the groups they had possibly escaped with. But he wasn't gonna say nothing, not now at least. There was no harm in her hanging on to hope as long as one of them was being realistic.

"You better go on and get some sleep. Like I said, were leavin' at first light." Daryl effectively and definitively closed the conversation.

"What about you? I have your blanket, and you need to sleep too."

She was right.

Daryl rose, grabbed the flat pillow from his pallet, and scooted his makeshift bed on the floor close to where Beth lay. He measured his movements and words carefully, not wanting to spook Beth.

"We'll share. That okay with you?"

Beth nodded her head and lifted the blankets for him as he knelt on the floor next to her. When he slid under, stretched out on his back, he could feel her close by his side. He was uneasy and comfortable all in one, craving the human contact just as much as Beth needed it. And if she was the one who was getting close, there was nothing for him to feel uneasy about, was there?

"Here, come on," he offered, extending his arm for her to rest her head on. She came closer, laid down her head, and rested her hand tentatively on his chest. He held his breath for a moment, why he didn't know, then exhaled to release the tension the contact had created.

"Thank you..." she whispered to him.

"Mmm-hmmm..." was all he could manage before he drifted off into oblivion.

He woke in the middle of the night, the fire crackling comfortingly to his back, pulling him into the world between sleep and consciousness. She was nestled close against his chest; he could feel her warm breath as she breathed rhythmically. He'd wrapped his arms tightly around her while he had slept like she was some small doll. He was too tired to fight the need to be near someone, despite the fact that it illustrated weakness, but who was there to judge him. And besides, he was only protecting her...protection he was good at; he could take pride in that. As he drifted back into the sweet embrace of sleep, he couldn't help thinking that there were few better was to spend the apocalypse.

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"Beth...Beth...wakeup..."

The soft voice gently drew her out of a mercifully dreamless sleep.
"Beth...Beth..."

She moved slowly, cuddling against the warmth, comforted by the arm around her as she began to come to her senses.

"Lil' Bit, we gotta get going soon. Sun’s almost up."

Beth forced her eyes open as reality hit her again. She moved away from him a little, tilting her head up and seeing Daryl looking down on her. His eyes were still heavy with sleep, and his hair was more mussed than usual. She wasn't used to seeing him this way; he was always awake and put together before he woke her...well, as put together as Daryl ever was. And she wasn't used to being this close to anyone when she woke, the tragedy of her inexperience again causing a blush to rise on her cheeks. At least it was too dark for Daryl to notice. She forced herself to look away as she wondered how long he had been awake trying not to disturb her.

"Sorry Daryl, I didn't mean to invade your space last night," Beth apologized to Daryl's chest.

"Nothin' to be sorry for. I think we both needed someone warm to sleep by last night...I just didn't wanna scare you this morning by jumping up."

"Thank you." Beth wasn't really thanking him for one thing in general. It was basically a giant blanket thank you.

"Yep...the fire's still going. I'm gonna cook some breakfast right quick so we can eat before we get going."

Daryl gently disentangled himself from her and the blankets. If he was uncomfortable with their situation, he didn't show it. He tucked the blanket tight around her before he went to work.

Beth packed their provisions, matches, some spare shirts and socks, and their blankets while Daryl cooked their breakfast. At least they were leaving with something...more than what they had left with when their farm was overrun and just a few weeks ago when they were forced to abandon the prison, but it was still little enough. It all fit into a backpack she had found shoved in the closet. When it came time to leave, Daryl poured some fuel on the cabin floor and dropped a match when she was safely outside. He had informed her of his intentions at breakfast giving several reasons when she didn't understand why. If anyone was looking for the men who died the day before, it would draw their attention, but by that time, they would be safely away. It would also eventually draw the attention of the walkers in their vicinity, giving them the opportunity to escape unnoticed. In addition, burning the cabin would eliminate shelter and extra supplies for anyone who may have been tracking them from the prison attack. When Daryl had finished his explanation, Beth added one reason quietly to herself, one that she hoped was in his head but he just hadn't wanted to say it. Maybe the burning cabin would leave a clue to their whereabouts for their friends and family who may be looking for them.

When she had first met Daryl, he had seemed like such a wildcard, rough and gruff with a prickly demeanor that made him entirely unapproachable. But then his wholehearted search for the little girl Sophia whom she had never known betrayed that he was actually a good person. And he had saved her more times than she could count. She owed him her life, so the least she could do was give him her trust. She followed willingly as he led her away from the cabin as it caught fire in earnest. Fire was a cleansing force. The burning cabin was something that had to be let go, another part of her past that had to be erased so she could garner the strength to become the person she needed to be to survive.

After about a half an hour into the woods, Beth stopped and dared to look back. The only evidence
of the fire was the steady stream of smoke in the distance. She hadn't heard Daryl turn around or reach her side, but she felt his large, steady hand on the small of her back urging her to move on.

"Come on, Lil' Bit. Ain't no good looking back," Daryl intoned as she turned to face him.

"How far are we going?" Beth dared to ask even though she feared the answer.

"As far as we need to go to get where we are safe." His ambiguous answer did little to sate the question at hand. "Come on. We can't stay here. Just follow me; I won't lead you wrong."

As Daryl let go of her and headed further into the woods, she could just make out the wings on the back of his leather vest, half hidden under his crossbow. They were dingy now, no longer as white as they were when she had first met him, but they were still there. None of them got away without being tarnished by this life. Daryl didn't want to lead. Maybe that was why people were so willing to follow.

Beth was no different. She followed. I will follow you into the dark.
They were on the third day of their trek, and Daryl was still keeping them at an aggressive pace. Beth was keeping up alright, but as it seemed they were going nowhere in particular, she didn't see why they were in such a rush. Daryl simply kept reiterating that they were heading away, so at least they were making good time by her estimation. The first night after the cabin, they sheltered under an outcropping of rock in the woods; it was little better than being out in the open. Even though Daryl had taken the first watch, not waking her until predawn so he could catch a few short hours of sleep before moving on, her sleep had been restless and plagued with horrible nightmares that she couldn't remember when she woke, but the fear stayed with her. The second night, they had come across a short dock over a river with a rustic structure at its end containing fishing oddments and such. It seemed like an odd choice of shelter, their fronts to the woods, their backs to the river, and she had said as much to Daryl.

"Can you swim?" He asked her as if his reasoning had been a plain as day.

She told him haughtily that of course she could swim.

"Ever seen a walker swim? I haven't, 'cause they can't," Daryl pointed out.

As the sun began to hang low in the horizon of the third day, Beth could feel the tension floating in the air. She was dreading the thought of having to spend another night in the open. In addition, they had encountered no combative people or even seen any walkers since they left the cabin. Neither of them had mentioned this fact aloud clearly in fear of jinxing the situation, but it naturally seemed like the right time for their luck to run out and for things to go from livable to terrible.

"Hey Beth, you see that up there?"

Beth sped up a bit to reach his side; she had started to lag behind a little.

"See what?" She didn't see anything up ahead except trees and the seemingly invisible trail Daryl was following.

"Looks like a clearing up ahead, and I think I can see a chimney." Daryl stopped a moment, pointing straight forward as if it was as clear as a sunny summer day.

Beth moved forward past of Daryl in hopes of seeing what he saw. "I still don't..."

"Watch out for that fence..." Daryl finished his warning just as she came into contact with the rusted barbed wire that clawed eagerly at her and caught the hem of her shirt.

Beth turned away trying to get free without ripping the flannel when she saw a mild expression of amusement creep across his face.

"It’s not funny!" Beth exclaimed, but she smiled a little too. She could see the humor in her lack of wilderness skills, and if this were the worst thing to happen to her today, it would be a very good day.

"Careful princess, we don't have any spare tetanus shots laying 'round," he teased slinging his crossbow over his shoulder and coming to set her free.

After she was disentangled, Daryl held two strands of barbed wire apart for her to slip through the fence. When she turned to reciprocate, he was already passing her and heading toward the tree line.
Just as Daryl had said, they entered a clearing where a lonely stone chimney stood, its house having burned down around it.

"It don't look like they'll be comin' home anytime soon." Daryl provided amusing commentary. "But we can at least check out the barn." He gestured toward the solid looking structure about a hundred yards away across the rutted driveway that led into the woods the opposite direction from which they had come.

"Yes, at least we can check out the barn..." Beth repeated with more than a little trepidation. They didn't really have a great track record with barns.

Daryl had instructed her to stay outside while he cleared it. When he returned a few minutes later, he threw open the doors signaling the ‘all clear’.

"Nothin' in there but hay stacked high. We can make our fire right out here then sleep all nice ‘n warm on the hay."

"I thought you said your job was to keep me alive?"

"Yeah...didn't I find us a nice safe place to sleep?" He clearly didn't understand her reason for protest.

"Build a fire that close to the hay barn, and you're likely to get us both blown up. Hay isn't just flammable; it can be highly combustible. We can sleep in the barn, but I think we should cook in the hearth," Beth suggested as she headed back to the free standing fireplace across the road. She felt a little pride well up in her chest having known something useful that Daryl didn't.

She could hear that Daryl was following her. All in all, it hadn't been a bad day.

By dark, the fire was burning warm, the squirrels were roasting, their dripping fat sizzling in the fire, and they were sharing a rare treat, a can of peaches they had found in the now burned cabin that had sheltered them at the beginning of their journey. It sort of felt like an unofficial, unspoken celebration. So many bad things hand happened that it only seemed fair to enjoy what things could be enjoyed, no matter how little. And if she focused really hard on not thinking about the world falling apart around them, it almost felt like they were just two friends enjoying a nice fire on an autumn night rather than survivors thrown together by circumstance, fleeing, trying desperately to find their place in the world.

"Daryl..."

"Hmm?" He half answered, wiping peach juice from his chin.

"How did you not know about the hay?"

"Dang girl, just 'cause I grew up country don't mean I know anything about farming." Daryl gave a good natured reply, reaching out and giving her shoulder a friendly nudge.

"Sorry...I just assumed..." Beth didn't really know where she was going with her thought. In hindsight, it had been a really silly assumption to make.

"You know what they say happens when you assume. You make an..."

"I know, I know..." she cut him off before he could finish.

"Just sayin' how it is." Daryl popped another soft peach slice into his mouth.
"I wouldn't have to assume if you would just talk about yourself every once in a while rather than having to be all mysterious all the time."

"I just ain't all that interesting...didn't think anybody much cared about who I was. They're interested in my hunting, tracking, survival know how, and God knows why, everybody wants my opinion or wants me to make decisions...those are all things I can offer somethin' in. Who really cares what my middle name is or what my favorite movie is?" Daryl stood up to check the squirrels that were blackening over the flames.

It was funny the way he talked about himself. It sounded like he felt the world used him for what he was good at, not really caring who he was or what he felt, but it didn't seem like it bothered him; it seemed like he took a great deal of pride in that.

Daryl cut the spit in two, handing Beth her squirrel.

"Careful, don't burn yourself," Daryl cautioned as he sat back down with his share.

"You know I can't eat a whole squirrel by myself," she told him for at least the twentieth time since their flight from the prison, but he always gave her the same amount he took as well as the same reply:

"Eat all you can, and I'll finish what you don't want."

As Beth was carefully pulling off chunks of charred meat, she couldn't help but think about how much she had been able to adapt in the new world.

"You know...I never used to eat food with my hands. Not even pizza or French fries or anything like that," Beth offered.

"I know..." Daryl replied, grinning in the firelight.

"How do you know? See, your assuming now!" Beth called him out with the same good nature he had used when she made her assumption.

"No, I'm not assuming. I know. All anyone's gotta do is look at you to figure out something like that."

What was that supposed to mean? Then again...he was probably right.

"And Beth, if you wanna know something about me, all you gotta do is ask..."
Daryl took a deep breath. Did he just open himself up like that?

*What the Hell. What can it hurt?*

"What's your favorite food?" Beth was quick to jump at his offer, but the question seemed harmless enough.

"You mean besides squirrel?"

Beth gave a little giggle, the kind he imagined girls made at their slumber parties when talking about cute boys in hushed, excited voices.

*God, she's so young.*

"No, seriously, when I was little and my mom was havin' a good day, that is before she died, she used to make these really awesome oatmeal butterscotch cookies." Daryl closed his eyes tight for a minute, and he could almost smell them, taste them so hot outta the oven that they burned his hands and mouth, but they were so good it didn't matter.

"And you know now how homemade cookies are the little precut squares in the packages you get at the store and cook at home...no these were the real homemade kind with the measured out flour and sugar and everything. I know for the world you come from, that's how things always were, but for me, that was special." He paused a minute realizing he was neglecting his dinner, took a bite, wiping the grease from his chin, and glancing over at Beth who was intently waiting for him to continue.

"I used to sit and watch her cook, and everything just seemed so perfect and normal in those moments...nothin' else mattered...and my mom...she made 'em extra special...she put chocolate chips in with the butterscotch ones too. Always on my birthday and Christmas, I knew I would get 'em..." Daryl trailed off, realizing how much of a deal he was making about stupid cookies.

*Jeez, all she asked was what your favorite food was...*

Daryl swallowed the lump of emotion and cleared his throat to mask it.

"It sounds like a really good cookie," Beth offered with sincerity. She reached over and squeezed his lower arm in what he assumed was a comforting gesture. It felt nice.

"Yup..." was all he could manage at the moment.

"Daryl...?" This time she was much more hesitant in her approach. This wasn't going to be a favorite food question.

"Hmm..."

"Is it harder for you to kill people than walkers?"

*God, Beth...really? We gotta go there?* But then the question seemed inevitable following what he had done to protect her.

"You lookin' for the long version or the short?"

Her silence was her answer. She wouldn't push him for more than he was willing to give.
"Well...it seems like that question should be real easy to answer. Walkers are just corpses moved by impulse which seems to me at to put them on a moral level below animals that are at least driven by instinct. People, on the other hand are livin', breathin', thinkin' creatures capable of complex rationalization, compassion, sympathy, and all that stuff." Daryl stopped to think about the words coming outta his mouth, and he couldn't decide if he sounded more like a psychology book or a bleedin' heart liberal.

Beth took his pause as the end of his answer.

"So, it's harder to kill humans," she summed up.

"Naw, I said it seems like it should be. Killing walkers on a normal day..." Yeah, that really fits the description of a normal day...is less than nothing. You're just protectin' yourself and the people you love by destroying something that's already dead. But then with people, the things that make 'em human, their abilities and whatnot, their decisions, make 'em easy to kill."

"Like how they choose to live and what they choose to do makes them deserve to die?"

"Yeah, Lil' Bit. Especially in this world where there's no law to keep you safe. Only each other. Do you remember what the last man standing in that clearing said to me when he was tryin' to stay alive?"

Beth shook her head. He hadn't really expected her to remember.

"He didn't plead for his life, say he was sorry, or even promise to never do something like that again. He said 'we didn't know that she belonged to anyone...not anyone like you'. As if you had no right to be safe just because they thought that you didn't have someone strong enough to protect you. I'll remember those words 'til the day I die." Daryl could tell that his voice had taken the tone of the anger he'd repressed since that event. "And Beth...I didn't just kill him...I wanted to kill him when I saw what he and the others were doing to you...it was one of the easiest decisions I've ever made." His voice had dropped to a softer, gentler tone...well, at least as soft and gentle as his tone ever was...as he got his emotions back under control.

Daryl reached out to her and softly touched her bruised cheek then let his hand linger down to where her busted lip was healing. Seeing her like that still enraged him.

"You don't ever let a man hit you. Any man touches you again and I'll kill him, you hear me?"

Beth nodded her head as he let his hand drop away.

"Those men that did that...they would have done far worse. Killing them...what I did to them...it wasn't just right...it was just." He knew that she knew all that, but he just had to say it.

"I would never hit you, Beth. I would cut off my own hands before I would hurt you..."

"I know, Daryl. You may not think so, but I know...I know you're a good man," Beth said quietly.

He paused for a moment to consider what had to come next. Beth was watching, waiting intently for him to finish as it was clear he had more to say.

Here comes the hard shit. He took a deep breath, preparing himself.

"And then the two hardest things I've ever done in my life were killing a human and killing a walker.
Back at your daddy's farm...when Dale was dying...and I...helped him leave...

No one knew...knew the impact it had on him. Sorry Brother, then he'd pulled the trigger. He told Rick that he shouldn't have to do all the heavy lifting, but he would take pulling that trigger to the grave. No one knew...until now.

Daryl was almost entirely choked up, but he had to finish. He just had to get this last part out and the worst would be over. He would never have to say it again.

"And the walker...I...I put Merle down."

He was quiet. He lowered his head, not knowing what came next. Beth moved so close by his side she was touching him. She took his calloused hand in both her soft, small ones, resting them in his lap. Their hands together looked so strange...from two very different worlds...but he didn't want her to let go.

"I killed my brother," he managed, just loud enough for the both of them to hear.

Beth didn't say anything. He didn't need her to say anything. She was there, and the silence that followed showed she understood.
Chapter 7

The hay was warm at least. After he'd spilled his guts and they'd called it a night, making their bed on the hay, Beth had fallen asleep quick; his chaotic thoughts kept him wide awake. He shouldn't have said all he said. It showed his weaknesses, and she didn't need someone weak. She needed someone strong. It was strange for him, being so close to someone 24/7, just that person, and what he was feeling was strange too. In another life, it would have strangled him. He had always been the kinda lone wolf, not in the Emo pouty teenager kinda way, but solo was just SOP for him...his most efficient and previously preferred mode of operation. He made the group thing work, made some friends, really became part of a family, but they still recognized him as a loner...for the most part. Carol had challenged that and tried to break through his barriers, but he just couldn't let her. Beth was different. In this situation, there was no room for fantasy. Beth realized that...maybe she had been one of the only ones who had realized that all along. He was who he was, did what he could and wanted to do, and she didn't expect anything more or less than that.

Beth had fallen to the hay beside him, just as she'd stayed by him every night since she was attacked. Her head rested near his shoulder, and her hand always found its way to rest over his heart. Maybe even in her sleep, she was gonna make sure he kept his promise not to die.

Just then, the night became alive with the yips, barks, growls, and howls of a coyote pack setting off to hunt. Their music was a welcome sound to him; it had been close to a year or more since he had heard the woods so alive. It seemed even the predators in nature had been silenced by the onslaught of the apocalypse. Maybe...

His thought was shattered as Beth shot up from her sleep beside him, breathing heavy and clenching his shirt in terror.

"Daryl...they're so close! They can't get in...can they?" Her frantic hushed whisper made him shake his head from his reclined position.

"Good God, farm girl. Never heard a coyote before?" Daryl sat up, putting a protective arm around her, drawing her close.

"They never got so close...they stayed in the woods..." Beth was shivering, whether from fear or cold, he didn't know.

"Well, it just so happens that this barn's near the woods. And last time I checked, I barred the door from the inside."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure..." Daryl bit back his sarcastic comment about the fact that coyotes couldn't open doors anyway. It was unnecessary considering her state, and it would come across as cruel rather than calming. "Come on Beth, back to sleep...I got you." He pulled her back down to the hay with him, reaching over to gently stroke her hair. "Don't worry, even if they could get in, they wouldn't eat you...you're too skinny...not worth their time."

"Not helping..." Beth whispered as the choir of coyotes continued.

She reached across the expanse of his chest, trying to pull closer, but there wasn't anymore distance to close. All he could do was wrap his other arm around her and try to sooth her. He knew that all her fear couldn't just be about the coyotes yipping, but he couldn't see inside her head.
"Think about it this way...they wouldn't be out there makin' all that noise hunting if there were walkers around." This was taking him back to his original thought before Beth woke in a start.

"You think...?" Beth questioned.

When he bent his head up and looked down at her, she was looking up at him with expectant yet sleepy eyes.

"I don't think. I know. Coyotes are afraid of humans, and we don't even really ever bother with 'em or wanna eat 'em. Walkers on the other hand will eat anything livin' while it’s still alive."

By the time he finished, the coyotes had moved on. He could hardly hear them off in the distance, and Beth had fallen back asleep. He could feel her steady heartbeat and rhythmic breathing against his side. It was comforting.

*                      *                      *                      *                      *

Beth was struggling to keep up with Daryl. He was pressing hard, and she couldn't help feeling fatigued. Daryl wasn't doing it on purpose, he just seemed to have one speed, and that speed was go. And today, for whatever reason, he seemed to be especially driven. He had to be in amazing shape to keep his momentum. She tried to think back to the cabin when he had been briefly without a shirt in front of her, but she didn't remember much of that day and couldn't pull the image up in her mind. Well, she didn't need to imagine to verify his athletic nature. It was funny to think back to high school where the football and basketball players spent endless hours in the weight room hoping for the resulting chiseled abs, but Daryl achieved his physique by living...fighting to live.
Daryl had noticed her lagging a bit earlier in the day and had taken the backpack from her. With the bag secured across his back, his crossbow in hand, all their guns and ammo except the gun she carried and her two spare magazines, as well as his knives, he still managed to take down two stray walkers they had met along the way, and provide dinner in the form of two fat rabbits, all while keeping them heading forward. Her Momma had always teased Daddy by saying that men couldn't multitask, but Daryl seemed to have it pretty much down to an art. Just as she was about to give up and tell Daryl she needed to stop, he turned back to her, his breath as even and unlabored as if he were taking a pleasant afternoon turn around the garden.

"Let's take a break. I need a breather."

He most certainly did not need a break...he probably just didn't want her to feel bad about needing to stop. He gestured for her to follow him a little further into the woods where he found a log for her to sit on and a tree for him to lean against. For the past few hours, they had been traveling along a tree line bordering a clear cut path for the endless row of power lines. They had stopped just before a steep incline that she had been dreading for a half a mile or so when it first appeared on the horizon.

"Daryl...I'm sorry...I'm so tired. Can't we just find a place where we can maybe rest for a day?" She was ashamed to have to place such a burden on him and couldn't look at him, not wanting to see disappointment or disgust on his face.

"Yeah, I was thinkin' we might need to do that. I'd like to keep movin', but that won't really do us any good if we can't run or fight when we need to."

He didn't really seem bothered by the notion, and that lifted a bit of worry from Beth's shoulders.

"And it always seems to come down to the fighting and the running." He passed her a refilled bottle of water he had just taken a leisurely sip from.

"Thanks..."

"I'll tell you what. We'll keep an eye out for a good place to rest a day or two, and if we find a car that runs, we'll take it."

They hadn't actually seen any cars to take, but the promise that they would, given the opportunity sounded like heaven. Daryl's immediate plan always seemed to have avoided the idea of a car though.

"I thought you wanted to stay off the roads?" Beth questioned, taking another drink of water.

"Yeah, I did, but plans change. I'm kinda out of fight or flight mode. We need a more concrete plan, or at least a more concrete means to make that plan happen. And at least if we find a car and hit the road, I'll be able to figure out where we are. I know what we are running from. It might be a good idea to make sure we're not headed in the direction of something worse."

She idly wondered if Daryl was the kind of man who fit the cliché of not wanting to stop and ask for directions. Probably not. As a tracker, he seemed to have his own personal internal GPS going for him.

"Come on, Lil' Bit. Let's see if we can find us that car."
Chapter 8

The hill was just as taxing as she anticipated. The situation was exacerbated by tall grass left untouched by livestock or mower and accumulated moisture that now wet it. Daryl stayed close by her side, glancing attentively her way every few steps. At least, he didn't make her feel like she was being babysat, but he was keeping an eye out. About halfway up the hill, Beth lost her footing and cringed, anticipating a hard fall, but Daryl with his cat-quick reflexes grabbed her wrist, holding it high until she regained her footing.

"I got you, Lil' Bit. Careful now. There must've been some rain here. It's pretty slick." Daryl held her steady on her feet.

She didn't thank him this time. He was probably fed up with her having to thank him.

Daryl spent the rest of the climb hauling her up the hill behind him. To his credit, even when they reached the top, he didn't seem any worse for wear. When she was safely on even ground, Beth sat in the grass and looked at the distance they had just traversed. From up here, it didn't look so bad, just a gentle slope really.

"Hmph..." Daryl let out ironically.

Beth turned to see Daryl facing the opposite direction. What did that say about their personal outlooks? She was always looking back and he forward to what they had yet to face.

"What's wrong...what is it?" Beth couldn't see from her current location.

Daryl dropped his arm offering her a hand up.

"Come see...someone must be smiling down on us today."

Beth looked down the slope, finding the deserted four lane highway and the car dealership that lay just to the other side.

The descent was much easier than the climb.

"How far is it? Things always seem closer than they really are." She questioned.

"Hmm...maybe half a mile, little less or more. In a few minutes, you'll be pickin' out your new car with no hassle from a salesman."

"I've never had a new car...well, I've never had a car...but my family...they were never new car people." Beth thought back about how her Daddy always said having a new car was frivolous.

"Me neither. When I was young, I always wanted a new car or a really old one," Daryl replied while scanning the terrain for possible threats.

Daryl was starting to offer more about himself.

"Why in the world is there a car dealer in the middle of nowhere?" Beth questioned as the ground leveled and they were drawing closer to the highway.

"This ain't a highway to nowhere. Sometimes businesses like this pop up outside of towns so they don't have to pay city taxes. Not everyone loves givin' Uncle Sam what he thinks he deserves. It could also be a business that serves several towns...though I'm hoping that's not the case." Daryl
stopped for a moment, as he seemed to consider what he was saying. "We know for sure there's a sizable town in one of these directions." He used his crossbow to point both to the right and the left in the direction the highway lead. "I just hope not in both. We need to figure out where we are now and where we're not going."

Out of habit, Beth stopped and looked both ways before stepping a foot on the highway. Daryl was already halfway across by the time she started.

"You comin’, Lil’ Bit?" He called out looking over his shoulder.

As Beth sped up to meet him where he waited in the grassy easement between the divided highway, she wondered how long it would take for such modern instincts like looking before you crossed the road to fade away, and if there were future generations to be born into what the still living considered the apocalypse, what habits would their parents teach them in their place?

They both crossed the remainder of the highway together, climbing a small grassy knoll, and stopping where the grass met the asphalt of the car lot. Beth stood silently as Daryl surveyed the area for danger, whether for walkers or humans, she could not say as each recently proved to pose equal threats.

"Well, my pick would've been a truck, or an SUV at the least, but it seems like all the smart breathers took those," Daryl stated once he apparently assessed there was no immediate threat, at least on the lot. "What kind should we get?"

"How about a really fast one?" Beth could feel genuine excitement ball up in her chest no matter how inappropriate it was in her current situation, but she had to enjoy what she could while she had the chance.

"Well, it looks like there's a whole herd of ponies over there for us to choose from." He gestured to the line of Mustangs parked near the building.

Without thinking, Beth started to move quickly towards the cars like a little kid headed eagerly towards the playground.

"Beth..." Daryl halted here in her tracks as she remembered where she was. "Stay by me."

She didn't just stop and wait for him to catch up; she walked back to his side, remembering what she promised when Daryl promised to keep her alive. He didn't admonish her for her impulsiveness, but it was really clear who the adult in the situation was.

"So, can you...what is it called...hotwire...any of these cars that we want?" Beth questioned trying to restrain her excitement.

"Yeah...it’s a little bit harder with some of the newer ones...it’s not just hotwiring, there're electronics involved...but I think I could do it."

"Could?" Beth didn't understand. Had he just backpedaled about getting a car?

"It's a car dealer. The keys are all inside." He smiled a bit, clearly laughing at her expense, but it didn't really matter. What mattered was that they had something to laugh about.
Daryl approached the tinted glass walls of the building while Beth wove in between the Mustangs. He tried the door, and it was unlocked.

"Beth, come on over here for a minute." Safety first.

She came immediately.

Daryl took the butt of his crossbow and banged it against the glass wall several times in a quick succession. Beth had her knife in hand, immediately understanding his intention.

"Don't go gettin' attached to a black or red one," he commented casually while they waited for what might or might not come.

"Why not?

What was that, did he detect a hint of protest in her voice? Having known her since the farm, she never really showed that much spirit.

"Cause those're the most common colors produced. We don't wanna be followers, do we? And anyway, if there's anything really awesome to still be had, it'll be on the showroom floor."

More than enough time had passed for any walkers to flock towards the noise so he pulled the door and ushered Beth in, glancing once again over his shoulder.

And there it is.

Daryl let out a low whistle as he headed towards the Holy Grail of his auto dreams.

"What is it...you like the blue one?" Beth asked, clearly having missed out on a proper automotive education.

"The 'blue one' is a 2010 Roush Stage 3 Mustang in Grabber Blue. We're talkin' about pure American muscle with around 550 horse power with a supercharged 4.6 L V8, 510 lb-ft torque..."

When he reached the side of the car, he touched it tentatively as if it weren't real.

There's no fucking way we can be this lucky...

"You know, you're speaking a foreign language to me?" Beth replied in a good natured tone.

"Basically you're telling me that this is every little boy's dream car?"

"No, I'm tellin' you this is a red-blooded American man's dream car. They started production in 2009, with an estimate of about 100 to be built, maybe five in this color at the most. And who knows how many they actually built before..." Before the world went to hell...

"Is it fast?" Beth had to know the answer to that. She was just toying with him now.

"Hell yeah..."

"So then, let's take this one." Beth opened the door and sat in the passenger seat, checking out the interior.

He didn't need to be told twice.

Daryl had his head under the hood checking everything out when he heard Beth's shrill scream...
Chapter 9

Before he could charge in to save her, he was knocked flat on his ass by a rotted torso propelling itself on a mechanic's creeper. All he could think of in that instant was that he should've checked the building better...but he was too fucking distracted...by a car. At least in the first instant his eyes could focus, he saw Beth kicking at the chest of the walker attacking her until she was able to pull the car door shut. Shit wasn't lookin' so good for him. Two more including the one that had turned its attentions from Beth caught him on their radar, and he could feel the hands of the torso grabbing hungrily at his feet. He was able to free his hunting knife before the two upright walkers tripped over each other, falling on top of him, one face to face with him.

"Beth...run now...do as I say!" He screamed out loud enough for her to hear in the car. "I will find you...later...run..."

There could be others near, and if he wasn't gonna get out of this scrape alive, he didn't need Beth to see the outcome if there was a chance she could survive. He wasn't afraid of dying. Never had been. He would rather live. He would fight to live, but he wasn't afraid. The thing that made his heart drop and will to live even stronger, and yes, maybe even a little afraid was Beth. And the fucked up part was that it wasn't just for Beth's sake that he was feeling the unwarranted emotions, but his own selfishness to cling to her.

He was able to plunge his hunting knife into the skull of the corpse right on top of him, but then its dead weight and the flailing walker on top of it trying desperately to reach his flesh pinned him, and the one at his feet seemed to be his likely end...until it wasn't. The pull at his feet stopped, and he stabbed at the only walker that should still be a threat, but it wasn't either. The weight crushing his chest lessened. As he caught his breath and focused on the world around him again, he saw tiny Beth struggling to pull the body off him. Once the first was removed, he was able to easily throw the rest of the dead weight off and scramble to his feet.

"I told you to run..." He should be furious with her. He'd intended to be furious if she had ever disobeyed him again, but he couldn't. He couldn't be anything but grateful.

"I know..." She managed breathless.

She was spattered in blood again, and there was random brain matter clinging here and there, but he'd never seen anything so beautiful. Opening his arms to her, and she accepted. He enfolded her in his arms, one tight against her back, and his other hand pulling her head to his chest.

*It's my turn now.* "Thank you."

"Your heart is beating so hard..." Beth whispered against him.

"You think?" She won the prize for the most obvious statement of the day.

Suddenly it seemed that she processed what had just happened.

"Are you bit?" She asked in panic, pulling her head back to look up at him.

"Naw...I'm good." Well, he wasn't bit, but he wasn't entirely good.

His heart was pounding, he pulse was racing, and his blood was boiling in his veins. There was something about escaping death that made you do things that shouldn't be done.
Daryl took a small step away from her, fighting his better judgment and losing in the same instant. Grabbing the back of Beth's neck, he leaned down and kissed her, his lips hard against hers. He knew it was wrong, but it didn't feel wrong, and she didn't pull away. She reached for him awkwardly, grasping his shirt in a tight fist. Her response removed all good sense and decency that might have remained in him, fingers running down her spine to the small of her back, pressing his palm there and drawing her up, crushing her delicate body against his. It had been so long...and he'd never tasted someone as sweet as her...or felt such a strange tightness in his chest.

When he released his hold on Beth, they remained connected, his hand resting low on her back and her hand tentatively over his heart. She was breathless. So was he.

"Nothin' will ever be the same."

Her lips were swollen and red, matching the bright blush that spread across her pale cheeks. And then he remembered how battered her face was, her lip still healing.

"You fucking brutal bastard..." he cursed himself when he realized how rough he'd been.

"I'm sorry, Beth...I shouldn't have..." He kept his voice soft, and it trailed off when he couldn't find the right words. Instead of words, he reached up and gently touched her wounded lip then caressed her bruised cheek to show her he knew what he did was wrong.

He should, for both their sakes, blame it on the situation, but that would be a two fold lie, a lie to himself and a lie to Beth. He had to make it up to her. He had to make it right. And for whatever fucked up reason his mind came up with, apparently making it right meant kissing her again. This time, he was more aware of himself and Beth and her response. He pulled her close, and when he reached down to meet her lips, they were softly parted in anticipation of the moment. Whether or not Beth knew he was going to kiss her again, her body knew. She allowed herself to melt into him without a forceful hand. He opened his eyes to look at her, to see the girl he didn't deserve to kiss, when he realized again what a selfish prick he was being. He pulled out of the kiss abruptly, snatching his bow up from the floor, gesturing for Beth to follow.

"Come on, we need to sweep the rest of the building, make sure there ain't no more where those came from..."

* * * * *

Daryl had broken the glass on the front of the vending machine in the employee lounge with the butt of his bow. She volunteered to gather what was useful while he searched the office for a map. As she threw the gummy bears and Twizzlers in the discard pile and the cookies, muffins, and granola bars into the keep pile, Beth couldn't help find the irony in separating the bad from the worse in their nutritional choices. Right now, the priority was placed on high calorie foods with the most filling and staying power that they could fit in their bag.

The kiss...kisses...she was trying to put them out of her mind. They didn't mean anything, did they? At least not for him. And he had apologized. That meant Daryl hadn't wanted to kiss her in the first place...but then, he kissed her again. She had never been kissed by a man before. She had been kissed, yes, but never by anyone as mature as Daryl. And those kisses tended to be sloppy, needy,
and generally one sided, leaving her wanting with an empty feeling in her heart. These kisses kept her wanting...in an entirely different way. This...this had been different...for her. Then he had just pulled away and kept her close beside or behind him as he swept the rest of the building for more walkers. Of course he had kissed her. She had often read that when a man faced down a violent threat, passion followed, and she was the only girl that was there. Maybe that was why he kissed her. Maybe he had always done that with women he fought beside. She would’ve never known. She decided to try to put the whole thing out of her mind as she shoved the food cache into her bag and grabbed two bottles of Gatorade out of the soda machine that had also met its demise at Daryl's hand.

Daryl was sitting at the desk in the large office's executive chair pouring over a map with a marker in hand. She sat down across the desk from him, not sure whether or not he noticed her he was so intent on his task.

"I come bearing gifts of electrolytes..." Beth offered, trying to lighten the mood. "Electrolytes are good..." she ended awkwardly.

"Hmmm..."

"What kind do you want? Blue or blue?"

"Blue's fine..." Daryl replied, taking what she offered.

So, at least he was paying attention.

Beth leaned forward to see the map to try to discern what Daryl's possible plan was. All she saw were two large X's, two areas circled, and two different lines connecting the two circles.

"See, Beth, this is where we are." Daryl stood, crossed to her side, turning the map as he went, pointing to one of the circled areas. He was leaning so close over her that she could feel his body heat. She took a deep breath to calm herself. "We don't wanna go this way. This seems like it is a pretty big town," he pointed at one of the X-ed out areas, clearly one direction of the highway they had crossed.

"What's this?" Beth questioned, pointing to the other blatant X on the map.

"Prison. We can't go back that way."

Well, that went without saying.

"So where is this?" She gestured to the other large circle to which two routes were mapped out. It didn't seem like there was anything significant or special about it.

"Well, you see, what I was thinkin'...here is a river..." Daryl leaned closer to her, his chest brushing against her shoulder as he pointed out the feature on the map. "And then here and here are two creeks that meet up with the river," he gestured to two lines that intersected perpendicularly with the river.

"Okay, I see."

"I think they're all pretty significant waterways 'cause at at least one point, each has state conservation public access for boats and fishing and such. If we're lucky and we can find somewhere around there with our backs close to the river, we know the walkers can only come at us from one way."

Daryl wasn't a man who boasted or celebrated his abilities, but she could tell from the inflection in
his voice that he believed in his plan. He believed they could find somewhere safe.

"Okay. Sounds good. So what now?" Beth couldn't have come up with a better plan if she tried.

"Well, this is the most direct route," he traced one line from point A to point B, "but this way takes us through some really tiny towns that might still have some stuff to scavenge. Either way we choose, we're gonna stop and rest somewhere safe a day like I promised and consider the plan some more. We don't know what we'll find there or who else might've had the same thought. If it comes to fighting or running, we need to rest."

Before he kicked into action mode, Beth felt Daryl's breath on the side of her neck, his lips so close she could almost feel them...her skin tingled. She unintentionally stiffened, anticipating what would come next. It wasn't what she expected either way as he placed a chaste kiss on her cheek.

So much for forgetting.
"Come on, Lil' Bit. If we're gonna go out, at least we're gonna go out in style."

It drove like a dream. It purred at rest and roared when revved, pure modern American muscle, more than likely the last of a rare breed in a dying world. And it was fast, just like he promised Beth. And there was Beth, ridin' shotgun, smiling. This was a dream...or a hallucination. Her smiling in their fucked up world even after all the shit that had went down, and not just today. Her watching him. Maybe if he had been ten or so years younger, he wouldn't have felt so shitty about liking it. If only he was young again...but in this moment, it really didn't seem to matter. There were twenty or so miles of open highway before the first turn off on their route.

"Come on, Daryl...slow down. Let's not take it too fast...let's enjoy the ride," Beth purred. Her lips said one thing, but the spark in her eyes said another. Something that was not to be ignored.

"Really, Blondie? You think this is too fast? We're just in third." Daryl could hear the excitement rising in his own voice.

He floored it as he threw it into fourth, the powerful surge throwing them back in their seats. Beth let out an adorable squeal followed by laughter. He couldn't help grinning. It was a good day...it was a very good day...until...he was blindsided...it all came crashin' down around him...

"Can I drive?" She was totally serious.

"What?" He heard exactly what she said, but he needed to buy time.

"Can I drive?" Beth repeated cheerily as if he should have no reason to turn her down. His heart constricted in his chest, and not in a good way.

"I don't know...can you?" He put on the brakes so he could handle this little situation at a safer speed.

"You know what I mean...will you let me drive?"

She thought he was playing a cute little mind game.

"No...I'm dead serious...can you drive?" This was going in a very bad direction.

"Yes," Beth replied all too quickly.

Could he really say no? She had just saved his life after all.

"Who taught you?" He needed more time. Maybe he could keep her distracted till they got somewhere to stop for the night.

"Um...Maggie a few times...and Shawn..." She looked all sweet and innocent, but right then she was Satan in a Sunday hat.

...maybe he owed her this much...

"Do you have a driver's license?"

Beth batted her eyelashes at him and smiled.
"I left it at home..."

"No..." It didn't come out concrete enough the first time, and he needed to stand his ground. "No. You can bat your eyes all you want and smile all innocent like, but there's no way in Hell I'm gonna teach a girl to drive, much less how to drive a stick!"

"Fine. I didn't want to drive anyway...sticks scare me." Beth smiled.

She'd been toying with him! And he had let her make him sweat.

"Silly girl..." he replied gruffly then softening it with a half smile."You got some spirit, don't you?"

But eventually, he might need to teach her to drive for her own safety. He didn't know what he dreaded more. The idea of that or a herd of walkers...

*                      *                      *                      *                      *

The house Daryl chose for their short convalescence was nothing much to look at, just a normal rural American home. He had exited the highway on a whim to find shelter, and this spot spoke to him, not because it was particularly secure or out of the way, but because it boasted a semicircular front drive with two points of exit as well as a driveway from the back. In their situation, multiple exit options where one of the best features they could look for when shopping for prime real estate. Everything seemed deserted, but it didn't seem to him that the place had been looted, so they might luck out and find something useful too.

As Daryl pulled up the parking break, the tires skidded to a stop. After he turned the car off, he sat silent for several long moments waiting to see if the noise of the car drew out any local walkers. Beth got the drift and followed his example, but then she had a good sense about when she shouldn't be too chatty. Guess that could be credited to growing up in the apocalypse. For the drive at least, life had felt more than normal, and the highway and roads were unexpectedly clear of the dead, abandon cars, and the walking dead. But then again, they'd traveled rural highways and roads that probably never saw the same amount of traffic that the ones closer to Atlanta did. They both eased out of the car.

"Okay, when we go in, no guns unless there's no choice...we gotta save the bullets till we really need 'em. You keep your knife in hand."

Beth nodded. They met just a few steps from the front door of the house. He checked his bow at the same time as he assessed the surroundings. He would not be caught unaware for the second time in a day. He didn't wanna take any chances. Their luck wasn't gonna run out on his watch.

"I want you on me Beth." Shit, that didn't come out right. "I want you right behind me. Put your hand on my back," he instructed.

Beth hesitated, a bit confused.

"Beth, now. I want you to stay right behind me." He felt her grab his shirt at the small of his back. "Don't let go unless all Hell breaks loose. And even if it does, stay with me unless..."

"Got it, Daryl." Beth cut him off before he could finish.
He pounded on the front door with the butt of his crossbow. From inside, he could hear at least one start growling and snapping at the thought of a meal, but it didn't sound like it was gettin' any closer, so it must be stuck. He pushed the door open, shining his flashlight into the dark.

"Looks like we got us a swinger," he noted, Beth leaning around him to see. The woman had hung herself from the ceiling fan, and the reanimated corpse was suspended, swinging, and grabbing, and clawing the air for the meal it would never have. Before he could make anymore inappropriate comments or Beth took in too much of the horror of the scene, he put a bolt through its eye. Almost as if on cue, another walker, slow and clumsy, stumbled through the door at the opposite side of the room.

"And there he is...Mr. 'Swinger' himself..." Daryl just couldn't help it. He shined his light at the walker and saw its fleshless bottom jaw just hanging from the left side of it face. Its right cheek and ear were gone. He'd botched his own suicide. Daryl wondered morbidly for a moment whether the man had died instantly from the botched shot or if he'd laid somewhere bleeding out.

"Daryl...shoot him..." there was panic rising in her voice, and confusion as to why he hadn't shot the damn walker.

"He can't hurt us. He ain't got no jaw to bite with," Daryl explained as he shot it through the eye anyway.

Either way, it was done.

They swept the rest of the modest home together, finding no other threats. They ended in the master bedroom. Beth sat on the edge of the made up bed and pulled a silver picture frame off the nightstand. From his position, he saw it was Mr. and Mrs. Swinger's wedding picture.

"They were just normal people." Beth's voice turned melancholy.

"What did you expect, the Dalai Lama or something."

He couldn't begin to offer comfort if he didn't know why she was upset, but he probably came across as a jackass, silently cursing himself. It wasn't his job to be mean to her.

"Who do you think went first? They clearly didn't have it planned...they don't look like they went together." She traced a finger across the glass in the frame.

Daryl took a seat beside her on the bed, leaning his bow against the footboard and confiscating the photo.

"I don't know, Beth." He laid the picture aside and took her hand.

"Do you think he left her, and then she had no choice?" Her head was down, and she was staring to the point where their hands were connected.

"If he did, he wasn't nothin' but a coward." It probably wasn't the right answer, but it was the truth. "Come on now, I'm gonna go check out back and take care of the bodies while you head in and see what we have in the way of food."

He pulled Beth to her feet, grabbing his crossbow, and moving into action. If she was busy, maybe she wouldn't have time to be sad.
Chapter 11

Daryl left out the back door while she stood alone in the kitchen. Opening the cabinet doors, she found that at least they had left the kitchen well stocked. Flour, sugar, canned goods, all the basics...and to her delight, a gas oven. Whatever they ate tonight, it wouldn't be cooked over a fire. Beth was startled out of her fantasy when she heard the familiar thrum of Daryl's crossbow followed by a high pitched scream. She ran to the back door, drawing her knife, almost bowling over Daryl coming back into the house with a chicken skewered on a crossbow bolt.

"Whoa there, Lil' Bit. There's chickens out back. I got us dinner," he proclaimed proudly, presenting his prize.

"You shot a chicken?" It seemed a little bit of overkill to shoot a chicken, and the words were the filler she needed to calm the rush of fear that spread through her at the sound of the crossbow.

"Well, I sure wasn't about to go chasing it around the yard. Do you want it or not?"

"Yeah, but not until it's plucked and cleaned and has no head!" Beth had steadied her emotions.

"Jeez country girl...when did you get so bossy?" Daryl asked like a dejected child.

"Killing, cleaning, and plucking were never in my job description."

Daryl turned away, taking his kill with him.

"Daryl..." She called out, and he looked back over his shoulder. "There's a gas stove in here. If you can find some eggs, I can fry the chicken nice as Sunday dinner."

"Hell Beth, for real fried chicken, I'll lay the eggs myself if I got to." He smiled at her and went to work.

Daryl returned the cleaned gutted chicken to her promptly in addition to six scavenged eggs. With the stocked kitchen-a dream following the crash of society-Beth had no problem pulling together a meal that was not at all improvised while leaving plenty of food for the next day if they were going to stay as well as some they could take with them when they left. Southern fried chicken, fried canned new potatoes, fancy cut green beans, and sourdough biscuit mix, just add water. They had lucked out on the water front too when Daryl discovered the hand pump in the back yard. She had a mind to make good use of that later.

Beth was humming as she was dropping breaded chicken pieces into the sizzling oil. Daryl passed through twice, dragging the bodies out the back, and she smiled at him both times. He returned the gesture. She couldn't help feeling happy. Everything almost felt normal.

How could she feel happy or even normal?

The world was in its death throes.

The dead walked the earth.

They had almost died a few hours ago.

Her family was either all dead or missing.

But he had kissed her...even if he was sorry.
And they were alive.

Could that be enough?

* * * * * *

When Daryl came to the table with the lit Coleman lantern, he stopped and smiled. She felt proud. They had candles-no need for the camping lantern-folded crisp napkins, silverware although she doubted Daryl ate fried chicken with a fork and knife, and a full meal any woman could be proud of, on a normal day.

"Dang Lil' Bit! You really busted out the Paula Deen on this one." He sat the lantern on the sideboard to provide extra light, then took his seat at the head of the table.

It was a good compliment. Beth fixed Daryl's plate for him before she took the seat at his right hand...maybe a little bit too 1950s housewife, but he'd taken care of her for so long, he deserved it.

"Sorry there's no butter or jam for the biscuits," Beth apologized while making her own plate. She knew there was nothing to apologize for, but her Mama always taught her to be humble when she felt her pride swell.

"I wouldn't even have noticed if you hadn't said anything," Daryl confessed before diving into his food.

To his credit, Daryl did use his fork for everything but the chicken, and he liberally applied his napkin.

There was very little talking at the table...just a lot of eating...and more eating. When Daryl had literally finished everything, he leaned back in his chair, putting his hands behind his back and stretching. The accompanying cracks and pops worried Beth a bit...had he been hurt today...but he didn't complain, so she didn't ask.

"Beth, that was amazing. Why were you never the one cookin' at the prison?" It was a lovely compliment, but they both realized the implications of the question and the loss it alluded to.

"It just wasn't my job," Beth replied calmly, refusing to let the loss of Judith ruin her night. "But dinner isn't over."

She jumped up, returning from the kitchen with dessert, setting it down in front of Daryl.

"Is that a pie?" He asked, his voice in awe over something so simple.

"I'd hardly call it a pie...a makeshift pie maybe. It's just a cornmeal crust made out of a prepackaged cornbread muffin mix, canned apple pie filling, some brown sugar, sugar, and cinnamon," Beth explained, serving him an oversized helping.

"Beth...shut up...the world's gone, and if I say it's a pie, it's a pie," Daryl proclaimed, taking such a big bite she didn't know how he fit it all in his mouth.

She took a bite of her pie too. It was good.

And for the moment, everything was right in the world...even if it was just in their small sphere.
It took her more than a half hour to heat enough water over the stove to fill the old claw foot bathtub to make a decent bath, but she wasn't going to pass on this golden opportunity. Daryl decided to scavenge through the garage and dilapidated shed out back after he finished all but her piece of apple pie. In the culinary world, that was quite a compliment, even if there weren't many fine dining options left out there. And he didn't only eat because he was hungry. They weren't starving...not even close. Daryl's hunting talent kept them well fed...it was a godsend.

Daryl watched her quizzically from the garage door as she made the numerous trips back and forth from the outdoor water pump. She even made two extra trips for water to heat when she was finished so he might have a bath too.

"What're you doin'?" He questioned on one of her trips.

"Taking a bath." Just saying it made her feel human again.


"Rules are made to be broken...what better time to break them than now?" She retorted before returning to the house.

Where was this attitude coming from? She had never been one who was good with witty repartee or even a suggestion about breaking the rules. Being around Daryl was starting to make her feel strong...and just a little bit rebellious...well, as rebellious as she was ever like to get in her lifetime.

When she dipped her foot into the bathtub to test the water, it was far too hot, but she couldn't resist. Beth slid into the water, embracing its cleansing heat and marveling at the fantastical shapes that appeared in the steam rising from her arms and hands when she lifted them from the water to come in contact with the cool air. She looked at the haul she was lucky enough to discover waiting at her disposal in the bath basket on the side of the tub. Shampoo, conditioner, scented soap, even a razor. She couldn't imagine Daryl found anything half so precious as she did, although her treasures weren't entirely practical. If only she could actually will herself to use them...it just felt too good, so she gave into the sweet euphoria of the moment.

Emerging from the bath clean with smooth shaved legs and sweet smelling hair, she felt like a new person. The clean nightgown she found in the bedroom drawer and the fluffy pink robe she borrowed from the bathroom felt like heaven. She heated the extra water on the stove and warmed the bath before she went to find Daryl. He just finished securing the front door, pushing the heavy couch in front of it to bar anyone, or more likely anything, from entering.

"I warmed the bath for you in case you wanted to take one..." She said softly, not wanting to be too pushy.

He turned, noticing her, shaking his head and grinning, presumably at the sight of her being eaten alive by the giant pink bathrobe.

"I won't argue against a bath...you gonna be okay alone?" She realized, in this calm moment, how much she liked the gravel in his voice.

"Mmm-hmm...I'll be fine. I laid some clean clothes out in the bathroom for you. I don't really know
men's sizes, but you can see if they fit. If you decide we can stay tomorrow, I'll wash our clothes," Beth offered.

"The doors are all secured." He squeezed her shoulder as he passed her. She liked that he touched her...he had never really been that way with anyone before...at least not that she had seen. "Thanks Beth," he added as he headed toward the bathroom.

"Hey Daryl...do you want me to take your gun and crossbow for you?" She questioned.

"No thanks...I always want em within reach."

He was a practical man if nothing else.

* * * * *

Beth pondered the bedroom question carefully. The apparent master bedroom where the wedding picture had been and she found the clothes was where Daryl had left his winged vest on the chair by the door and their extra guns and knives on the nightstands and dresser. A lantern and some random candles lit the room, all evidence leading to the conclusion that he had claimed this space. There was another bedroom. Did he want to sleep alone? He seemed to have been sleeping beside her these last few days since they were on the move out of necessity for security and warmth, but she didn't want to sleep by herself. Maybe he wouldn't want to sleep next to her now that there was a choice or because he regretted some things that had happened earlier in the day. So either way, the decision had to be made. She would stay. If he wanted her to leave, he could tell her. He never had a problem with speaking his mind before.
Chapter 12

The bath did him a world of good. Even though Daryl knew they couldn't really be sure they were safe here, it was nice to have a few minutes to feel normal again. He'd even taken the trouble to shave the random facial hair that had sprouted up the last few weeks and neaten the hair he intended to keep. He couldn't help stop and shake his head when he found the clothes Beth laid out for him. The wife-beater he could tolerate as long as it covered his scars, but the red and green plaid flannel pants.

What the Hell's this for...Christmas morning?

In the end, he opted for the plaid pants. What good would it do goin' to bed after a bath in dirty clothes?

Goin' to bed...

He hadn't really thought much about that until now. There were two beds in the house. He wanted to sleep with her...beside her...something he had never allowed himself to do with women before the world went to Hell. They'd been sleeping beside each other...but did she just do it because she had to? And when he'd kissed her earlier...what if that scared her off? He knew he wanted to kiss her again...

Fuck it...If she doesn't want you next to her, she'll tell you...and then you'll just've been rejected by a girl you never deserved in the first place.

In regular situations, he didn't mean to move about in stealth mode, but silence was like second nature to him, even before the world wide death spiral began. He stopped instantly at the door at the sight of Beth. She sat perched in the middle of the bed, the absurdly pink bathrobe had fallen off her shoulder baring her pale skin. Her hair was still wet and hung in loose twisted ropes down her bare back. Her shapely white legs were bent as she smoothed lotion over them, never once sensing he was near.

Daryl soundlessly retreated back into the darkness of the hallway, pressing his back to the wall and taking a deep breath.

She's so small...how can her legs go on forever?

And holy shit...what in the Hell's she wearing?

Maybe for a different woman...girl...other than Beth...not around him...the nightgown wouldn't have been scandalous. He just wished there was more of it.

What's wrong with you? Man the fuck up!

Daryl entered the room without hesitation, just like he'd come straight from the bathroom and didn't stop to see her luxuriating. He was deliberately assertive entering the bedroom to leave no question about his intention to sleep there so she could say her peace if she pleased. He leaned his crossbow against the wall and slipped the two guns he carried under the pillow closest to the door. He checked the room earlier to see if he thought it was secure enough to sleep in because a real bed sure seemed like a good deal...but the unsecured windows bothered him. Luckily though, the glass panes were obscured by the overgrown shrubs outside offering concealment, at least enough that he was willing to risk it for a night in a bed. With Beth safe by the windows, he would take the door.
She smiled at him softly as he placed his guns. She smoothed lotion up her leg, over her knee, and across her thigh, the gown creeping up to a point he didn't think he should be seeing. He turned away feeling flushed...*Dammit...be an adult...*and repositioned his crossbow closer to the bed, just for something else to focus on.

"How was your bath?" Beth questioned politely.

"It was good you know...just missin' the bubbles."

Beth gave a little half laugh, and he continued to fix his bow. In his old life, if a woman had done what Beth was doing, he would've thought she was coming onto him or she was a tease...but Beth was far too unworldly...he couldn't think of the right word for her...to realize her actions where seductive or would have an effect on men...*innocent*...was that the word he was looking for?

When he finally turned around, Beth had slipped off the robe entirely and was smoothing lotion up her arms.

"Aren't you cold Lil' Bit?" He questioned, turning away again, this time to shut and lock the door. She hadn't protested his presence, so it seemed safe to stay.

*God Beth...you need to cover up...*

"No...I'm good. I'm actually warmer than I've been in a long while." 

*Shit, you don't say...me too.*

There was nothing left to do but deal with it and change to a more neutral subject. He sat on the edge of the bed, back against the headboard, legs stretched out in front of him. It felt damn good. He picked idly at the plaid pattern in the pants as Beth finally set the lotion aside.

"You know...I'll never forgive you if we have to run in the middle of the night and I'm in these pajamas," Daryl informed her. "Plaid pants don't really inspire fear in your enemies," his voice was gruff, but he knew she would understand he was only teasing...for the most part.

"I don't know, Daryl. You really seem to be rocking the tartan plaids." She smiled, still perched in the middle of the bed, very close to him...but how was tonight any different than the other nights?

"Yeah, well, I haven't slept in actual pajamas since I was like twelve or thirteen." It seemed like now he was even subconsciously more willing to share pieces of who he was. He surprised himself a little.

"So, what did you wear to bed before everything fell apart?" The question was asked so innocently.

"...clothes..." *Shit, you hesitated too long.* He felt a wry smile spread across his face and wished he could slap it away.

"Oh...oh..." Beth apparently understood the implication of his answer and blushed enough that he could see it even in the candle light.

"God, you smell amazing!" *Fuck, did you really just say that out loud?!*

"You think so? I know right?" Beth immediately shifted from embarrassed to comfortable again. At least him making a jackass outta himself served a higher purpose. "It's the lotion. It's called vanilla cupcake batter." She extended her hand toward him so he could better take in the scent. "Doesn't it smell awesome...make you want to eat my hands right off?"
Daryl couldn't help laughing wholeheartedly; the context of their world was so absurd.

"I don't think you wanna be sayin' anything about someone wanting to eat your hands off...I'm sure there'd be plenty of takers."

"Daryl...you're so mean to me!" Her words had no effect on him 'cause he could barely make them out through her giggles.

The awkwardness of the situation quickly faded with his *hmmph* and her breathy little laugh, and he soon found himself in the familiar situation of Beth at his side, her arm resting across his chest. Except this time, it was a real bed, with warm blankets, and pillows that were almost too fluffy for his liking, but he wasn't gonna complain none. Beth snuggled closer, but it didn't seem like it was outta fear or cold...maybe it was just what she wanted.

"Beth..." he said softly incase she had already fallen asleep.

"Yeah?"

"You really kicked ass today." Always give credit where credit was due.

"Really?" She asked like she didn't believe what he was saying.

"Really." He told it true.

Beth fell asleep quickly, and he was on the way there too...there was just one last thing on his mind.

*Hey J.C., if that was you out there helpin' us today, thanks for watching our backs. If you're takin' requests, could you please watch out for Beth. She don't deserve this. She's probably too good for this world, but I'm not ready to give her up when I just found her. If this is close to a prayer, Amen. Oh, and J.C., if you don't recognize me, I'm Daryl Dixon. I'm a better man than my father. I'm a better man than my brother. I'm a better man than I used to be. And if it ain't too much to ask, could you help me be good enough...to save her?*
Chapter 13

When Beth woke, the sun was streaming through the window, diffused into small rays by the overgrown shrubs. She could feel Daryl pressed behind her, his arm draped over her waist holding her secure. She wasn't afraid of what was outside or what was going on in the world because the here and now wasn't bad at all. Did that make her a bad person? She wondered for a moment what time it was...how long they had been asleep...and then realized it mattered less than nothing. Daryl's warm breath on the back of her neck was calming. She was comfortable. Beth always imagined that sharing a life so closely with someone would take a lot of getting used to, like a really awkward or stressful adjustment period. They weren't a couple or anything, not bound together for life, but after he saved her, it all came so easily. Beth turned around in his arms, careful not to wake him, and watched him sleep in the sunlight. He looked so peaceful and young, not scarred by the world. He wasn't fierce but innocent and vulnerable, a side of Daryl Dixon no one really ever got to see. He had a beautiful soul.

*                      *                      *                      *                      *

It was the strange euphoria between sleep and awake. Daryl couldn't move...but he didn't need or want to.

He could smell breakfast.

He was warm.

He could feel the sun.

...fade to black...

A hand brushed the hair back from his face.

His eyes fluttered, the sun blurred the image seen through his eyelashes.

Her eyes were so big and bright as she looked down at him.

The sun in her hair made it look like pale gold. It spilled across her shoulders and fell to tickle his neck. He reached up and took a rope of her hair in his fingers.

Sleep dulled his judgment. He reached his large hand behind her neck, pulling her down into a kiss. When he released Beth, she was very still, her lips still almost touching his.

"I'm not sorry..." His voice was full of the gravel and grit of sleep. Maybe this was all just a dream.

Sleep beckoned to him again, and he couldn't refuse.

*                      *                      *                      *                      *
They shared the same plates of breakfast food. She had been lucky enough to find one tray to have breakfast in bed, but Daryl didn’t seem to mind sharing. She was still flushed and awkward from being kissed...again...and when he looked at her, her heart beat faster...fluttering Did this mean anything? Is this what it was like to be an adult?

"Lil' Bit, this is amazing...thank you," Daryl managed with a mouthful.

Beth smiled demurely.

"Thanks...I bet lots of girls have brought you breakfast in bed," she replied, taking a bite of scrambled egg. Was she fishing a little...yes.

"What? No...never. I didn't bring 'em to where I stayed, and I never stayed long enough for breakfast," Daryl answered shoveling more food.

Oh...so he had been a player or something. She blushed and took a sip of the hot chocolate she had found to hide it.

"Your hair's different today," Daryl commented.

"Oh...yeah...um, I didn't comb out the curl last night before it dried...so now it's a nightmare."

"I like it. It's pretty." She could feel him watching her as she took a strand in hand, examining it to avoid eye contact.

"Thank you..." she managed.

"So what time's it anyway...there was a clock still workin' in the kitchen, wasn't there?" He was really talkative this morning.

"Yeah...it said it was noonish before I brought breakfast in." Beth smiled, thinking about how absurdly long they had slept.

"How 'noonish'?" Daryl asked, a half frown spreading across his lips.

"Noon-forty-five-ish..." Beth smiled just a little.

"Jeez...well, at least we weren't planning on goin' anywhere."

Daryl was quickly distracted by breakfast again, apparently too absorbed to further ponder the wasted day.

* * * * * * *

"We should really get up and do somethin'." Daryl's words were far from enthusiastic from where he laid beside Beth.

He was sprawled out on top of the covers, hands behind his head on the pillow.

"Get up and do something if you want to. I'm staying right here until it's time to cook more food," Beth said snuggling against one of the pillows. She was full, she was safe, and she was warm. She wasn't moving.
"I don't want to, I just said I should..." He let out a contented sound that resembled a gravelly purr as he stretched and cracked his neck from side to side.

A few minutes passed in silence...comfortable silence though.

"So, here's a question. Why are you so pale? I used to think it was 'cause you had some princess in a tower syndrome, like they kept you inside, hidden from the sun, but all this time since we left the farm, you never got no darker...you might even be whiter than when we first met if that's possible."

Daryl brought one of his arms down from behind his head and laid it next to hers to compare.

"See, white as snow," he finished, proving his point with the vast difference between their skin tones. "Wasn't there a fairytale started like that?"

"Yeah...it's not 'princess in a tower' syndrome...I'm just anemic." Beth savored his question. He really didn't ask a lot about her.

"You need iron? With all the red meat we've been eatin'? We've really been doing damage on the squirrel and rabbit population on our trip." There was a hint of worry in his voice. The last thing she wanted to do was make him have to worry more.

"Well, it's not just about food, but I'll be fine..." Beth reassured him.

"Then what do you need to cure it?" Daryl turned on his side, concern spread across his face.

"Don't worry, I'll be fine. It's not something that can be cured...I used to just take iron tablets, and those make it better," she explained, hoping his concern would disappear.

"I'll just have to find you some. Until I do, will you get sick or anything?"

"No, sometimes I just get tired...or I might bleed more than other people if I get cut or anything..." This wasn't really helping. "Really, it's no big deal."

"It is a big deal. I promised to take care of you," Daryl asserted, leaning up on his elbow, still looking at her but from a more authoritative position.

"You should've left me behind...at the prison. I'm just dragging you down." Beth hadn't actually meant to say that. It just slipped out.

She had been trying so hard to be an adult, but sometimes, like just now, the moody teenager she resigned to the past reared its ugly head. Eighteen was a hard age, she came to realize. Everyone expected you to suddenly be an adult, but there was still so much insecurity and uncertainty left. Now more than ever, she needed to be able to put that youth behind so she could survive.

"Unless I'm hallucinating...I'm pretty damn sure you saved my life yesterday." She knew he meant business when the damn popped out of his mouth. It wasn't like he never cussed, it just always seemed like he tried not to when talking to her. "And I would've never left you behind. We've all been through so much together...we were on the road so long after the farm, and then the prison..."

"Yeah...but everybody knows you do better on your own. I'm just a burden...holding you back and putting you in danger." Beth was unsure of herself...and she didn't even know why she had gone down this path. Stupid insecurities.

Daryl watched her for a few long moments. Not like he was trying to come up with the right thing to say, but more like he was taking her in, considering her entire existence.
"I heard somewhere once that ancient people, like pre-civilization people, weren't really human ‘til they hit certain benchmarks that gave ‘em their humanity. One of the most fundamental of those was the ability to care for another person even if it meant death. That realization that there is someone out there that’s more important than you or your life gives you humanity." Daryl's voice was calm and even as he explained ideas he didn't appear capable of knowing.

That was something about Daryl...he was definitely a book that couldn't be judged by his cover...for the most part. In the good with weapons and survival department, the cover said everything.

"You see, Beth..." he continued. "I've been in some really dark places. But you...you're my anchor to humanity...and if I lost you, I don't know if I could come back from that dark place again." Daryl wasn't looking her in the eye, like he had divulged his deepest, darkest secret and was afraid to see her reaction.

“I hope we never have to find that out..." Was that the right thing to say?

"I would die for you." He was dead calm...dead serious, and that scared her.

Her heart sank not just at the thought of being alone but of losing him.

"I would rather you live for me..."
After breakfast they stayed in bed longer than any reasonable people should. They mostly laid in silence, and at one point he reached out and idly picked up a strand of her hair, running it through his fingers.

*I really like her hair*, Daryl decided.

"Daryl?" Beth questioned softly as he let her hair slip from his fingers.

"Hmm..." At this juncture, whatever she asked, he would probably tell her.

"Do you think we have an unfortunate destiny?"

He knew Beth was a dreamer, but this was a bit too melancholy for his taste.

"An unfortunate destiny?"

"You know...like in all the great stories. The people always seem to have unfortunate destinies. Like Alexander, Achilles, King Arthur, Julius Caesar, Romeo and Juliet...they all found a little bit of happiness, then there was a lot of tragedy. But in the stories, somehow...the tragedy is always so beautiful. In life, it's not." Beth turned on her side, waiting for his reply.

"Well, Lil' Bit, happy lives don't always make for good stories, and the same goes for the other way around, great stories don't always make for happy lives." *If I ever met the jackass who wrote this fucked up world into existence, I'd slit his throat.* "And you know what I see in all those stories you mentioned, at least what I know of ‘em? Stupid decisions...and not just little ones, but great big stupid decisions." He might not be as educated as other people, but he knew a bad decision when he saw one.

"But we've made some bad decisions..." Beth added, "like feeling like we were safe at the prison...or even thinking that we could live a normal life again."

"Nah, Beth, there's a big difference. We made the best decisions we could in impossible situations. In stories, those people make the worst possible decision among so many right ones. And all of this is to make you feel like their tragic end is some life affirming moral decision to play on your emotions." Daryl had never put much stock in stories.

"Do you believe in destiny?" Beth continued.

*What is this...fantasy hour?*

"I believe in my ability to survive, to make decisions, and to do what I promise," Daryl asserted. "Do you feel unfortunate?" It was his turn to ask a question.

"I should...but feeling sorry for myself doesn't make me feel any better...I want to live..." It sounded like she felt ashamed that she was alive.

He turned over to face her, to make sure that he got his point across.

"You're probably not gonna like what I have to say, but you're gonna listen. There wasn't nothin'
either of us could do to save your Dad. When everything went down and you were separated from Maggie, there was nothin' you could do about that neither. Do you think your Dad and Maggie, whether she is alive somewhere or dead would begrudge you 'cause you are alive?” He wasn't gonna give her time to answer. "No...and I guarantee if either of them had been given a choice between them or you livin', they would've picked you."

He felt shitty after he finished and he saw a tear fall down Beth's cheek. He reached out and brushed it away, hoping he was gentle enough.

"I don't mean to cry...I'm sorry I'm so weak."

"Cryin' don't make you weak...just shows you're not dead inside."

People always seemed to think he was void of all emotion but anger and hate, but Beth knew the truth of it. She'd seen him cry, and she'd shared some of his lowest points since they met...probably one of the only people who ever had. That meant she was in some strange way part of him. This really made him think about who he was and who he was becoming. Since they'd been alone together, he'd changed, at least for her. He couldn't imagine he would be different around everyone else, even if they did somehow miraculously find everyone again, but he could let his guard down around her without being afraid of what she would think.

They were silent for a few moments as he thought about whether or not he wanted to tell her what he believed.

"You know what Beth, every man has to live by his own code. My code, what I believe...whether it's stupid or not...the thing is, death is never beautiful. It's sad, and someone always loses. But there is somethin' beautiful and honorable...sacrifice. If a man loves someone or something so much that he is willing to give up everything he is and has...his life...to save that one thing...that's beautiful.” In that moment, he thought about T-Dog, and Lori, and even Merle in his own fucked up way in the end, and everyone else out there who had made such decisions when their world went to hell.

"Do you think anyone will even be around to tell our stories?"

"I think we will...I told you before Beth...I don't think this is the way we end.” Maybe she just needed that reassurance. Maybe he did to.

"Tell me a secret?” Subject change...she was so young...this must be what a sleepover was like.

"It ain't so bad sleepin' next to someone...and wakin' up next to someone too." The real secret went something like this- *I like sleeping next to and waking up beside you*. It was just all too fast. He was getting too attached...

"What stopped you...from before?”

The question had multiple answers. Before, he'd never been with a woman who was worth waking up next to. And in his old life, he wouldn't have been able to get within a mile of a girl like Beth, but he really didn't feel like lowering himself in Beth's eyes.

"I don't know. Maybe it was me not trusting people. Maybe it's that I've changed..." It was all true to a certain extent.

It seemed like a good enough answer for Beth.

"And Beth..."
"Yeah..."

"I feel fortunate."

*D * * * *

Daryl was a nightmare in the kitchen while she was trying to cook. He brought her two chickens and a basket full of eggs, but him standing over her while she cooked trying to be useful wasn't helping.

"Do you have anything to make more pie?" He asked like a little child.

"I think...I have some cornbread mix for the crust...check the back cabinet, I think there's some blueberry filling up there," Beth instructed, finding a pan for the pie while the oil for the chicken heated.

She heard Daryl opening a can, and when she turned around to retrieve it from him, he was licking pie filling off his fingers.

"Daryl, give that here!" Beth commanded. He reluctantly handed it over, and she sat it beside the stove. "If you eat it now, there will be no pie."

He didn't look entirely happy that she was scolding him. When did she become the responsible adult?

"And I don't know why we need to cook two chickens for dinner. It's just going to go to waste," She observed as Daryl crossed the kitchen to her side and leaned up against the counter while she prepared the pie crust. At that moment, Beth didn't know his sneaky intent or that he was applying his hunting skills in the kitchen.

"Because we're gonna eat it all," Daryl replied assertively.

"We can't eat all this," Beth protested. Daryl had always been the one to push more food than she thought she needed.

"We will. You gotta learn to eat what you have when you have it."

Beth suddenly remembered being on the road before the prison...when there was very little to eat if anything over the winter...and sometimes even when there was food, she wouldn't touch it, like when Daryl shot an owl. She'd given into rattlesnake a few weeks ago, but only because she'd heard that people ate it sometimes even if they weren't starving.

"The rule of hunting...hunting to survive that is...is that you never kill more than you need but always try to get as much as you can eat 'cause who knows if it will be there tomorrow," Daryl schooled her.

She'd been hungry in her lifetime, mostly in those hollow months of travel after they lost the farm and before they found the prison, but since then, she had mostly had what she needed. It must have been horrible to live a lifetime of not knowing where your next meal was going to come from, and the realization that the only way you were going to eat was if you hunted and killed your own food. Growing up, she'd known that there where still people out there that were forced to guarantee their existence in that uncertain manner, but she had never met one until Daryl. She felt sorry for him but knew he would never want her sympathy. Even if he thought that she felt sorry, he would probably
hate her for it. And his life in the old world had prepared him to survive in their world. Daryl was built for it.

All of Beth's sympathy for Daryl disappeared when she caught him with his fingers in the pie filling again...after she had specifically forbade him...

"Daryl Dixon! Out!" Sternly pointing as she confiscated the can from him.

"Why?"

"A man's place isn't in the kitchen. Go find something to do."

"Like what?" He grinned a bit, and she realized he was being annoying on purpose.

"I don't know, Daryl...go do some guy thing. There's a shotgun somewhere in the house."

"How do you know?" His interest was peaked...so focused now.

"I saw some shotgun shells in the nightstand on your side of the bed when I was looking for lotion last night...go find it." Beth offered him his only option.

"Jeez Beth...you don't gotta dismiss me. I was just tryin' to help you with dinner." He wasn't convincing anyone.

"Um-hmmm. Helping...right..." Beth said as Daryl stood poised to exit the kitchen.

"Go on...I'll let you know when dinner is ready."

Daryl accepted his banishment with all the grace of a man-sized child, sulking as he went.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 14 was the first chapter of this story written and published after "Still" Episode 4 x 12 of The Walking Dead originally aired.
Daryl didn't just find one shotgun, but two he informed her as he sat down at the table and she poured his drink for him.

"What's this? You found wine?" He narrowed his eyes, swirling the burgundy liquid as she poured her own glass. "I don't know how I feel 'bout contributing to your delinquency again."

"My delinquency? Again?" Beth questioned. She wasn't a delinquent.

"Yeah, your delinquency, Blondie. Under my watch you already got lit once, for the first time ever, and then you where accessory to burning down two houses. Your turnin' into a little drunken pyromaniac." Beth could hear the amusement in Daryl's voice.

"It's black-cherry Kool-Aid, I think I'll be fine," Beth assured.

"Good, I don't really care for wine much anyway...but seriously, Beth...that night got outta hand. We gotta be more careful than that. Gettin' lit like that ain't gonna help us survive." Serious Daryl made his appearance again.

Beth stopped to consider the implications that their actions had. Even before, both their families had, at some point or another, been affected by alcohol. Beth knew that her Daddy had been an alcoholic once, but he'd crushed the habit when his children were born. Daryl's dad had allowed his addiction to crush his children instead.

"But I do remember the last time I had wine...and it was a good night," Daryl offered, a smile spreading across in his face in the candle light. "It was our first night at the CDC in Atlanta...and I got Glenn drunk for the first time...totally drunk off his ass. He was a hilarious drunk and had the mother of all hangovers the next morning when he crawled in for breakfast..."

Chapter 15

"You're okay with leavin' tomorrow, right..." Daryl stated more than questioned. They needed to find somewhere more secure, and the sooner they saw whether or not his plan was gonna work, the sooner they could prepare for the future.

He glanced over his shoulder to her, where she was sitting in the middle of the bed, to gauge her reaction as he locked the door.

"Whatever you think is best," she replied casually, finishing again with the cupcake lotion.

It was strange. People were never really this comfortable around him. He hoped it wasn't dangerous for Beth. After he shoved the two handguns under his pillow, he joined her and almost waited for the Dawson's Creek theme music to cue up. He fought the urge to laugh at himself. It was all so normal.

"So...when was the last time you stayed in bed the whole day?" It was nice to learn things he didn't know about her...the little pieces that would eventually make up the whole.

Beth glanced sideways at him and turned over her arm to answer his question.
Well, this isn't good...

Daryl took her wrist in his hand, marveling at how pale and translucent her skin was, her blue veins delicate rivers just under the surface. He brushed his thumb over the prominent vertical scar. He'd regretted what he said that night they got drunk, about her slitting her wrist just to get attention. He hadn't really believed it, he'd just needed someone to hurt like him, and he took it out on her. But the scar closed all arguments anyone might've had about her intentions. She hadn't just done it for attention...she'd been completely serious.

"Damn, Beth...you meant business. Most people cut across like in the movies. You cut down to get the job done." This conversation wasn't going in the direction he expected.

"How do you know...about the 'right' way?" Beth questioned with little emotion.

"You don't get to be my age without knowing a bunch of useless stuff."

"Hmmm..."

"Beth, I need to say somethin'...I should've said it a long time ago...but I don't know...I just couldn't find a time that seemed right. I didn't mean to say what I did about...you know, when you cut your wrist...about you just wanting attention." Daryl cleared his throat to flush out the awkwardness he felt building in his chest.

"Don't worry...I forgave you a long time ago...some things we don't have to apologize for," Beth assured him.

"Thanks, Lil' Bit..."

"So what about you? When was the last time you spent an entire day in bed?"

Yeah...because that's so much of a happier story...

"At your house...after I shot myself with my crossbow." The memory of what happened with Sophia actually stung more than the bolt through his side. He'd failed that little girl, plain 'n simple.

"Can I see..." She was hesitant in asking, not presumptuous.

He leaned, stretching his left side taut to bare the scar and reluctantly lifted the wife-beater he wore to show her. Beth moved in front of him, looking with her hands and her eyes. Daryl’s skin shivered at her touch.

"I can't really see in this light..." She was so close, and she pushed his shirt further up his side with her small hand, palm grazing up his ribs. "Could you please..."

He knew what she was asking. His survival instinct said no, but the overwhelming need to share something with her won out. Sitting up, he reached behind his head, pulling off his shirt in one fluid motion.

"Impressive..." Beth's fingers found the circular scar and gently traced around its edges.

Beth was on her knees, and before he knew what was happening, she was moving behind him.

"No!" He snapped instinctively, capturing her upper arm in his hand to stop her, squeezing harder than he should've as he panicked inside.

She didn't say anything to him, but her eyes spoke for her. He let her go and felt her cool fingers
brushing against the scars left from the lashes his father had given him...the only gift he ever saw fit to give. Daryl's eyes clenched tight, waiting for the fear and pain of the memories to fall away. When he opened them again, Beth was back in front of him, facing him.

"Scars are the roadmap to your soul," Beth whispered.

*These scars just remind me the pain of my past is all too fucking real.*

"Yeah...I don't think anyone'll ever want to travel down that road with me," Daryl managed, coming out of his state of anxiety. The worst was over.

*I will if you want me to.* No words left her pretty little lips, but he knew by the way she looked at him, that was what she was saying.

"Well...at least this one will be something to tell your kids about someday." Beth brushed her fingers against the arrow scar again.

"Hmph...I don't know about that." Daryl scooted back so he could lean against the pillows. "You know how I told you I've been in some pretty dark places?"

Beth nodded, listening intently, her eyes wide and inquisitive in the lantern light.

"That was one of those dark places..." he paused, considering whether or not he wanted to tell the story.

"So, what happened?"

"Well, let's see...I was thrown by a horse, fell down a cliff, somehow in the fall, I managed to shoot myself with my own crossbow which I really didn't know was possible. I tried to climb back up the cliff, fell again, passed out, then hallucinated about my brother who I thought was dead but really wasn't. Even in the hallucination, he managed to remind me of how useless and weak I was." Daryl paused, swallowing hard. He took a deep breath before continuing.

"When I came to, there was a walker gnawing at my shoe, and I beat its skull in what a tree branch. There was another one comin' quick, and since the only bolt I had left was skewered through my side, I had to pull it out then load it dripping with my own blood to shoot the walker." It seemed like the story should end there, but wait, there was lots more...

"Then, I ate a raw squirrel, cut off the walkers' ears, strung 'em up for a trophy necklace, climbed that hill, and just when I thought I was home free, someone from my own group shot me in the head."

Beth looked down for a minute, taking in what he'd said.

"Yeah...you might want to tone that story down a bit, or at least wait until the kids are older to tell them..." Beth confessed.

Daryl sat up straight again, close to Beth, his confessor, companion, and anchor...

"You see, Beth...the darkness, it comes so easily for me...I need humanity...something to hold on to...something to fight for..."

Beth was sitting quietly beside him...facing him...her legs drawn up. Before he could stop himself, Daryl reached out to touch her pale calf. Her leg was so smooth and perfect. He drew his fingers up across her knee, coming to rest his whole hand on her thigh just under the soft fabric of her
nightgown. He heard her sharp intake of breath and quickly pulled his hand away. He shouldn't have done that. She was better than him. But he wanted to...
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Daryl's touch came unexpectedly, in a quiet moment. His hand was warm where it met her skin and traced the line of her leg. As his fingers drew closer to the hem of her nightgown, Beth's breaths shortened, her heart pounding hard, and she tried to establish at what point she would tell him to stop, when she realized she wouldn't...and why should she? The end could be tomorrow, so what was she waiting for? And acting on impulse wasn't likely to drive them apart in their world; it could maybe even bring them closer together. When his hand slipped under the gown on her thigh, Beth took in a sharp breath, and Daryl immediately pulled away, her skin shivering where she could still feel his caress. She hadn't wanted him to stop...the new sensations just surprised her.

Beth shifted to her knees, hesitantly crossing Daryl's lap and sitting on his thighs. Placing a hand in the middle of his chest, she gently pushed Daryl to recline against the pillows again. She leaned in close, trailing her fingers down between his ribs and across his firm abs, having no idea where her initiative was coming from...maybe it was just the need to live life before the chance escaped.

"Beth...we need to stop..." Daryl's breath was a bit ragged...his voice low and gravelly.

She rested her hand on his stomach, looking at him and gauging his response. He may have said it, but his no definitely did not mean no. Daryl reached out and touched her cheek softly as she slid her hand lower down his torso. It came to linger on the defined cut of his hip, perhaps in her short exploration of his body what she would consider the most evocative part of him. The problem was, she was stuck now...she didn't know what to do. She either needed to have Daryl tell her or take over; the second was the more comfortable of her options. But the moment was lost when Beth accidentally shifted her hand downward, and Daryl snapped.

"Dammit Beth...I said we needed to stop!" He pushed her off of him sharply, grabbing his shirt and a gun from beneath the pillow and was out the door before she could react.

Beth sat in the middle of the bed, confused about what just happened...what had she done wrong? He had started it...he touched her first...

And then Beth panicked when she heard the back door slam closed behind Daryl. For an instant she was sure he was going to leave her...disappear into the woods and never be seen again. Until she saw his crossbow leaning against the wall by the bedroom door.

He would never leave that behind...Beth thought bitterly.

There was nothing left to do. He'd made his feelings clear. Beth got up, blowing out all the candles and turning off the lantern, returning to her side of the bed where she would try to find solace in sleep. Bitter tears burned down her cheeks as she tried to deal with the pain. One thing she knew now from experience...rejection burned.

* * * * *

Daryl pulled a cigarette out of the pack he'd found hidden while combing the house earlier for the
shotguns. As he lit up and sat on the back porch steps, he thought on the list of stupid decisions he'd made in the last few minutes.

He'd left his crossbow behind.

He'd only taken a gun, and there was nowhere to put it except on the step beside him. The waistband of the damn plaid pajama pants sure in the hell wouldn't hold the weight.

He didn't even have a knife.

And he'd really fucked up things with Beth before storming off.

The thing was, when she touched him, his initial apprehension was fueled by a suspicion that Beth was offering herself in payment for his protection with the only thing she thought she had to offer. He couldn't accept that. He still had pride, and he wasn't soulless. In the same instant, he cursed himself, knowing that Beth had far too much integrity to give herself so lightly. After that thought disappeared, he hesitantly allowed himself to give into what he wanted. He'd even given her a way out if she needed it...he told her they needed to stop even though that was the last thing he wanted. He told himself it was okay. He shouldn't have touched her first, but he'd stopped and she continued. And they were both adults, yes, some more adult than the other, but still adults, so what was wrong with it...it was just sex?

Daryl took a long drag off the cigarette and inhaled deeply as he gathered his thoughts.

Another mistake...he'd left his shoes inside he realized as the cold from the concrete step seeped through the soles of his feet.

Just sex was great...well, as great as sex had ever been for him. That’s all it ever was his entire life...just sex. But in those last moments in bed with Beth, he realized it could never be just that with her. They’d shared too much life and loss and pain in the last almost two years and especially in the last few weeks. He was becoming very attached to her...maybe more than...

And the deal breaker had been when her delicate little hand rested on his exposed hip...then she’d stopped. She looked at him with confusion and uncertainty, not knowing what move to make next. The man in him wanted to take over, to own her...but as her protector, he recognized the danger he posed and forced himself to retreat. There would've been a point where the darkness in him wouldn't have allowed him to stop. He’d wanted her too much.

He tried to dig his toes into the concrete of the step as he put out the spent cigarette beside him.

What would Hershel think about him now? Hershel was an honorable man. For whatever reason, Hershel had come to respect him pretty quickly when most people would never give him the time of day. Above all, Hershel believed in redemption...something no doubt he died still believing in. In Hershel's eyes, there would probably be no redemption for the liberties he'd taken with Beth...hell...if Daryl was the father in this situation, he would have shot the trespasser between the eyes. But everything was different in this world.

And Daryl was uncertain too...he didn't know how to go about handling someone so innocent. He didn't know just how innocent Beth was...he had his suspicions...but it was clear that she was far less experienced than the women he was used to. Before...he'd had a personal rule about that. It was far more responsibility than he'd been willing to take on, and not that any girl had offered. Those kind of girls didn't go for men like him.

In any world, she was too good for him, so far beyond his reach in the old world he wouldn't even
have been in her line of sight. This world evened the playing field, but still not enough. If anything
did happen...it had to be done the right way. The problem was, Daryl had no idea what the right way
was...and there wasn't nobody around to ask even if he was willing to talk about it. That meant if
things did proceed, they must proceed with extreme caution. And Beth's best interest was always
gonna be his first priority. If he let himself become selfish, his judgment might get so clouded that he
wouldn't be able to make the decisions or sacrifices that needed to be made for her.

One thing was for sure. He needed to grow the fuck up. These past two days, he'd allowed them to
live in a complete fantasy world. The house was secure enough for now, but nowhere near safe.
He'd allowed himself to drop his guard too much for the sake of rest and recovery. They'd almost
died two days ago getting a car, a few days before that Beth was almost gang raped and killed, and a
few weeks before that, their home had been attacked and destroyed, their friends and family killed or
scattered to the wind. And here he was livin' in a fantasy...sitting at the head of the table letting Beth
serve him like he was the patriarch of some mafia family, taking long hot baths with girly smelling
soap...playing sleepover all day and night, sharing secrets and stories, flirting in the kitchen...not that
he hadn't enjoyed or maybe even needed those things...but this wasn't the time or the place...they
weren't safe yet. Not by far. And until he found a place where he felt they were totally safe...the
fantasy needed to end. He needed to be strong.

Daryl's thoughts turned to a far darker place in the cool night. He thought about Beth's attempted
suicide. He hadn't really known her then or what she'd been through that drove her to that point, but
the attempt pointed to the fact that Beth had a very concrete idea about how she did and didn't plan to
die. He thought about how sad she'd been discovering the two who'd opted out in this house, and the
idea that they hadn't gone together. When he'd thought it out, he came to the conclusion that the man
had been weak, botched his own suicide, but ultimately left his woman behind in a situation where
she felt she had no choice and had to kill herself. What a cowardly bastard that asshole was.

At least Daryl knew that most people who attempted suicide and failed never tried again, so
hopefully that would go for Beth...and she was so much stronger now. She had him to take care of
her too...however was necessary. He didn't believe in suicide. Never had. And the Romeo and Juliet
bullshit of going out together when things got too tough...he didn't buy into that neither. He would
go out fightin' till the bloody end...somehow he'd always known that. But Beth...if they were ever
pinned down with no hope of escape...he'd do it...he would give her mercy...and if that moment ever
came, he would thank God he possessed the darkness to do it...

Beth left no light burning for him to find his way back to her. If he'd been a different man with no
nighttime hunting skills, it would've been a lot harder to navigate. At this point, she probably didn't
give a flyin' fuck. He stopped briefly in the doorway thinking how much a difference twenty-four
hours made. At least the bedroom door was open. He'd half expected Beth to lock his sorry ass out
for the night...but then she wasn't vindictive like that...she didn't have a cruel bone in her body. She'd
left the door open, but she was huddled on the far side of the bed practically clinging to the edge,
making it pretty clear she didn't want him near. After he'd secured the door and replaced his gun
under the pillow, he slid into bed trying not to disturb her. If he reached out, he was close enough
that he could touch her but there'd never been so much distance between them. He fell asleep
eventually, but it was a cold and hollow night for Daryl.

When Daryl woke up the next morning, he had no thought that it was a new day with a new start;
that wasn't the way the real world worked. But at least they were movin' on today, and being on the
road would be a much needed distraction. He rubbed his eyes, and once the sand was gone, he saw
that Beth wasn't there. Had he actually expected her to be there waitin' for him when he woke up?
She'd been thoughtful enough to bring him breakfast though. The tray they'd used to share breakfast
in bed the morning before sat on Beth's side of the comforter covered expanse. Sitting on top of the
tray was a smashed vending machine muffin Beth had scavenged from the car dealership.
Fuck me...he thought bitterly as he snatched the muffin, ripping it open.

Chapter End Notes

Just to let you guys know, the next few chapters are going to be a little dark and angsty. Daryl and Beth kind of went into things quick, and it was never going to be that easy for them. I also wanted to thank all of you who are reading. I truly appreciate you and hope you continue to enjoy.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

~Authors Note: About the last chapter-Daryl and Beth got really close, really quick in this story, and neither of them really expected it or intended for it to happen that way. When Daryl walks away after stopping Beth, he thinks he is trying to be decent, and he might even be a little afraid.

About this chapter-We are going to see part of the aftermath of Daryl's act of decency, kind of a breaking point. I thought it was important to tell the story from both perspectives, so bear with me. Both of them are having to move beyond the fantasy they built in the past two days to wake up to the real world. There are what I believe to be some authentic Daryl moments, so we see he hasn't turned entirely into a cuddly teddy bear. This chapter and next chapter aren’t going to be fluffy...that isn’t going to be the entire nature of this fic...but I hope this chapter has some emotional value. Thanks for reading, and I hope you will come back for more. I am going to try to have the next chapter up tomorrow since this one was a little short.~

Beth had just finished warming a pot of water over the stove when Daryl made his way into the kitchen. If they were leaving today, she was at least going to clean up while she had the luxury of hot water. And her face was puffy from crying last night. It could use a good soak with a warm rag. The lack of sleep didn't help either, but what could she do? She had been awake when Daryl came to bed...surprised when he came in. She thought he would've chosen to sleep in the other room, but then she was where the weapons were, plain and simple.

"Mornin' Beth," he greeted, showing very little change in his normal demeanor.

"I brought your clothes in from the line outside. They're cold, but they're dry." Right now she knew she needed him to survive; she didn't want to go it alone, so she would do what was necessary and require nothing from him.

"I'm gonna make some eggs. You want some?" Daryl offered.

Why was he being nice?

"No thank you," she replied as cordially as her wounded pride would allow.

"Did you eat already?"

"No. I'm fine." She just wanted to take her hot water and go.

"You need to eat something." Switching to his insistent voice, pressing his hand to her shoulder blade as if to drive his point home.

Beth angrily shrugged away from his touch, grabbing her pot of water.

"Daryl...I said no...I'm not hungry. 'No' means 'no', right?" She spat the last words bitterly, exiting before Daryl had a chance to reply.
Beth slammed the bathroom door and locked it. She was thankful she'd put her clean clothes in the bathroom earlier. Her show of assertiveness would have little effect if she had to go right back out to retrieve them after she stormed off. And she wanted to get cleaned up quick...maybe it would stop her from crying again. She was just a ball of emotions today, and not just because of Daryl, but because they were going back out there, into the real world. This stupid fantasy was over...two days made her think real life was possible again...but it wasn't.

Where had all her hope gone?

*                      *                      *                      *                      *

Daryl ate his eggs straight from the sizzling cast iron standing over the stove.

*Damn, Lil' Bit, why you gotta be so naive?*

He should've never said no. He didn't want to. Who was he to tell her what she wanted when they were both adults. He'd lost her now, and she was a monster of his own making...

When Daryl threw the empty skillet in the sink, he wondered if Beth was more angry at him or if she was sad and covering it with anger. Anger was okay. Anger could be a motivating factor. But sadness...she'd suffered so much sadness already. Maybe once they got on the road again, she would be too distracted to be sad. He wanted to get a move on soon...how long had she been gone?

Suddenly, something he'd said from the night before popped into his mind.

*Damn Beth...you meant business...you cut down to get the job done.*

For an instant, panic flooded his chest. But no...something like this wouldn't rock her will to live, would it? He needed to go check on her anyway so they could get going. He just made his way to the bathroom door much quicker than a normal pace, tapping on the peeling panel of wood as calmly as he could manage.

"Hey Beth...you almost ready? Daylight's burning!"

He waited. No reply.

He knocked again. This time harder.

"Beth...everything okay in there?"

Again, no answer.

Pounding on the door now, hard...

"Beth...answer me God Dammit!" Panic welled up in his chest in earnest. His heart was beating so fast it felt like it was going to explode.

Nothing.

Daryl set his shoulder to the heavy wooden door twice before it busted, dreading what he would find in the bathroom, not knowing if he could do what might need to be done.
Beth was standing by the sink, staring at him like he was a madman. And he was mad...fuming!

"Wha...What are you doing?! Are you Crazy?!" Beth screeched at him.

"No...are you fucking crazy?" He was biting back all of his anger and fear. Daryl wasn't screaming, but he was definitely making himself heard.

Grabbing Beth by the shoulders, shaking her...

"When I come check on you, you don't fucking ignore me...you answer me God Dammit! Do you hear me? Answer me!"

"Let me go..." Beth struggling in his grasp.

"Listen up, Blondie-there ain't no puppies or rainbows or fields of kittens waitin' out there for us..." Beth continued to thrash, and he let her go, not wanting to hurt her. "And you ain't goin' on a Sunday picnic with your Daddy in a meadow full of flowers neither! This is real life...and you got to wake up!" Daryl regretted his final words as soon as they flew out of his mouth. He'd let his emotions get the better of him, and this time he wasn't drunk on moonshine.

And he'd wounded her deeply. The anger in her face was joined instantly with sadness, and she went completely still.

"Beth...I didn't mean...I'm sorry..." Softening his voice...

She caught him off guard...but after a lifetime of fighting, his sense of survival was too strong. Beth drew her hand back to slap him, but he instinctively threw his arm up to block the blow. Again it was the wrong move, and she was even more infuriated.

Daryl dropped his arms to his side and spoke to Beth as gently as he could manage in the state of high emotion.

"Sorry Beth...that was just reflex. Go ahead..." He offered himself for the punishment he deserved.

Beth stood very still, not moving towards any option.

"Go on, Lil' Bit...I deserve it...and you need to..." assuring softly, not sure if she would follow through. Please...I need you to.

He'd never let anyone hit him before...after his old man...but this was different.

Beth slapped him full in the face. For such a little thing, she delivered.

* * * * *

"Hey Beth...you almost ready? Daylight's burning!"

Daryl clearly hadn't grown up with any girls. Apparently he didn't realize bathroom time meant alone time...and Beth wanted just that...to be left alone, so she decided to simply ignore him.

He knocked again, this time more insistently.
"Beth...everything okay in there?"

Why wouldn't it be? She just stuck to her game plan of not answering and continued brushing out her hair.

This time he pounded on the door so hard it rattled in its frame.

"Beth...answer me God Dammit!" He sounded angry...desperate even.

What was he so worked up about? So he was annoyed? Good, because she was definitely not opening the door for him now.

Before she could get her hair pulled up, she heard Daryl slamming against the solid wood. As she stood there in horror and confusion, it only took twice for the door to break open and Daryl to come barreling in.

And he was more than angry.

"Wha...What are you doing?! Are you Crazy?!" Beth screamed at the absurdity of it all, forgetting where they were, not knowing who or what could be lurking outside.

"No...are you fucking crazy?" Daryl's voice...she had never heard him like this before...not with her.

She could see his jaw clenching and tightening as he bit back even more anger.

He was enraged. He grabbed her by the shoulders, squeezing painfully tight and shook her hard.

"When I come check on you, you don't fucking ignore me, you answer God Dammit! Do you hear me? Answer me!"

His anger, cursing, and the shaking made her cringe away from him and struggle to escape his grasp.

"Let me go..." She feebly tried to get free but ultimately knew if Daryl didn't want to release her, there was nothing she could do.

"Listen up, Blondie-there ain't no puppies or rainbows or fields of kittens waitin' out there for us..." Daryl finally set her free, and she stumbled a few steps backwards. "And you ain't goin' on a Sunday picnic with your Daddy in a meadow full of flowers neither! This is real life...and you got to wake up!"

She knew all that...he didn't need to say that...especially the part about Daddy...he didn't have to be so cruel... She clenched her eyes trying to stop the flood of sadness that was overtaking her, gritting her teeth to hold back the sob fighting to escape.

"Beth...I didn't mean...I'm sorry..." His voice was soft and calm and sad. What he said about being sorry was true, but it didn't matter. The cruel words had already come out and done their damage.

Rage and fear and anger and sorrow all exploded in her at once, and she threw her hand at his face to slap him. She couldn't really say what drove her to that violent move, but her hand never met his cheek. Daryl swiftly blocked the blow, jarring her wrist at the point of contact.

She went still. Beth was angry at Daryl. Angry at herself for resorting to hitting someone. Angry at the world for everything it had thrown at and taken from her. Ashamed of herself for loosing control. She looked at Daryl, waiting to see anger or disappointment or resentment...but he was calm, and all she saw was sadness and maybe even some understanding. He was standing so still, his arms at his

sides, all of his defenses dropped.

"Sorry Beth...that was just reflex. Go ahead..." He spoke to her softly.

She was confused. She didn't know if it would make a difference or even make her feel better. And what would Daddy say?

"Go on, Lil' Bit...I deserve it...and you need to..."

_But Daddy is dead..._

Beth slapped Daryl full in the face, but to his credit, he didn't flinch and his face remained a stoic mask. As she drew her hand back and held it against her chest, she hoped his cheek stung as much as her palm and fingers did. Daryl stepped forward and hesitantly embraced her. She should pull away, but she didn't...why she couldn't say. This didn't make things right. It wasn't even a start. Maybe they were broken...maybe all hope was lost...
Their road trip wasn't smooth sailing after the morning storm of emotions. The route Daryl chose on a rural two lane highway proved unsuccessful about thirty miles in when it was blocked by an ancient fallen tree, and there was no possible way around. Even nature wasn't on their side. Daryl declared that the back track and reroute would cost them the better part of the day as he committed them to rural county roads. Not that it mattered to her. She was just along for the ride. Beth couldn't imagine what good would come when they eventually got where they were headed. It wasn't like they were going to live happily ever after.

Daryl tried to engage her in idle conversation, but he was ultimately just talking to himself. She was turned entirely toward the window, too busy watching the world literally pass them by. The fields and forests and fence rows were beautiful, but the dead houses were sad shells mourning the people who once lived in them. They were all so stupid to feel safe at the prison...actually thinking they could make a real life there. And now she and Daryl were like God's children, cast out of the Garden of Eden, denied his grace and protection. Except in their case, Adam and Eve weren't liking each other too much. If the future of the human race depended on them, she wouldn't count on it.

"You know...Glenn had a pretty nice car once...even when I met him after the turn," Daryl offered, and the mention of their lost family momentarily drew her out of her sad reverie.

Although she didn't turn to him or even give any indication that she was listening, he continued anyway.

"It was back when they first brought Rick to the quarry after meeting him in Atlanta. I was out hunting, out in the woods a pretty good distance from our camp when I heard this wailin' car alarm echoing all across the mountain. Wasn't nothin' I could do about it, so I just kept on hunting, and it eventually stopped. Next day, I got back to camp and saw what all the fuss was about..."

She wondered who Daryl was back then. How he was with other people...this must've been right when he lost Merle the first time. And all the others...all the rest of his group that he'd never named...as well as the people she had met who were all gone now.

"And well...I mean...it wasn't a real good time for me... I'd lost the deer I'd shot to a walker on the way back to camp and found out the new sheriff in town handcuffed Merle on a roof and left him for dead...but it was a nice little red Dodge Challenger...and Glenn just thought it was the most wicked car ever..."

Beth tried to think on it...all the people he'd lost since they came to know each other from before the prison.

Sophia...the little girl Beth never knew but knew she affected Daryl profoundly...Dale, Shane, Lori, T-Dog, Andrea, and Merle, and more recently Rick, Carl, Judith, Michonne, Glenn, Maggie, and Daddy...but those two probably didn't count. They were her people, so he probably didn't care...but...after the moonshine, he'd spoke of Maggie...and he was torn up because he didn't think he did enough to save her Daddy. That had to mean something, didn't it?

She was missing someone else...
"And by the time they were all done partin' it out, poor Glenn, he was devastated," Daryl finished.

And it came to her...who she'd missed...Carol.

It all made sense now. Why he didn't want to be with her. Carol was the person he was closest to. If Carol would've been there beside him when the prison fell, Beth would've had no chance. He would've left her behind for sure. There was no way she could ever live up to the standard Carol had no doubt set before her. Of course he missed her and mourned for her...he'd never even said her name out loud since they ran. During their emotional breakdown with the moonshine when she mentioned not being like Maggie or Michonne or Carol, he didn't even react to her name...he was too hurt apparently. There was no way she could ever be as good as the strong, independent, mature woman Carol was. That meant there was no way she could be good enough for Daryl in the only way that mattered...and perhaps he would eventually leave her. Being alone...Beth would never survive that. When she thought about the horror she felt at the last house with the woman hanging from the ceiling fan...Beth began to fear dying alone even more than being left alone in life.

Daryl always said he kept his promises. Beth was going to request one final promise from him before it was too late. She turned in her seat to face him, resolved to remain strong and keep her emotions in check.

"Daryl, can you stop for a minute?" Her voice was as even and calm as she could hope for.

"Yeah...you okay?" Daryl questioned intently, putting on the brakes and stopping in the middle of the road.

"I just need to ask you something."

Daryl pulled up the parking brake and put the car in neutral, turning to her and waiting attentively. This was the first time she'd spoken to him since they'd left the house.

"I need you to promise me something..." words still unbroken to her surprise.

"I'll promise as long as it's something in my power."

"Promise me that when you find someone better to travel with or if you decide to go it alone, you'll help me find somewhere safe to stay before you leave me..." Beth's voice cracked a little at the end.

"This is ridiculous. I ain't even gonna entertain you with an answer." He was blatantly aggravated at her request.

Daryl went to release the emergency break as he prepared to speed off again, but Beth grasped his forearm in her small hand prompting him to stop.

"Please Daryl...you have to promise...you know I can't make it alone..." Full desperation invaded her voice.

He pried her fingers off his arm then rested what was no doubt supposed to be a reassuring hand on the juncture between her neck and shoulder. After this morning, she had resolved that she wouldn't let him touch her again, but she didn't have the emotional strength to fight it.

"Beth...when are you gonna get it...I'm not gonna leave you...I think...you gotta understand...this is it for me..." The broken nature of his uncertain proclamation was hard to comprehend.

She didn't know what he was trying to say, and she still needed to hear him promise.
"Please Daryl...you have to promise..." Urgent now.

"Hell Beth...yeah, I promise," Daryl rasped reluctantly.

This silent treatment was driving him crazy. He'd never been much of a talker...until recently with Beth, and he didn't mind silence. But the fact that he knew he was getting the silent treatment was what made it unbearable. Luckily, they came up on an antiquated gas station and service garage with a few parked cars outside. As he pulled off the road and skidded to stop, the place looked pretty untouched. Maybe he could siphon some gas. Beth turned to look at him as he opened his door.

"I'm gonna look around, take a piss, and see what I can find. You comin'?" Daryl was outta patience and manners at the moment.

Beth wouldn't even grace him with a reply; she just turned back to her fixed position looking at nothing out the window.

"Fine Beth...suit yourself...but stay in the car," Daryl barked.

He slammed his door and saw Beth lean over to the driver's side and lock it behind him. And he'd left the damned keys in the ignition. He hoped he wasn't gonna have to play a fucking game with her to get back into the car. At least he knew she couldn't drive away and leave him since she couldn't drive a stick. There were still small miracles in the world. He was kinda glad she decided to stay in the car. He could use a few minutes to clear his head and cool down.

Daryl cleared both the gas station and garage before setting to anything else. The store was really untouched, so it would be worth a look, but fuel was his priority. He was able to find a few empty gas cans and siphon enough from the abandoned cars to fill their tank almost two times over, and they were still doing good on what they started out with. Beth was obliging enough to pop the trunk for him when he knocked on the window, fitting the gas cans in with the other supplies they'd gathered from the house before they left.

Inside, Daryl found a veritable selection of caloric depravity, so he grabbed some shopping bags and tossed in everything he saw. Lots of chocolate bars. Girls liked chocolate, right? Well, so did he, so either way, he felt set. There were also some various over-the-counter meds, antiseptics, and bandages that he couldn't pass up on...not in their world. And then he encountered the most intimidating aisle in the whole damned store-the feminine care section. He'd never ventured here before, but Beth wasn't like to come in, and she might be grateful for the gesture. Shoving a variety of what he thought she might need in the future in a large plastic shopping bag just for her...this was definitely not his area of expertise...

At the door, Daryl dropped his bags before leaving and decided to enjoy a candy bar before they hit the road again. As he bit into the sweet chocolate and caramel goodness, he realized that it was probably the only sweetness he was like to get out of the day. He was still pissed beyond belief by the promise Beth demanded of him...she wouldn't even take his word. And she'd totally disregarded everything else he tried to say during the one real conversation they'd had on the drive. He shouldn't have even fucking opened his mouth.

To Beth's credit, she unlocked the door for him as soon as he reached it. Maybe she had some time to
cool down and reflect while she was alone. He put his bags in the back seat then handed Beth his offering.

"I saw this stuff inside and thought you might like to have it," Daryl explained calmly, sliding into the driver’s seat as she took the bag from him.

Beth parted the crinkling plastic, looked in it then at him...and if looks could kill...

"I can't believe you...you think this is why I'm pissed at you...because I'm having my period?" She seemed composed, but her voice carried the razor-sharp edge of anger. She was coming unhinged.

"No...no, that's not what I thought...not at all..." He knew he needed to tread very carefully. "I don't know how you girls...ladies...handle that...delicate time...without..." Just digging himself deeper when he hadn't even realized he'd started digging a hole in the first place. "I just thought you might appreciate this stuff when you did need it." It was the best Daryl could do.

"You're a dick, Daryl. That's why I'm pissed at you!" Beth spat.

"Watch your mouth, little girl!" Daryl could feel his anger rising. "I was just tryin’ to be considerate! Won't happen again!"

"Watch my mouth?! You're not my father! You don't get to tell me what to do!"

Well, at least she was paying attention to him now and wasn't staring out the window ignoring him.

"You’re right, I ain’t you're daddy. What would Hershel think if he heard you?" It was to get her attention, to make her stop and think.

It worked, and she glared.

"Come on, why don't you slap me again? I might like it this time!" Daryl growled out, leaning close to give her the opportunity.

She needed to get her emotions out and move on, and if it took him provoking her, he would do it. And Daryl was pissed too...Beth was acting like a spoiled brat. She needed to grow up.

"No? You don't want to...okay, then get the fuck over yourself." He gave her some time to process.

"Fuck you, Daryl!" Still so infuriated and burning with Greene fire.

"Yeah...there it is...that's why you're mad at me. You wanted to fuck me, and I said 'no'. You need to get over it." He was harsh, but it was the truth. She needed a little reality.

Reality might sting, but Beth didn't have any snotty reply.

Daryl reached back in a bag, grabbed a candy bar, and tossed it in Beth's lap.

"Here, have some chocolate and be quiet. Chocolate releases endorphins, and endorphins make you happy." He was calming down now, at least on the outside.

Beth eventually ate the candy bar, but probably only because she hadn't eaten all day.

They were at an impasse.

Chapter End Notes
~Author's Note: So this is going to be the last chapter where Beth and Daryl are at each others' throats (at least for a while because every realistic relationship has its moments) before they realize it is accomplishing nothing. They are just currently at an awkward stage where things happened so fast, they haven’t really communicated feelings, maybe they don’t really realize what it all means, and misunderstandings are going to occur. Daryl's never been in this kind of situation with a woman before so he is kind of lost in addition to the fact that he is trying to keep both of them alive, and Beth is still angry and self-conscious from his rejection even though Daryl thought he was doing the decent thing. This chapter has some insecurities and irrationality, some tempers flaring, and some immaturity. I have great confidence that they will work it out, but it being all rainbows and butterflies would be unrealistic at this stage. Next chapter has some sweetness though. Thank you for reading!~
They stayed the night in the open. After their fight, Beth didn't say a word to him. To make matters worse, Daryl had no luck at all trying to get them back on route. None of the roads were cooperating with him. After all the times he had to turn around, try a different path, and was shot down again, they'd made absolutely no progress. Daryl should've never gotten a car. A bike maybe would've gotten them somewhere, but even being on foot would have been more productive at this point. By the time dark was coming, Daryl didn't have the energy or the will to try to find somewhere inside for them to stay. They'd made it just fine in the outdoors before, although for Beth, it probably wasn't ideal.

After he'd made a fire and a perimeter, they ate the food they'd brought with them. Being in the car full time didn't really allow for hunting opportunities. He just needed to find his way back to normal...normal with Beth. They couldn't go on like this.

"Beth, I don't wanna fight. I'm not gonna yell at you anymore; it ain't doin' us any good." Daryl hoped he could keep his word on this one.

She just glared at him across the fire. He had no idea that she could keep quiet for so long.

"I'm sorry...for everything I said." He didn't apologize often; Daryl hoped she understood that.

Still nothing but Beth shootin' daggers. How could he have let her get so far under his skin that he snapped at her like he did? Everything she did, good or bad, had such a huge impact on him.

"Fine...don't say nothin'..." That would be his last word on the topic.

That night, Beth made her bed on the ground on the opposite side of the fire. For a long while, they watched each other from their respective places until finally Beth turned her back on him. Well, that was that. He watched over her for most the night, and even when he tried to sleep, Daryl found that it wouldn't come to him easily. This was the first time since Beth's attack that they hadn't slept beside each other or at least in the same bed. She could just as well be a million miles from him, there was so much distance in between.

A night of no sleep and a silent Beth really didn't make Daryl's mood all sunshiny and bright. And he was usually a morning person. This couldn't continue. It was time for action...and the perfect opportunity presented itself around midday into their drive. He hit the brakes sharp and unexpected, skidding into the gravel parking lot beside a sign reading *The Wilderness Lodge*. It was really off the beaten track, and it was small enough that there was no place for many walkers to hide.

"Stay here," he instructed, leaving the car and taking the keys with him this time just in case. He locked Beth in for safe keeping though.

Daryl cleared the lobby with minimal effort, hopping over the front desk and grabbing a random room key. Everything seemed absolutely deserted. Perfect. He quickly returned to the car to retrieve Beth. Opening the door, he grabbed her wrist pulling her to her feet, glancing down at the room number on the key, 210, on the second floor of the log structure made to resemble a hunting lodge. Beth resisted for a moment, causing him to turn toward her and assert himself without a word. She looked at him all wide-eyed and confused, but he wasn't gonna give her a chance to question, dragging her up the steps behind him, holding her steady when she tripped from not paying attention.
He didn’t turn her loose ‘til he got her into the room and locked the door behind them. Beth took in her environment while he cleared the bedroom and the bathroom, finding nothing to deter them. The room was surprisingly pleasant; far better than he was ever used to.

"Daryl...is something wrong...are we hiding?"

He leaned his crossbow up against the wall by the door and laid his guns and knife out on the rustic hewn table.

So now she was talking to him? She was afraid. He could hear it in her voice. And maybe she should be with the choices she was makin’ lately.

"No, we're not hiding," he articulated very clearly.

Daryl passed her, stopping at the end of the bed. Casually shrugging off his vest and tossing it on the couch at its foot, he turned around to face Beth as he very deliberately unbuttoned his flannel. She was staring at him, wide-eyed, like a frightened deer. He disregarded his shirt, letting it fall carelessly to the floor.

"What...what are you doing...?" Beth's voice quavered.

"Ain't this what you want from me?" Daryl asked, reaching behind his head and pulling off his wife-beater, tossing it to the floor too.

He looked directly at Beth...locked eyes with her as he unbuckled his belt as aggressively as he could. The whole point of this was to scare her out of wanting to make a stupid decision with him, wasn't it? He needed to be direct. He needed to be purposeful and forward. And he could tell by her rapid breathing that there was some fear in her.

"It was wrong to push you away the other night...I didn't do it 'cause I didn't want to. I did it 'cause I didn't want you to make a mistake. But if that's what's drivin' you away...if this is what you want from me, I'm good to go. I'm not gonna lose you over this." Yelling at her didn't work before, maybe good old fashioned honesty would.

"But...it's still light out..." Beth interjected as he stepped closer to her.

"And?" He knew the answer to the question, but the only way this was gonna work was if she worked it out for herself. At least that's what he hoped.

"...it's still daytime..."

_God, she's so naive_

"What are you afraid of, Beth? What you're gonna see? Or what I'm gonna see? 'Cause that's kinda all part of this proposition," he explained bluntly as she blushed away. "Your turn..." Daryl moved in even closer, and Beth was frozen.

_Good...it's working._

But then Beth's hands went to the buttons of her long sleeve...and she fumbled with ’em, her hands trembling a little.

"Beth...you want me to take your clothes off for you?"

She didn't answer in words, and he needed her to be the one to say _no_ this time or this little exercise
in adult relationships was a fucking waste.

Daryl moved as close to Beth as possible before reaching for her shirt so his presence would be felt. He unbuttoned it with deft fingers, not being aggressive, but he was being forward. He bet that as soon as her shirt was off, the game would be over. He slid both of his hands across her shoulders, pushing the sleeves down her arms, never losing full contact with her soft skin. She really needed to say no or his plan wasn't gonna work out too well for him either. But by the time it hit the floor, she still hadn't relented. Beth wasn't as bold as the night she'd come onto him, he could feel her shivering...but what if this was really what she needed? She deserved better than him...but if this was what was gonna happen, he couldn't fuck it up. He had to give her what he could.

Daryl released her arms and allowed himself to slip his hand under her tank top, spreading his fingers and covering the entire spanse of her smooth stomach. She was so little. She needed to eat more. Beth sucked in a breath when his hands ran up her ribs, lifting the flimsy shirt over her head. Once he rid her of it, he pulled her hair free of its band, letting his fingers venture into the soft strands. He didn't look down to see what was now almost bared; he didn't need to. His eyes were on hers, until she refused to look at him.

*                      *                      *                      *                      *

If you kiss her, you're lost forever...

Instead of her lips, he let his mouth find the soft curve of her neck. But he wanted to be lost...lost in her...

*                      *                      *                      *                      *

When Daryl's hands skimmed down her arms, slipping her shirt off as he went, every inch of her body came alive. They were alive...this was what they were meant to feel. There was still a knot of fear and apprehension balling in her stomach, but she pushed it aside to experience life with Daryl. She shivered at his touch and hoped he didn't notice. Beth didn't want him to think she was a scared little girl; it was just new to her. His hands left her arms and one found its way under the hem of her cami, fingers spanning the soft flesh of her stomach, then both hands following the line of her ribcage, drawing the shirt up with it. After she raised her arms so he could remove it, Daryl reached for the elastic band holding her ponytail, pulling it out and setting her hair free. He looked at her...looked her in the eye like he could see into her soul. She couldn't keep his gaze. His fingers were in her hair, pulling her head gently to the side, and that was when she felt his lips at her neck.

A million things were racing through her mind as Daryl's fingers began tracing the edge of the well worn pink bra she'd run from the prison in.

She might die tonight or the next day, but would sharing just one time with Daryl for the sake of experience be enough?

She couldn't bear the thought of Daryl giving in just so he didn't push her away, even if he did say he wanted to.

Beth needed more.

Daryl moved closer, their bodies touching. She reached up, gently caressing his cheek. There was no mark where she hit him during their fight at the house, but she regretted raising a hand to him all the same. He didn't move to touch her anymore, apparently turning himself over to her. Beth stroked his
hair...it was so soft...softer than anyone would imagine... brushing it aside as he watched her intently. She wished she had someone to talk to about all this. Maggie...she had experienced so much more of the world than Beth had...but Maggie was gone.

"God Beth...do you even know what you want from me?" Daryl's voice was low and breathy. His hand came to rest on the small of her back, not in a seductive manner, but just in a way that connected them.

"Everything..." She might as well tell the truth. "And I've never..." it came out so awkwardly, and she couldn't finish.

*                      *                      *                      *                      *                      *

Well...his plan worked...partly...but it really didn't do anything to quench his desire or the fact that he felt shitty that those desires existed in the first place. He didn't let her go though. He craved their closeness...needed it even...and they were close enough they barely had to speak to hear each other.

"Beth...I'll give you everything I have...but it ain't enough...you deserve better..." Why couldn't she understand?

"Who are you to tell me what I want?" Beth's palm pressed at the middle of his chest as if to make her presence felt, but it wasn't necessary...he could feel her.

Who was he? He had more life experience than her. He knew what the world was really like...even before the turn...and it was ugly. And most of all, he knew who he was. But he didn't need to tell her that...she believed what she believed whether it was good for her or not. Daryl let go of her and led her to sit on the edge of the bed. Kneeling on the floor in front of her, resting his hands on her knees, looking intently at her, Daryl needed to have her full attention.

"Beth, I want you to listen to me, okay?" The most serious side of him spoke.

She nodded her head indicating he had her attention. Daryl didn't take his eyes off hers.

"If we’re gonna be together...together like a family, we need to do things the right way." Together like a family...what just came outta your mouth? But it felt right. "That means not pushing things too fast or doing them for the wrong reasons. They have to be for the right reasons."

Beth nodded again.

"That means when you’re ready...when you’re really ready...you can come to me, and I promise to take care of you the best I know how," Daryl softened his voice when he made his promise. "I don't wanna let you go...but Beth..."

"Yeah...?"

And this was the vital point he really needed to get across for her sake. He had restraint, but he was no saint.

"If you offer again, just know I'm not gonna say 'no'."

"I understand..." She reached out and ran her fingertips down the cords of his neck, tracing the line
of his muscles to his shoulder.

Daryl captured her hand in his, stopping her from going any further, his flesh rippling where she caressed him. Not that he didn't want her to touch him, but at this point he could only tolerate so much foreplay without the play.

"Beth...like I said...I'll give you everything I have...but you shouldn't want me...I'm ruined..." It was like his own personal warning label.

"Daryl...you're just broken...and I can fix you." She sounded so sure of her convictions that she almost made him believe anything was possible.

Maybe there was light at the end of his darkness. *If anyone can, it's you...*

"Do you wanna stay for a little while and rest?" He asked from his knees, still holding her hand tight.

"Yeah..."

Daryl reluctantly let go of her and retrieved both their shirts. As he passed Beth's to her, he caught a glimpse out the back window of the bedroom.

*Holy Shit...*

"Beth...grab your shirt...we gotta go NOW!"

The herd that was emerging from the tree line directly behind *The Wilderness Lodge* was something they could never handle. Daryl grabbed his other shirt and vest, threw Beth's long sleeve to her, and retrieved his weapons.

"What's wrong?" Then she looked over her shoulder out the window and was instantly on her feet.

Daryl grasped her hand as they ran for the car together.
Their home for the night was a small pull-off by the road with a picnic table, a fire pit, and a corrugated tin roof. There was some sort of historical marker near the road, but neither of them really cared to look at it. Daryl sat vigil by the low burning fire long after Beth had curled up on top of one of the picnic tables wrapped tight in a blanket and went to sleep. He'd set up a perimeter alarm, planning to catch a few hours of sleep too, but he just needed a few minutes to himself. He wanted to take the time to mark the herd they'd encountered today and their direction on their map, and after, he found himself staring into the flames thinking about everything. Everything had changed...he had so much more now...and that meant he had more to lose. It used to be easy for him to clear his mind, but now he didn't have the luxury of thinking about nothin'. He would never have nothing again.

*                      *                      *                      *                      *

This isn’t happening! This isn’t happening...Not Again!

This time it only took one man to pin her to the ground, her arms above her head, her assailant ripping mercilessly at her pants. His face was blurry and distorted, but it was the Governor—the prominent black eye patch left absolutely no doubt.

"You're so much sweeter than your sister. I like it when there's no fight left in the girl."

She should be fighting...she should be screaming, but she couldn't. She couldn't even try. And this time, Daryl wasn't there to save her. Beth was forced onto her stomach, and looking forward, she could see the fence and the prison. And everyone was there, standing there, just watching. Rick, Carl, Glenn, even Maggie...and all the others. They all had guns, and nobody was trying to help her. Daryl wasn't there though...had he abandoned her?

A cruel hand on her head smashed Beth's cheek hard into the ground, and she closed her eyes tight on impact. The Governor leaned close down over her, and she could feel his hot breath against her ear as he whispered to her.

"Say hello to Daddy..."

Her eyes involuntarily popped open to meet the dead gaze of her Daddy's eyes that had been so bright and full of love in life. She reached out to him, but there was nothing to reach for...it was just his head...

Beth finally found her voice.
"Daddy...I love you..." she cried.

Why wouldn't anyone help her?

"Daryl...please...Daryl...!" She screamed, hoping he was somewhere out there.

"Beth...Beth, I'm here..." She could hear Daryl, but he was so far away he could never save her. "Beth...Beth..." His voice was so calm...how could he be so calm?

She could feel a hand softly shaking her shoulder.

And just like that, it was over. She woke with a start...could barely breathe, and there were tears rolling down her cheeks. Beth looked to where Daryl was standing over her, staring down at her with concern.

"I'm here, Beth. It was just a dream."

Daryl seated himself on the bench of the picnic table, coming closer to her level, gently wiping her tears away.

Beth took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, willing her heart to stop pounding out of her chest.

"You wanna talk 'bout it?" Daryl asked softly.

Beth just couldn't. If she said the words, it would be all the more real.

"Stay by me..." She was able to force out without her voice totally breaking.

Daryl offered her his hand, and she took it. The last thing she felt before falling back to sleep was Daryl pulling the blanket over her shoulder and still holding her hand in his.

*                      *                      *                      *                      *

Whatever monsters haunted Beth's dreams, she'd called out for his help. Problem was, he couldn't save her from her nightmares. What he could do was stay with her standing guard, ready to wake her if the demons returned...

Daryl wasn't startled out of his sleep. He opened his eyes, saw the fire was still burning, and Beth was still out. Then he heard them...the moans and snarls...and just then one tripped the perimeter alarm. He shot up, almost falling over the bench, looking for their point of retreat.

"Daryl..." Beth's voice was panicked.

He had to think...but there was no time. They were surrounded on three sides...he couldn't even see their car behind them.

Fuck me...

Their only option was forward, into the woods. Crossbow in hand, he grabbed Beth by the wrist, jerking her to her feet.

"Gotta go. Beth...we gotta run!" Hauling Beth after him into the dark tree line.
Daryl had to let her go while they were running. He didn't have enough bolts to make a difference with the herd that was chasing them, so he threw his bow over his shoulder and pulled his knife. They had limited ammo too, and the excess noise of gunfire would do little to help their situation. Once he'd manipulated his weapons, he reached back grasping Beth's wrist again...he wasn't gonna lose her. The woods were thick, and the underbrush was heavy. It took all he had to keep himself from getting tangled up and Beth on her feet too. Being a tracker wasn't worth shit if you were running for your life in the middle of the night. He could hear the herd behind them...if they stopped for more than a few seconds, they would be on them again. There had to be a way out...

But there wasn't. There wasn't even time...

Their crashing through the woods and the noise generated by the herd started drawing stray walkers in the vicinity to their forward location. They weren't herds, only three or four at a time. He forced himself into survival mode where killing became an automatic function, and Beth took down her fair share too. But there was no way they could keep up this pace and stay alive. As the last immediate walker hit the ground, he could see Beth's dark silhouette doubled over, gasping for air. He went for her, putting his hand to the back or her neck...what little comfort he could give.

Then the fear...

"Beth...you bit...?" He didn't know if he could handle that. Not now...just thinking the words...

"No...I just...I can't breathe..." Beth gasped, going silent again.

He gave her all the time they could take, but when the herd got too close, he grabbed her by the arm, pulling her behind him...forward was the only way they could go...they had to keep going.

"Daryl...what do we do...?" He could hear that primal fear in her voice, and he knew that tonight was the night he'd fail her.

"We run...we just run ‘til we can't..." He didn't have the right answer...didn’t know what to do neither. He couldn’t save ‘em. He couldn’t save her.

They should’ve stayed in that house. What was running worth if they were just gonna die anyway? If they’d stayed in that house, at least they would’ve died with a taste of normal on their lips...maybe even sweetness. Now they were going to die, tired and afraid in the dark...a horrible death...torn to pieces. He’d been wrong all along. This was how they ended. He could hear Beth crying behind him. Daryl always thought he would die regretting the things he did in life, not the things he didn’t do...

They should’ve stayed in that house. He should’ve made love to Beth. He should’ve kissed her for real and told her he was afraid...

Afraid to be close to someone...

Afraid to care about someone...

Afraid to be vulnerable...

Afraid to make love to her because he would fuck up and not do it right...

Afraid of what came after.

He always said he wasn't afraid of nothin’...but Daryl was so very afraid...
Before he could think of anything else his pathetic ass was afraid of, they were tumbling down a sharp dirt slope, and there was nothing they could do to stop their fall. At the bottom, thankfully, he was able to break Beth's fall. And this time he managed not to shoot himself with his own bow. As he caught his breath, Daryl could actually see...they were in a cleared gully, the moon bright enough to illuminate their surroundings. He pushed Beth aside and got to his feet before the two walkers beside them had a chance to eat a snack. He put 'em down quickly, a plan forming that just might save Beth.

There was an old tree halfway down the slope, its roots snaking out of the ground, dirt washed away. Upon quick inspection, there was enough room for Beth to hide under 'em. As Beth caught her breath, Daryl dragged the two walkers he'd brained towards the root shelter to hide Beth's presence and mask her scent.

"Beth...quick...come on..." Daryl called. She was immediately at his side. "When that herd comes down this slope...we're not gonna be able to get up the other side...it's too steep. I'm gonna draw 'em off that way," Daryl pointed down, following the line of the gully.

"What...what do you mean...? No..." Beth panicked when she realized what he meant to do.

"No time to argue...remember...I promised to keep you alive, and you promised to listen to me." She started to question him, but he cut her off. "You're gonna get under here and hide. I will come back for you if I make it. Stay here, and if I'm not back by full sunrise, follow the walker tracks back to the car. If that happens, if I haven't found you yet, you decide whether you wait or go...do whatever you think will keep you safe...alive. Keep moving west...we know what's east...go west..." His words were clipped, quick, verging on frantic as he could hear the herd approaching.

"Daryl...no..."

"No time, Beth...get in now..." He pushed her. There was no negotiation.

In his moment of doubt, he remembered how Rick's plan failed Sophia, but this was their only chance for Beth to survive.

He placed the first dead walker to conceal the shelter then pulled the other to cover where Beth had entered.

Now had to be the time...there would be no other chance...

"Beth...I..." Daryl was cut off by the walkers falling down the hill.

He blocked the shelter's entrance with the corpse without finishing. What he wanted to say to Beth didn't matter now...what did was that he needed to save her. He screamed at the walkers, and they were more than willing to follow.
Beth couldn't bear the noise. They just kept coming, tumbling down the slope, bones crunching, flesh ripping...the snarling, snapping, and moaning. She clenched her eyes tighter together and clapped her hands hard over her ears trying to drown out everything. Her heart was pounding so hard...breathing so heavy that she was surprised the walkers couldn't hear her...terrified any moment they would. Maybe this was just another part of her nightmare...but it didn't end. Were they not meant to be happy ever again? They'd started something today, talked about it honestly, and there was the possibility it would be something real...but now Daryl was dead or would be soon. Why did she deny him today? If she had said yes, at least if Daryl died, she would have a small piece of him, a sweet memory to hold on to...keep with her for however long she had left to live. Daryl warned her that he wouldn't say no again...if he was alive and came back to her, she would hold him to that.

Beth bit back a sob.

*Calm down...you have to calm down.*

She pulled her knees tighter to her chest, trying to make herself smaller under the tree roots.

What if Daryl turned, came back, and found her? That would be the worst thing she could imagine. No, there was something even worse than that. With the size of this herd, they would tear Daryl to pieces and eat him alive...there wouldn't even be anything left to bury. She was so alone; everyone was gone. If Daryl didn't come back, she was done. Beth resolved herself that when she wasn't able to wait any longer, she wouldn't go west. West was what she and Daryl had pinned their hopes on...but without Daryl there wasn't any hope. Beth would try to make her way home. If she was going to die alone, she wanted it to be there.

Home was a good thought...calming even though it carried such sadness. There was a Weeping Willow tree near the house, and when she and Maggie were young, it used to be their secret hideaway...there, close to its trunk, under the cascading branches where no one could see them. They would sit under there for hours talking and singing and laughing and playing make believe. When Daddy came out looking for them, they would be very quiet, and Daddy would get all worried because he couldn't find them. Then they would call out to him, he would part the branches, crawl under, and sit with them telling them how wonderful their secret hiding place was. When she was little, Beth always thought Daddy was silly and forgetful because whenever they were under the Weeping Willow, he could never find them. Later she realized he was just allowing them to keep something magical and secret in their lives. Long after Maggie outgrew the Weeping Willow and went away to college, Beth would still go there, hiding under the protection of the branches to write or sing or just be. It was still magical to her. If she had ever had the chance, she would've liked to share that magic with Daryl. He liked the outdoors; he would've appreciated it. She had never shared it with anyone except Maggie and Daddy, but she would've happily shared it with him. It was too late now.

It was resolved. If she ever made it home, she would make her peace with the world and God. She would go to that magical place under the shelter of the Weeping Willow. Beth couldn't just will herself to die though; she probably had the ability and fortitude to do just that, but she didn't want to come back as a walker. She would have to do it herself...a clean shot in the head...and it would all be over. Maybe when she got home, she would take some time before the end to write her story...their story in her journal...to leave behind. If someone did live, maybe they would find it some day and realize that the dead girl under the Weeping Willow had found hope and love, even for the shortest time, in the most unexpected place. It had to mean something...
Home...home is where the heart is...right? She might make it home, but maybe there was something better after. Maybe if Daryl's heart was with her, they would find each other in the place that came next...and Daddy would be there too, and maybe even Merle. Merle was a horrible person, but he died trying to save them all. And Daryl loved him despite their past. Beth had to look forward now, even if forward meant the end.

*                      *                      *                      *                      *

Daryl was spent. He'd been running for what seemed like hours, and the herd kept coming. This had to be far enough...it had to be if he was going to make it back to Beth by sunrise. He would never forgive himself if something happened to her. If Beth left that hiding spot and was bit in the woods trying to get back to the road...there was no way it was going to happen like that...history wasn’t gonna repeat itself this time around. *Fuck fate.* He was going to make his own destiny now, and fuck anyone or anything that got in his way.

Daryl sped up with his last burst of adrenaline to put more distance between himself and the herd, then climbed the side of the ditch he and Beth had fallen down. He did a slow 360 to see if there were any immediate threats, then he went flat on his stomach to catch his breath and watch the herd pass. They were closer behind him than he'd thought, but the sooner they passed by the sooner he could make his way back to Beth. The steady stream of walkers kept moving mindlessly forward, chasing their invisible prey at a faster pace than usual. That had to be why he could still barely breathe.

The end of the walker train finally came and passed, and he carefully watched them disappear into the distance. As soon as the last was out of his sight, Daryl caught his second wind and started his journey back to Beth.

*                      *                      *                      *                      *

It was so beautiful. Beth was under her Weeping Willow tree and all the gracefully cascading branches were encased in ice, the sun shining on them and turning the branches into strands of iridescent diamonds. She reached out to touch them, and one broke in her hand, small shards of sparkling ice spilling to the ground. Everything possessed such an ethereal quality...she wasn't cold, but she wondered if she had somehow died, and this was her place in between.

But she wasn't alone. The branches were parted, and four little blonde angels spilled into her secret world. They looked at her with shock, like she was the stranger in her own magical place. Three little boys and one little girl with long blonde hair and big blue eyes stared at her as if waiting for an explanation.

"What're you doin' here?" The oldest, a fierce little boy questioned her.

"I used to always come here...when I was younger...I lived here," she explained, staring at them in wonder. There was something about them, something she should realize.

The smallest, the little girl, reached out and took a strand of Beth's hair in her tiny hand. Their hair was so much alike.
"We know..." said one of the younger boys, just as fierce and assertive as the older.

"How do you know?" How could they know...there was no way these children knew her. They'd never met.

"You told us, silly...and you said Granddaddy could never find you when you hid here," the youngest of the boys offered.

"What? Who?"

"Granddaddy Hershel, silly..." the little girl spoke in a melodic voice. "You say you miss your daddy lots, and he loves us from heaven."

Beth felt dizzy. What was this? What was happening?

"Mama, are you okay?" The eldest boy who had been so fierce knelt down next to her and took her hand.

Mama...? The little boys...they looked so much like...

"Shhh...he's comin'...be quiet or he'll find us..." the youngest boy whispered frantically.

Beth was flooded with fear as the four children huddled behind her. But they were giggling between their frantic shhhs as the willow branches parted and a figure crawled into their sanctuary.

Daryl...she wanted to hug him and kiss him, hold him and never let go...but she wasn't sure this was real.

"I thought I said it was time for y'all to go to bed?" His tone was gruff, but there was happiness in his eyes.

"But Daddy...it's still light out," the biggest boy came forward to challenge.

"Yeah...well...we’re leavin' at first light to go hunting. You need to be sharp and rested if you wanna get your prey," he asserted.

"Daddy...I'm a girl...I don't go huntin'..." the little girl protested as Daryl drew her into his arms and kissed the top of her head.

Beth felt happy and sad in a very confusing moment. She could feel tears falling down her cheeks, and Daryl looked at her with concern.

Could this be real?

"No, you don't hunt now, but maybe when you're older. Your Mama's pretty good with a crossbow, and I taught her everything she knows." He flashed a smile her way but was still concerned.

"Daddy, how'd you find us here? Mama always said that Granddaddy Hershel could never find her here when she was little," the eldest boy questioned.

"You see, son, Granddaddy Hershel was a great man. He was a doctor who helped save lots of people during the hard time after the Turn."

"You mean when you and Mama met and fell in love?" The middle boy asked.

"In love..." the little girl in Daryl's arms mimicked in a sing-songy voice.
"Yeah...exactly...when I met your Mama and my life changed. And even though Granddaddy Hershel was a healer, he couldn't find anyone who was hiding worth a shi...crap...worth nothin'. But your Daddy, you see, he's a tracker, and he will always be able to find you, no matter what, no matter where you are or how far you go in life. I'm a tracker...it's what I do...what I know...what I've always known."

The four children gathered around, hugging him. It was a strange sight, but somehow it seemed to fit Daryl. Everything seemed right.

"Back to the house now, all y'all. Remember, we're leavin' together at first light...at dawn..."

After the children disappeared, laughing and scampering away, Daryl moved close to her, his forehead furrowed in concern.

"You okay, Lil' Bit?"

"Yeah...I think..." Beth reached up and brushed away her tears. "You're happy?"

He looked at her like she'd shot a crossbow bolt through his heart.

"How can you ask me that? What's wrong with you?"

"I...nothing...I don't know..." Beth didn't know what to say. She shivered. It was suddenly so cold. Daryl reached out and pulled her close, wrapping his arms around her. "The children...I can't seem to remember when they were babies." She couldn't remember anything.

"Is that why you're sad...'cause the kids are gettin' older?" He drew her tighter. "We should have another."

"You want more?"

"Yeah, why not...it ain't like we can't take care of 'em. I thought we talked about this...a big family?"

He seemed confused now.

"You remember when they were babies?" Beth needed to know something...anything.

"I remember all of them...what it felt like to hold them in my arms the day they were born. My first son...who came before things got better. He was the sign that showed life found a way even when the world was fallin' apart. And my little girl...my only daughter. She stole a part of my heart on the day she came into this world, and things were suddenly all bright and beautiful after that..." Daryl choked up a little.

It all sounded so beautiful...she wished she could remember...wished she knew whether this was real or not.

"Do you remember the first time we were together?" Beth felt herself blush when she asked the question which wasn't right. She just needed some sort of trigger...something to signal where reality was...to grasp at something real.

"Mmm-hmm...you don't really forget something like that. You remember the best things and try to forget the worst." Daryl hesitated. "What is all this..." His voice became so serious, almost hurt...but she just couldn't...

And then she remembered something...something terrible and horrific...she was so scared even though that moment seemed so far removed.
"Daryl...that night in the woods..."

"What night...there've been lots of nights in the woods..." his voice was becoming more withdrawn. His emotion was fading.

"That night...with the herd...when you left me under the tree while you drew them away..." She felt the very real fear well up inside her chest as the words poured out.

"That night..." was his only reply.

It was getting so much colder. Even Daryl's embrace wasn't enough to drive away the chill. And he was getting colder too...his skin against hers was no longer warm.

"Did we make it...?" Beth barely managed the question...terrified of the answer...

Then it was all gone. Daryl was gone; the beautiful ice covered Weeping Willow tree of her childhood was gone. She was trapped, being strangled by tree roots, bound to the hard ground where Daryl had left her...it was so cold...
Slowly coming back to consciousness, Beth could barely see the sun filtering through the tree roots. The dirt was so cold...a harsh snap back to reality. Was the sun up already? She didn't remember falling asleep...wasn't prepared for the truth she might have to face alone when morning broke. Was she giving up already? He could still be alive...she'd once said Daryl would be the last man standing; she just had to believe. Beth refused the dawn...there wasn't enough light yet. Instead she curled in a tighter ball against the frigid, hard ground. Maybe this was what her grave would feel like.

Beth laid there, just waiting for whatever came. At least the horrific sounds of the passing herd were gone. The birds were starting to sing, and she could hear other animals moving about in the woods above the gully. Didn't Daryl say something about the animals sensing danger? They wouldn't be out if there were walkers near. It was brighter outside now. She couldn't hide under the tree forever, could she? It was time to be an adult and face the truth. Daryl might not be coming back, and if he wasn't, that meant he was dead. He died to save her, and she wouldn't waste that. Beth willed herself to push the corpse out of the way so she could crawl free of her cage, struggling to pull herself out and make it to her feet. She stood there quietly for a moment, her back to the direction Daryl would be coming from...the way he led the walkers away from her. Their story wasn't going to have a tragic ending. It couldn't. She was going to turn around, and Daryl was going to be running toward her, waiting to embrace her and tell her everything was going to be okay. Beth was silly for thinking Daryl wouldn't come back; Daryl was built for this world. She turned around confidently waiting to greet him...but there was nothing as far as she could see in the direction he'd fled the night before.

Beth was able to hold it together for only the shortest second until she sank to her knees, feeling like she was going to be sick. Her fingers dug into the hard, cold dirt as she gagged and sobbed and made a snotty mess of herself. Beth let her forehead rest on the ground because she didn't seem to have the strength to hold her head up...she was dizzy and feeling faint. And she could hear his words so clearly from the day they spent in bed together in their fantasy world at that little house. It was a different world...how could a few days feel like a lifetime ago?

...the thing is, death is never beautiful. It is sad and someone always loses. But there's something beautiful and admirable...sacrifice. If a man loves someone or something so much that he is willing to give up everything he is and has...his life...to save that one thing...that's beautiful...

"No..." Beth cried into the ground. She shouldn't have said it out loud. It could draw walkers, but she couldn't hold it in either. "Dammit Daryl...it's not beautiful...your sacrifice...I don't want it!"

She coughed and gagged again, but there was nothing to come up.

*If a man loves someone so much that he is willing to give up his life...that's beautiful...*

"Why couldn't love be enough...why couldn't you just..." Beth couldn't breathe. "It was all for nothing..."

It took a moment to try to calm herself and focus on her breathing...more than a moment. But Beth finally righted herself, stood, and wiped her face with the back of her hand. It was after full dawn. She looked down the path again, but this time she wasn't delusional. Nothing. Beth wanted to go look for him, but Daryl told her what to do. She knew he would want her to listen. She tried to pull herself together and climbed the washed hill back up into the woods to follow the walker trail to the road.
Daryl stayed at the edge of the tree line before the sharp slope of the ditch so he could have the concealment of the trees but keep an eye on the area below just in case Beth stupidly decided to come after him. He tried to keep a quick but quiet pace. At this point, caution was his priority. In the darkness, there was no way he could go runnin' through the woods without making noise and drawing attention to himself, leading anything listening towards where he'd stashed Beth. He wasn't sure just how much fight he had left in him. If there was another herd or even large group of walkers, it would probably really be the end.

As a hunter and tracker, he'd spent his life in the woods, and he'd become pretty damn good at estimating how far he'd traveled and how long it would take him to get back. Tonight he had no fucking idea; the concepts of time and distance were beyond his comprehension. And then tonight started to become today as he saw the first faint hints of morning in the distant horizon...thin tendrils of light reaching into the darkness. He was never going to be able to make it back to Beth before dawn. His priorities shifted, and Daryl slid back down the hill into the ditch where he had a clearer path to pick up the pace.

Daryl hadn't paid much attention to the land marks on his night flight, but as full dawn passed, he swore he could see the tree clinging to the hill where he'd hidden Beth. Part of him hoped she'd stayed even though he'd told her to go at dawn. It didn't matter either way now. All that mattered was that she was alive somewhere where he could find her.

It was the tree, and Beth was gone. Daryl saw where she crawled out of the shelter, and then for some reason fell down. There were no markings or tracks that would indicate something else had been near her, and there was no blood, so she wasn't hurt. He went to the ground where her knees had hit and put his free hand in the dirt over where her small hand had left an impression. He wanted to grasp it and hold it like the print was a real and tangible thing.

Please...

The ground was barely damp in front of the handprint. Had she been crying?

Time to move...now.

Daryl followed the same path as Beth, climbing the hill, and he quickly found her trail, just to the left of the destructive path that had been cut through the woods by the walkers. It ran parallel, leaving easy signs for him to track without being obstructed by the walker route.

"Good girl..." he couldn't help sayin' out loud. In whatever state she was emotionally, she was playing it smart.

Daryl tracked. It was the most important thing he'd ever set out looking for; the thing he needed the most, and he sure in the hell wasn't gonna go away empty handed.

The trek back had been easy so far...no walkers at all. Beth kept her knife at the ready all the same. She occasionally had to glance at her right to see the walker trail to make sure she was going in the
correct direction, reverse of the walker herd from the night before. How far had they actually come from the road?

A branch some distance behind her snapped, and Beth froze instinctively. Whatever was in the forest behind her started moving again, taking a few soft steps then stopping. It definitely wasn't a walker limping and dragging along. It might have just been a deer, but it was big, so she wasn't willing to risk it. When it started moving again, she side stepped quietly, further away from the path, deeper into the woods. Beth slid behind a large tree, pressing her back up against the rough bark. Holding her breath, she closed her eyes tight even though she knew she shouldn't, waiting for the threat to pass. She could feel her heart beating in her eardrums, but the noise of the approaching threat disappeared.

"Beth..." The voice was hoarse and fatigued, but it sounded so real. Had she fallen asleep again?

"Beth..."

She didn't want to open her eyes, fearing the spell would be broken, but she did, and he was there. Beth brought her hand up to cover her mouth to keep the sob from escaping. She moved toward him without thought, but he held out his free hand to stop her.

Is he bit? Oh God...please no...this isn't happening! The tears came freely.

"Whoa, Lil' Bit...let's put the knife away." He peeled her hand off the hilt of her blade and replaced it in its sheath at her waist. He wasn't bit, he just didn't want to get stabbed...

Then it was no holds barred. Beth threw herself at him and wrapped her arms so tightly around Daryl that she hoped he couldn't breathe while she cried into his chest. He pulled her close in return, so tight that his embrace hurt...but it didn't matter. Nothing else mattered.

"You hurt, Beth?" His lips close to her ear...

She shook her head no against his heart...the proof he was alive.

"I thought you were dead..." Beth mumbled into his damp shirt, afraid to let go.

"I ain't an easy som'bitch to kill..."

Daryl gently disentangled her arms from around him and forced distance between them with a firm hand on her shoulder.

"Here...let me look at you..." Daryl offered sympathetically.

She could only imagine what she looked like, covered in snot and dirt and tears with matted hair tangled in leaves and twigs. And she looked him over too, feeling guilty for feeling so sorry for herself. Here she was thinking she had it bad hiding and sleeping all night when Daryl had been running, fighting, and tracking the entire time. Despite the pleasant temperature, he was drenched in sweat, his hair plastered to his head. Daryl was also wearing his fair share of dirt and sporadic woodland accessories, and the dark circles under his eyes revealed he'd had no rest.

And there he was, still just looking at her. The intensity of his gaze always made her self-conscious, forcing her to look away.

"I'm a mess, I know..." Beth managed, looking at the ground.

"You're a beautiful disaster." There was an edge of something in his voice.
Beth only had a second before the moment just exploded.

There was nothing to make sense of...arms entangled, hands grasping, their bodies colliding in the most brutal manner, forced so close there were only clothes left in between. Lips met, were bruised and bitten, hair pulled... no romance, just instinctual and primal need. They both crashed to the ground with a painful crunch and Beth's back slamming on top of the stock of Daryl's crossbow.

"Owww..." She half cried, half laughed.

"Sorry..." Daryl growled his apology before attacking her lips again, lifting her, and roughly pushing the bow aside.

It was in that moment that they both seemed to realize how careless and stupid they were being. They were both alive, and that was something to celebrate, but this was not the time or the place...getting all hot and heavy in the woods when anything could be lurking out there. As they came back to their senses without a word to each other, Beth breathed deep and slow. She took in everything about Daryl. His smell...he smelled like sweat, and dirt, and blood, and woods-feral and wild-like a man who survived in their world should smell—and it inflamed her. His weight on top of her, his body pressed against her, the feel of him breathing with her, feeling a lot more than she had ever felt before...and they were both alive...so very alive. She didn't blush away because everything was finally starting to turn out just how it was supposed to.

And they didn't stop; he just slowed and went easier with her. Daryl reached down and kissed her long and deep. It wasn't a soft or timid kiss, but the bruising intensity of the previous moments had faded. What it was though was possessive. Her lips were sore and stinging, but that was a price she was willing to pay. And most of all, she could feel his fingers entwined in hers, grasping like they would never let go. Sometimes what seemed like the simplest gestures turned out to be the most intimate. Daryl pulled away from the kiss, looking down on her, contemplating...what she didn't know. This time, she didn't look away.

"You okay, Beth?"

She nodded, still a little breathless.

"Did I hurt you?" Here he was again with the concern.

"Yeah..." Beth said, laughing breathlessly as she answered.

She was pretty sure they had both done some damage to each other...damage they would be feeling sooner or later once the adrenaline wore off.
Daryl gave her a wry smile letting out a breathy *hmph* as he shook his head.

"Come on, let’s get you outta the dirt."

Daryl sat up, pulling her with him until he was sitting on the ground and she was straddling his lap.

"And this is better?" Beth couldn’t help question, feeling just a little seductive despite being covered in dirt, and snot, and now saliva added to the mix.

"No...not really..." Daryl went a bit awkward. "But you're fine...

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"I...I'm sorry..." Beth read him wrong and tried to move off him.

That was the last thing he wanted. Daryl grabbed her hips with both hands to stop her from moving. How could she be so damn innocent?

"You're fine...I'm just not 'better'..." She looked at him all confused and wide-eyed. "Never mind...just forget about it...just never mind..." There wasn't anything he was willing to say at this point.

Despite how awkward and self-conscious he felt, Daryl lowered his head shaking it while trying to hide his reaction. His reaction wasn't for Beth; it was a reaction to himself. This was probably why he had that personal rule about what kind of women he slept with. He hoped he wasn't gonna be a shitty teacher. He started to teach her how to track...but when it happened, it wasn't gonna be as easy as a tracking lesson, for either of them. He felt real dread. But how could he dread something they both wanted...it would turn out okay...wouldn't it?

"Did I do something wrong?" She sounded so sad, and the expression on her face was so heartbreaking. How could she be so unsure of herself after everything that had happened...everything he had shared with and told her? Didn't Beth believe a word he said?

"No...no, Beth...you can't do anything wrong..." Daryl assured.

They were going down this road, and since they were eventually going to get there, she had to have that kind of reassurance. The responsibility would fall to him. And she'd all but confessed she was a virgin...and that scared the shit outta him. His rule had been about women with little experience...virginity entirely off his radar. They would both be in virgin territory. He'd never...he pushed that thought away...it was something to consider at a less emotionally charged moment...when he could clear his thoughts and actually think about something besides Beth perched on his lap.

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Sitting quietly with Daryl, it finally all sank in—the anxiety, fear, sadness, desperation—all the emotions attached to the idea that she had lost him. Beth closed her eyes, breathing deep, trying to let it all go.
She felt Daryl's hand slide under her shirt and up her back, following the path of her spine. She shivered at first until her body realized that the steady caress was meant to calm, not arouse.

"Are we going to pretend this didn't happen?" Beth questioned once the tensions eased.

"What?" Daryl sounded confused. Well, a lot had happened...maybe it would be better to pretend that some of the past night never occurred, Beth considered.

"Are we going to pretend that you didn't kiss me?" Beth let a hand tentatively connect with his chest.

"Were we pretending before...ain't no reason to pretend...is there?" Those blue eyes, how they bore into her.

He hadn't ever acknowledged that he'd kissed her...had he...wasn't that the same as pretending? Daryl was so confusing.

"No." There never had been a reason in her book.

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"We're gonna be okay..." Daryl promised as he stroked the silky skin of her back, both of them still coming down from their very emotional night and reunion.

And there came the tears again. She tried unsuccessfully to wipe them away with the back of her hand only to make more dirt camouflage on her face. She was right...she was a mess...but it didn't matter to him.

"I've never cried so much over a boy in my entire life, Daryl Dixon..." Beth exclaimed as she tried to wipe the tears and dirt from her hands onto her equally filthy shirt.

*Is that a good thing or a bad thing?* Daryl wondered to himself about the crying over *boys*.

"Yeah...I don't know if I qualify as a *boy*...and I ain't worth cryin' over." It probably wasn't the answer she was looking for; it was the truth though.

But he reached behind her neck and pulled her down into a kiss all the same. Was this okay? Was this what she wanted? He was doubting every move he made, but he needed to know.

"Beth..." it came out all strangled and awkward after he released her from the kiss.

"Yes..." She was all serious...the tears finally fading.

"Ummm...no...never mind..." Daryl decided against it.

"What? You started it, you have to say it now. That's the rule," Beth insisted.

*Shit...gotta open your mouth when everything's goin' just fine.* And what was this rule? What, were they 10?

"Can you...will you promise me something..." Here he was, all self-conscious again, tryin' to find his words.
She nodded her head.

"I...well...I said...promised I'd keep you safe as long as I'm alive...I plan on sticking around. Will you promise that too...that you won't leave...me?" Daryl knew he had abandonment issues, but to ask her to promise this? Was he tryin' to chase her away?

"Yes. I promise." Beth's response was immediate, not a single second of hesitation or thought. And she sounded stone cold serious. Maybe he needed to clarify what he meant.

"Ummm...I mean...my promise means even if we find our family or other people again...if it ain't just us...and I was kinda hoping you could promise...the same thing too." He was reaching here, and he hoped Beth couldn't hear the insecurity in his voice...but who was he kidding.

"I know...and I promise I won't leave you...it's kind of the only thing I have to offer..." She smiled soft and shy, avoiding eye contact. He wished she wouldn't do that. He had done that his entire life. And why did she underestimate herself...what she had to offer...to him? He reached out, lifting her chin gently.

"Kiss me..." Daryl wasn't quite sure if he was asking her or telling her, but she did.

Beth was so hesitant, so shy of herself and her actions...even more than he was, but he let her go and followed her painstakingly innocent lead. It was beautiful.

It all felt right. This was right. He had something real now, and there was no one he would let take it from him. He'd told himself that he would be lost if he kissed her again. He wanted to be lost...and in losing himself in Beth, he gained more than he'd ever imagined...more than he deserved.

Beth had just made him the best offer he'd ever been made in his entire life. Maybe it...life...started now...
Daryl pointed for her to sit on the moss covered log near the small trickling stream they were about to cross.

"Are you sure we’re going the right way? I don't remember crossing a creek last night..." Beth trailed off. She didn't remember much of their night flight except for fear and hopelessness...but Daryl's hand had refused to let go of hers...refused to let her give up.

"Yep, I'm sure."

He pointed again for her to sit, and she obliged him, plopping down too hard on the rough surface of the fallen tree.

Beth was just so exhausted. And Daryl must have been dead on his feet, but he was still able to remain coherent, upright, and move silently through the woods. He crouched down by the water's edge, pulled the red bandana from his back pocket, and dipped it below the surface of the stream.

"How..." She was about to ask How do you know?, but luckily Beth was able to stop the flow of idiotic words from her mouth. Daryl knew because it was his life. He hunted. He tracked. She would have never even thought of asking if she wasn't so spent. "How far are we?" She went in for the save as Daryl looked over his shoulder at her.

"I don't know...probably about 300 yards or so. We hit the stream pretty quick last night." Daryl straightened, looking in the direction they were headed before turning back to her.

Beth was willing to bet that they were exactly 300 yards from the road; no probably about needed to be attached to it. Daryl practiced an art. He just wasn't willing to recognize the beauty in what he did.

Daryl knelt in front of her and gently started cleaning the dirt and snot from her face. His expression was so still and calm, something Beth wished she could feel on the inside. She was still haunted by the shadows of the night, and her heart was still racing from everything that had happened when morning dawned and Daryl returned to her. How did he have it all together?

Now pulling twigs and leaves out of her hair, finished with her face...

"That bad?" Beth questioned, happy there was nowhere for her to see her reflection.

"Nah...you're good. I just couldn't let you go gettin' in the car all dirty." He watched her, his words deliberate and carefully measured. Daryl saw that she was still worked up and was attempting to lighten the situation.

He was always so perceptive, but his attempt only worked for a second until Beth latched onto another horrible scenario.

"Daryl...what if the car's gone?"

"What, a walker hotwire it...probably just as likely as a normal person being able to. And I got the keys," Daryl assured her, continuing his ministrations.

He accidentally pulled some of her hair out with one of the last twigs, and she winced away.

"Sorry...and Beth, even if the car is gone, we ain't no worse off than we were after the..." His words
just stopped.

Beth knew what he was going to say, *the prison*, but it didn't need to be said. They both knew...they carried it with them.

"But you loved that car. You said it was your dream car." She needed to redirect from the past...a past that was still fresh and painful.

"Beth, you can't love a thing, you can only love a person. If the car's gone...I liked it, it was great, but I didn't love it...I...have a...person now."

Well, if she put the pieces together, what Daryl said might have bordered on romantic...he couldn't love a car, but he liked it. He could love a person, and now he had a person. Beth considered this a moment and realized Daryl's inability to express his feelings was telling enough. He didn't love her, but he made sure she knew he cared. She should probably never expect him to be a romantic...it just wouldn't be Daryl. She would take him however she could get him...strong, silent, awkward, protective...

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"Stay put," Daryl instructed as he went back to the stream to rinse out the bandanna after he'd finished with Beth's hair.

*You compared how you feel about her to a car...a fucking car! Fucking prick...torturing himself when there wasn’t nothin’ he could do to take it back...cringing from the thought as he felt the cold water rush over his hand.*

It hadn't been a very good comparison. That was the fucking understatement of the century. He needed to give Beth something concrete. But he'd asked her to promise to stay. That had to be enough, wasn't it? She had to understand how he felt.

Returning to Beth, he knelt down in front of her, set the dripping bandana on his thigh, and reached for the buttons of her shirt. He drew his hands back quick though. The action had come so naturally that he hadn't realized he might be crossing the line.

"Can I?" Daryl asked, and Beth nodded. "I just wanna check and make sure you ain't hurt or cut up or nothin'. Sometimes when our adrenaline's up, we don't realize there's something wrong."

Daryl finished his explanation just as he came to the last button on her shirt. She didn't ask for his reasoning; it just kept his mind from wandering in the moment. Beth shrugged out of it, tossing the dirty flannel aside, left only in the thin tank top she wore underneath. Daryl took her right hand and started his slow inspection of her bare, pale skin, wiping off the random spots of dirt that had soaked through her outer layer.

He wanted her; there was no question in that. Hell, any sane man with a pair of eyeballs would want her, but this was different. There was something different in him...Daryl felt a need to protect her. He wanted her to belong to him. Sure, the uncertainty that was always present in Daryl’s life questioned whether or not Beth really wanted him, but whatever part of himself that overpowered the rest knew that she was with him. The strange part was...maybe it wasn't so strange, maybe just decent...that he wanted to protect Beth and her innocence until everything was right and safe and he didn’t have to focus on anything else. Daryl was realistic. He knew in their world nothing would ever be perfect,
and he didn't know how long Beth would wait until she offered again. He hoped a little while at least... 'cause he didn’t have the strength to say no to her.

The thing was, Beth wasn't the kind of girl you fucked in the woods against a tree or in the dirt, or in a car, the bed of a truck, a seedy motel, the alley behind the bar. Hell, anywhere he'd ever fucked a woman was out of the question for Beth. But then Beth wasn't the kind of girl that you fucked. He could only imagine her in a soft bed with feather pillows and crisp white sheets...and he had an imagination. It just couldn't do questionable things to her. Daryl might not be able to give her that soft, perfect feather bed, but he could try for something better than what they had.

For a moment he wished that he could strike out all those alleys, seedy motels, and fucks in the woods so he could be good enough for her...but then he would be someone different than he was. Maybe it was good he'd gotten those experiences out of his system.

By the time Daryl pushed his thoughts aside, he'd swept Beth's hair away from her neck and ran his hand across her back and in between her shoulders. She shivered at his touch, but he finished his inspection and cleaned the dirt from her other arm and hand.

"You're good," he assured Beth and himself, moving in front of her again.

"Cold..." Beth pronounced rather unceremoniously.

"What?"

"I'm cold," she repeated.

It'd been a warm morning, warm enough that his shirt was sticking to his sweaty chest. His jacket and vest were too warm, but they afforded a certain amount of protection while running through the woods. But now, the wind was shifting and there was something cool and changeable in the air. Of course she was cold, sittin' there in nothin' but a tank top, wiped down with frigid water.

Your jacket you idiot...give her your fucking jacket.

"Here, Lil' Bit." Daryl pulled his crossbow off of his back, setting it down so he could shrug off his coat. He held it out for her, not just for her to grab it, but to put it on her. This was what the kind of men she was used to did, right?

Beth stood, slipping her arms into the oversized sleeves.

"Are you sure?" She asked so self-consciously.

"Mmm-hmmm." Daryl stepped closer behind Beth so he could reach around and button his jacket and vest for her.

Part of Daryl...the dark part...fought him, growling inside that it was counterproductive to put more clothes on Beth, but it seemed like with her, the better part of him, the better man, always won out.

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"We need to find somewhere to rest...stay the night...not in the open...'cause it looks like it's gonna rain, and we both need to sleep." Daryl's words were slow and tired. He finally seemed to be losing
his steam.

He was right. They were both dead on their feet...well, they were driving, but...everything from the past night, all the emotional and physical torment weighed heavily on their state, but he smiled softly over at her after he spoke, and she returned it. There was a foundation now, something sturdy to build on. And even though it was still before noon, they needed to sleep or they would be no good if anything happened.

"So, how long until we get there?" Beth questioned. The mythical There Daryl had plotted on their map, surrounded on three sides by waterways...the current location she was pinning her hopes on. It was scary being so close...not knowing if they would ever find a safe place. While they were traveling to somewhere, they could always hope, but once they got there, the truth would be out for better or for worse.

"Maybe tomorrow afternoon if we don't run into trouble." Daryl hesitated for a moment. Maybe he feared the same thing she did. Of course he did; how could he not? "And Beth, I was thinkin', if this don't work out, maybe we should try for home...Shit...!" Daryl slammed on the brakes and threw his arm roughly across Beth's chest, pinning her back against the seat.

When they came to a halt, Beth saw the reason for Daryl's immediate stop. A large buck stood in the middle of the county road, panting, bloody with an arrow sprouting from its shoulder. He put the car in neutral, pulled the brake, and grabbed his crossbow from the back seat.

"Stay here, Lil' Bit," Daryl instructed, opening his door.

"What are you going to do? We can't take that with us..." Beth couldn't fathom him attempting to tie the deer carcass to the top of the car.

"I'm gonna put it down and leave if for whoever's out there still tracking it. It ain't my kill..." *                      *                      *                      *                      *

Daryl sent the deer to the ground with a single shot to the heart. After he pulled the bolt back, he took his knife and slit its throat so it could bleed out. He hoped whoever originally shot it found it, and there was no reason to let their meat go bad by not bleeding it. But whoever shot it wasn't much of a hunter if they were that far behind.

"Hey...hey...get away from that! That's our deer!"

Daryl rose from his position near the road, loaded bow in hand, to see two people panting and jogging from the tree line at the roadside.

"We said get away from that!" The other yelled as they made their frantic approach.

"Hey, you douchebags wanna stop yellin' so you don't bring every walker in a mile of here down on us...it'd be your funeral!" Daryl spat as he raised his bow just in case.

One of the men coming up on the scene was a middle aged balding man with a beer gut wielding a re-curve hunting bow. The other looked like he belonged in some geek squad office, and he had nothing but a KA-bar in hand.
"Get away from our deer or I'll shoot you..." Pot Belly shakily drew an arrow at him, and Daryl couldn't believe how blind they were. No wonder the deer got away.

Couldn't help but grin.

"You think this is funny, asshole? That's our deer, and you ain't gonna take it!" He was so far from being threatening, but Daryl was just gonna let their little drama play out.

"I don't need your deer, and it ain't my kill. But you two are idiots if you're willing to die for it." Daryl lowered his crossbow. This wasn't his moment anymore.

"You're outnumbered two to one," Geek Squad pointed out in what he no doubt thought was a logical assessment.

Even if it was just Daryl, the other men would be dead before they could blink. But he wasn't alone. He smiled beyond them to Beth who'd never looked more badass than she did right then. She was only about eight feet away from the two hunters, a gun in each hand pointed at their backs, and she was pissed.

"It ain't me you need to worry 'bout. It's her...and take my word for it...she's vicious." Well, that might not be entirely true, but it was Beth's moment to shine.

Both men turned simultaneously, saw Beth...falling to their knees, dropping their weapons, and putting their hands up in surrender. Daryl couldn't have been more proud. His tracking lessons were really paying off...and she sure had been silent and stealthy. Tired, pissed, lethal little Beth was lookin' pretty damn good! Daryl just wondered if she would be up to pulling the trigger.
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Once all the testosterone simmered down to a normal level, the two strangers calmed down enough to realize she and Daryl weren't a threat and didn't want to steal their deer either. Daryl had reached her side, nodding for her to lower her weapons, but Beth still kept her guns in hand and Daryl his crossbow at the ready.

"You'll wanna gut that buck and skin it here before you take it back to wherever you're goin'. Maybe even start a small fire and burn the hide and innards so you won't bring nothin' down on your camp," Daryl advised.

He touched her on the upper arm guiding her back to the car.

"Come on, Lil' Bit. Need to hit the road..."

Beth couldn't help feel angry at the ingratitude these people were showing. They'd drawn on Daryl and threatened him when he'd just brought their deer down. Because of him, these strangers would eat. She looked back at them, now crouched close to the carcass; it seemed like they had no idea what they were doing.

"Hey, wait...we're sorry...we just couldn't let you take our deer. Our people...our group...the supplies ran out a couple of days ago, and we haven't had much to eat," the fat man apologized, standing, followed by his hunting partner.

"Do we look like we need your fucking deer? Does it look like I can't take care of us?" Daryl spat out. It seemed like Daryl had reverted to his feral nature. Or maybe that was just the way he was always going to be around other people.

"No...no, that's not what we meant. We're just hungry," the other apologized.

"Cause it sounds like y'all are callin' me a thief!"

Why was he so angry?

"Come on Daryl, let's just go..." Beth nudged softly, and to her surprise, he moved to listen.

"Wait...why don't you and the girl come back to our camp. You can eat with us...you killed the deer after all. And if you want, well, you can stay the night...safety in numbers 'n all," the fat one offered tentatively.

Daryl hesitated, but she wanted to keep their options open. If Beth was as tired as she felt, Daryl was past exhaustion.

"Where's your camp?" Beth questioned just in case.

"About a half-mile through the woods that way." The tall man with glasses pointed to the tree line on the opposite side of the road. "We were on our way back with nothing when we saw the deer...but if you wanna take the road, go down about a mile and there's a sign for a campground turn-off. Down that road, it's another three-quarters of mile or so, but you can't miss us."
"It ain't even noon, and you were givin' up huntin' for the day? You ain't much of providers are you...let your people go hungry 'cause you ain't shot somethin'...there's plenty of daylight left!" Daryl was beyond pissed.

Not everything had to be a confrontation...but Daryl was spent...and to be honest, they hadn't been around other people in a very long time...

The strangers didn't have a reply for Daryl.

"Pfft...thanks for the invite!" There was no thanks in what Daryl spat, belligerent and dismissive to the them, directing her firmly to the car. He didn't seem too keen on company.

Once they were safely pulling around the dead deer, Beth turned in her seat to face Daryl.

"Why are you so mad? I know they drew on you, but they hardly seemed like a threat."

"No...they weren't a threat...I just don't got time for idiots." Daryl's voice was starting to lose its edge of anger.

"We're not going to stop at their camp, are we?" Not that she particularly wanted to stop if they had a choice. But they were so tired, and what if they didn't find a better option...

"Nah, Beth. They're just walker bait. Ain't nothin' there for us but people you might get attached to and lose. If those two douchebags where their best and brightest..." He didn't finish his thought.

"Daryl...we need to sleep...if only for a few hours...I'm so tired." She would make it about herself, make him feel like he was doing it for her...even if it made her look weak...because he needed it too.

They had just passed the campground sign, and it didn't seem like Daryl was convinced...until he slowed down and turned the car around.

"By the way...you looked pretty badass when you brought those bastards to their knees. I couldn't keep myself from lookin'." Daryl glanced her way with one of his little smirks, tired as he was.

Is he flirting or just complimenting? Either idea made her warm. She even sensed a little bit of pride in him.

"Yeah...I was having a bit of a Lara Croft moment. And that man drew on you!" If he could protect her, Beth would do the same for him with all the fierceness she could muster.

"You're pretty good at bringing me to my knees..." Daryl's voice went all soft and raspy. He was full of compliments today. Beth blushed and looked away. Everything had changed...everything was...more...

"Have you ever shot left handed?" He went serious again, looking over to gauge her reaction.

She shook her head no. That shouldn't really be surprising since she had never held a gun before the turn.

"We'll eventually need to fix that in case someone tries to call your bluff...so it won't be a bluff."
Daryl made it clear to Beth that they weren't gonna get all cozy with these people as they drove down the bumpy gravel road. They might stay the night 'cause the sky was starting to cloud over, maybe another night if it rained all the way through, but it wasn't gonna be permanent. He despised weak men, and if he'd met the group's alpha males, he sure in the hell wasn't gonna like the rest of 'em. He also told her that there was no reason to go tellin' everyone all the details about their life. The more strangers knew about you, the more they had to use against you.

Coming in to the camp, it looked like everyone was set up for a damn 4th of July weekend. The small campground had a ring of campsites surrounding a central circular picnic area. Each campsite was occupied by an R.V. or small clusters of tents with their own fires. There was no organization, no defensive perimeter, no passive perimeter, no one on watch...no security at all. Daryl didn't like it, but at least the people didn't pose a threat. They all paused what they were doing and moved towards the car as he pulled in. There were probably a little better than twenty people present, an equal number of incapable looking men and women, three or so bratty looking teenage boys and two girls, and some smaller children, all just waiting around to be a walker buffet. At least he didn't immediately have a bad feeling in his gut. If he had, he would have turned around and driven off...so he decided it was safe to get out of the car, and Beth followed. He had his crossbow in hand and Beth still palmed one of their pistols; the people stopped at a respectable distance.

Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum who they'd met earlier parted the crowd, apparently eager to introduce them.

"Everybody, this is the man who brought down our deer so we can thank him for dinner," the fat one announced, looking at him, waiting for something. Daryl supposed they wanted to know his name.

"I'm Daryl. This is Beth," he offered gruffly.

Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum turned out to be Kent and Justin who then felt the need to introduce every other member of their group. Like he really wanted to remember their names. Just more dead meat. Daryl observed the group dynamic and watched two of the teenage boys push to the front of the crowd closer to Beth. Nope...this wasn't gonna happen! One of the boys looked at her a little too long for his liking...actually a lot too long...and flashed her a cocky half-smile. Beth was uncomfortable, and Daryl was resolved to curb this boy's death wish before he had a chance to grant it.

"Hey you, Short Stack!" Daryl directed towards the boy who immediately recognized Daryl meant him and averted his stare from Beth. "What's his name-the little punk ass with the brown hair?" Daryl demanded of their hosts.

"Um...that's Tyler...he didn't mean anything..."

"Hey, Tyler!" The boy wasn't even man enough to look him in the face. "You better keep your eyes to yourself if you wanna keep your eyes!" Daryl spat. "Otherwise take a good long look 'cause she's gonna be the last thing you see."

"Whoa, it's okay...no harm done..." Beer-gut Kent laid a hand on his shoulder, and Daryl was about to snap.

"Get your fucking hand off me if you don't wanna lose it..." Daryl jerked away growling. Body parts were gonna start getting hacked off...nobody had a right to put their hands on him.

Except her...Daryl felt Beth's tiny fingers gripping his upper arm, attempting to calm him, but she didn't say anything to diminish his control of the situation.
"Let's just set this straight...you invited us here, not the other way 'round. It seems to me that we paid our rent for the night with that buck. But let's be clear, what's mine is mine. You don't need to touch what's mine; you don't even need to be lookin' at what's mine. Got it?" If Daryl needed to lay down the law, he would.

There seemed to be a silent consensus among the group. Well, at least nobody vocally disagreed.

"Good...good..." Beer-gut Kent seemed happy the situation was diffused. "We have an empty R.V. where you can stay. It used to be our leader's, and we've kinda been leaving it vacant until we can make a decision about who’s going to take his place, so you can set up in there." He gestured to a vehicle close to the other exit point of the campground. At least it was strategically placed.

"Fine...come on Beth, get in the car." Daryl wanted to get out of the center of attention as soon as possible.

And at this point, he just needed a bed to fall into.

"...About the deer..." Geek Justin hesitated, asking him something he didn’t understand before he and Beth could retreat to some privacy.

"What about it?" Daryl really had not patience left.

Geek Justin pointed to the center of the picnic area where the deer was laying.

"What the Hell...I told you to gut and skin that thing out on the road!" He was furious. These people were literally too stupid to live. No wonder their leader left ‘em or was dead. There was one thing for certain; Daryl didn’t plan to stay for long.

"We didn’t...we don't really know how...we were hoping you could help us," Beer-gut Kent stammered.

"Whatever the fuck-get me some buckets for the guts, and get those punk ass kids and your men by the deer. You're gonna learn."

* * * * *

Daryl cleared the R.V. before he even let her in to see what they had to work with.

"I gotta go handle the deer..." Daryl told her, offering her a hand up into their temporary home. "Bring the guns and ammo in, maybe a little of the food, but the other supplies, lock 'em in the car and keep it locked."

"Okay...what do you want me to do then?" Beth was sure she could make herself useful in some way...these people seemed pretty lost.

"Stay here. I'll come back as soon as I'm done." He was pretty concrete about her staying put. "Beth, we don't know these people, and were not gonna get to know 'em. Be ready to move if I say." He passed her the car keys then brought his fingers to gently trace the edge of her face.

Beth leaned into his hand. The comforting gesture from such a strong force was everything she needed...reassurance that somehow everything would turn out alright.
"I'll be back soon..." Daryl reached and pulled the knife from the sheath on her belt and offered her his in return. "I can skin faster with yours...maybe not as clean, but faster."

She took the knife, and Daryl smiled briefly before he left to his task.

Beth brought in a bit from the car, the weapons and ammo, some clothes to sleep in, a little food for the morning, but she didn't linger long outside, not wanting to draw any unwanted conversation. Daryl said they weren't going to give away too many personal details, but he hadn't exactly hammered out what they were and weren't going to say. And if the plan was that they weren't going to stay long, she didn't want to get friendly with anybody. She agreed with Daryl, there was no reason to risk their lives and stay with these people; they weren't their family.

After bringing in their belongings, Beth watched at the window as Daryl began his tutorial on deer gutting and skinning. He had no patience with incompetence, and he really didn't play well with others, least of all, useless strangers. She could hear Daryl barking at the group that had gathered to learn...watch...and couldn't help smiling to herself at his fierceness. Beth probably wouldn't be smiling if she was on the receiving end though...she'd been in that position when Daryl gave her her first crossbow lesson at the moonshine shack. She'd initially been scared when he snapped...dragged her out of the house...but that was their breakthrough, his breakdown...their real turning point. And she knew deep down, even in that moment, that Daryl would never hurt her.

Beth had jobs to do other than staring out the window at Daryl...her...what was he? Did Daryl have a label? What was she to Daryl? Did relationships even have labels anymore? Well...there was no time to think on it now. She left her thoughts behind and went about planning all the alternate escape routes. All the windows were functional, and they could probably make it through the skylight if things got really bad. Once the safety issue was marked off her list, Beth went to the bedroom to check out the sleeping situation. It looked pleasant enough, and she was lucky to find a fresh set of linens in the cabinet above the bed...small miracles...right? Clean sheets were a luxury they absolutely deserved. Wherever the group's leader had disappeared to, Beth was thankful he had cleanliness standards, standards she couldn't even say that she clung to anymore. After stripping the sheets off, Beth went to flip the mattress...

What is that?

Beth pushed the mattress off the platform revealing a hidden door. A makeshift hiding place? A hidden escape hatch? It would make sense given the situation. But the reality was even better...

Good God!

She let the door shut and latched it, struggling to pull the mattress back in place and making up the bed calmly as not to draw any attention from the outside. She would need to confer with Daryl on this find.

Beth watched out the window again to find Daryl at the water pump washing the blood from his hands and arms then running some water through his hair. He returned to her with a bucket full.

"Here, Lil' Bit. It's cold, but I haven't had a chance to start a fire. Thought you might wanna clean up better than we did at the stream."

For that she was grateful. But she wanted to share what she found with Daryl before anything.

"Fuck me!" Daryl spat, looking out the window before she could interject.

"What...what's wrong?" Daryl didn't usually cuss that much in front of her.
Beth moved to his side at the window and saw what caused his outburst. The group of men and boys Daryl left with the deer were using an axe to cut it apart.

"I asked them if they thought they could handle cuttin' up the meat and there they are literally hackin' it to pieces..." Daryl just shook his head and turned away.

"How have they survived this long?" Beth wondered out loud, unable to turn away from the bloody massacre of the deer carcass when once in her life she would've never been able to bear such a sight.

"Guess their leaders did all the heaving lifting. Don't see them 'round anymore...either dead or struck out on their own. I sure don't blame 'em if they left." Daryl was disgusted. "Here's your knife back," he traded her again. "Did you find anything good?"

"Mmm-hmm...well, I guess that depends on how you look at it..." Beth led Daryl into the bedroom where she had drawn all the curtains for privacy.

"Holy Shit..." Daryl cursed under his breath, realizing they were sitting on a gold mine.

"It's a pretty big gun collection," Beth responded. It really could mean the difference between life and death.

"It ain't a collection; it's a guns and ammo cache..." Daryl went in for closer inspection.

"But Daryl, they're not ours." Beth wasn't really trying to be convincing in her assessment. She really wanted Daryl to assure her of the exact opposite. In this case, her need for their own survival overrode any thought of sharing her find with this group.

"Ain't theirs neither. All this stuff belonged to their leader, and they don't even seem to know what's here." Daryl gave her exactly what she was looking for. Was she becoming too cold and uncaring?

"And I doubt any one of these idiots has ever shot a gun before anyway..."

Chapter End Notes

~Author's Note: It looks like we will get to see Daryl and Beth interacting with a new group...and they've been out of the group dynamic for a bit which I think is complicated especially for Daryl being outside of his comfort zone. There is probably some fluff coming too! Thank you for reading!~
Beth opened her eyes slowly. It had been a grey day, and now the setting sun offered a muted sky peeking through the curtains over the R.V. windows. She had that strange feeling as she woke...the feeling she always got when she woke up somewhere new, she didn't know where she was, and her stomach sank. It hadn't happened to her in a long time; maybe it was different here because she could hear people moving around outside...and they hadn't been around other people since the prison.

Daryl was sleeping soundly. His exhaustion had gotten the better of him. Maybe her too because Beth couldn't remember falling asleep...even falling in bed. His arm was slung over her side, and his hand still grasped his crossbow which was laying in front of her on the bed. They must have been dead on their feet. She studied the bow closely in the fading light, reaching out to touch it. Beth felt strangely comforted by the fact that it was probably always going to be the three of them in their relationship. She smiled and closed her eyes again until it was really time to wake up. The funny thing was, she always got in trouble for not wanting to nap when she was little...one of the only things she ever did wrong when she was growing up. Now, as she drifted back to sleep...she couldn't imagine a better way to spend her afternoon...with him...

*                      *                      *                      *                      *

What he was feeling...uncomfortable was an understatement. They'd put him and Beth front and center in two camp chairs in the communal picnic area where the rest of the group was sitting at picnic tables or in their own chairs just gawking at them. Daryl was uneasy enough that his hand was resting on his crossbow leaning up against his chair. It wasn't bad enough that they had some post-apocalyptic peace cult worshiping them over a deer, they were out in the open with no one on watch with far too many fires, too many lanterns, and too much noise. There were two positives though. One, at least if a herd came crashing through, there were plenty of weak targets to choose from. He should feel shitty for thinkin' that, but if these people hadn't learned nothin' about survival in the past two years, they deserved what was coming to them. Second, the cookin' deer smelled like heaven, even if it was hacked to pieces, and it reminded him of happier times at the prison. He'd actually been okay with most of the people there being familiar with him, but those were just days gone by...another world that no longer existed. Daryl glanced over at Beth. She looked almost as uncomfortable as he felt, and she was normally good in social situations.

Someone whose name he'd heard and forgotten approached and offered him a brown glass bottle of beer.
"They're not cold, but they're some of our last. We thought you two might like one." The offer was sincere enough, but considering their safety situation, totally misguided.

"Nah, we ain't drinkin', thanks. Probably not a good idea for anybody seeing how out in the open we are."

They seemed a bit surprised collectively by his statement. They didn't actually think they were safe here, did they?

"So, where are you folks from?" Beer-gut Kent hesitantly questioned. Daryl realized they were entering the interview portion of the night's program.

"We're from a rural area, pretty far from any major town, 'bout an hour and a half from Atlanta."

Daryl decided to use the general details of Hershel's farm for his answers.

"Was that where you were when the shit hit the fan?" A different one questioned. "What happened?"

"Yeah. We were set up pretty good, nothing from the outside bothered us 'til a herd came through." Daryl wasn't comfortable embellishing, but he didn't feel good about saying what they actually went through. For some reason, his gut just told him no. But this crowd was hungry for details. Luckily, Beth took point.

"When the herd came through, Daryl lost his brother. He went down fighting. I lost everyone except Daryl. My Daddy knew Daryl would take care of me. We were all fighting, we got separated, and saw everyone else get overrun, but we couldn't do anything to help them. We ran...after..." Beth said it so sweetly that no one would ever question the sincerity of their story.

"So, you've been on your own since the beginning?" The question was asked as if the very thought was impossible.

"We've done just fine on our own..." Daryl could feel himself getting defensive. Alone hadn't been ideal for him for a long time...but he wasn't alone. The two of them could make it together...didn't need no one else.

"Come on people, let's cut out the twenty questions. He's probably tired and hungry," Geek Justin intoned, coming forward followed by a woman with a plate of sizzling venison. "You brought the deer down, you eat first." He gestured the woman forward, and she handed the heaping plate to Daryl.

Daryl took the plate he was offered and immediately passed it to Beth, feeling rage gripping his chest.

"What the hell's wrong with you people? Feed your women and children first." Didn't they have any common decency?

They were fortunate after that. As the food was being passed out and hungry people were eating, the attention was shifted from him and Beth. She scooted her chair closer and shared her meat with him...there was plenty of it, more than the hunter's portion, and he waved off a plate that was being brought to him. The less interaction, the better. Just as everyone finished eating and it seemed like the interview was about to resume, the rains came, and everyone retreated to their respective dwellings. He'd dodged a bullet there.
"Do you want to talk about it?" Beth asked as she slid under the covers and Daryl checked for the third time to make sure the door was locked. She didn't know why he was so angry.

"Nope." He threw himself onto the bed, sighed, then apparently decided he did have something to say. "My old man, he always got to eat first, even when there wasn't enough. I don't have a problem with a woman fixing her man's plate first when there's plenty of food to go around, but when you have hungry women and children who haven't had anything to eat, it just ain't right."

He was seething beside her in the bed. She couldn't offer any sort of comfort or reply. She'd never been in a situation like that, so anything she said would be insufficient; Daryl probably knew that. The rain was really starting to come down now...it almost sounded like hail on the R.V. roof for a few moments. She was grateful they'd found somewhere inside to stay for the night.

"Beth...could you sing somethin' for me?" She could still hear the anger in him, but he was clearly trying to keep his tone calm and quiet, if only for her.

"Are you sure...I thought you were tired?" Beth questioned self-consciously. She didn't want to be an annoyance.

"I'm just overtired now. Ain't goin' to sleep anytime soon." The edge really starting to fade in his voice. "You don't have to if you don't wanna..." he trailed off, going self-conscious too.

But she did have to...and she wanted to now. Daryl had never asked her to sing before. He'd yelled at her about her singing in a moment of pain and loss, told her to keep singing when he'd come into a room and she'd stopped so she wouldn't irritate him, but he'd never asked before. She tried to think of something appropriate...a song to calm the raging beast beside her...

"And rain falls angry on the tin roof as we lie awake in my bed. And you're my survival, you're my livin' proof that love is alive and not dead..." the melody floated around them softly. "And tell me that we belong together, and dress it up with the trappings of love. I'll be captivated, I'll hang from your lips instead of the gallows of heartache that hangs from above. And I'll be your cryin' shoulder, I'll be love's suicide. And I'll be better..."

"Whoa, wait...what does that even mean?" Daryl interrupted. She hadn't even realized that he was actually listening to the lyrics. "What in the hell is 'love's suicide'?"

Why was he so sensitive tonight?

"I don't know, Daryl. It's just a song...a really pretty one if you would just lay there and enjoy it."

"I don't like it. Next." At least Daryl seemed like he was getting a little bit of a better mood.

"Gosh Daryl, I'm not an iPod. You don't just get click the skip button on me." Beth pretended to protest.

"Never had an iPod, so don't go referencing somethin' I don't know." She looked over and could see a slight smirk on his face. "Next."

Trying to think of a song Daryl might actually know and like...maybe this one...

"Send away for a priceless gift, one not subtle, one not on the list. Send away for a perfect world, one not simply so absurd. In these times of doing what you're told, keep those feelings no one knows. Whatever happened to a young man's heart..."
"Okay...now I know that one, and it ain't no better," Daryl stopped her again. "*Staring Down the Barrel of a .45* ain't exactly a happy song."

"You didn't ask for a happy song," Beth retorted before getting back into the music. At least she knew something he knew.

"...swallowed by pain as he slowly fell apart. And I'm staring down the barrel of a .45. Swimming through the ashes of another life. No real reason to accept the way things have changed. Staring down the barrel of a..."

Daryl apparently resolved himself to listen quietly, but there was a sharp rap on the door that broke her off this time.

"What now...?" His question was for no one in particular, both of them sitting up, Beth just a little startled.

There was another insistent knock as Daryl grabbed the lantern on his side of the bed.

"Coming...Jeez...lay off..." Daryl yelled to the visitor as he threw his crossbow over his shoulder. "You stay here," he instructed softly.

Beth could see Daryl at the door, having sat the lantern down nearby, but she couldn't see who was outside waiting.

"What do you want?" Gruff...there was nothing welcoming in him after he opened the door.

Beth heard quickly enough that it was a woman.

"Hi, I'm Jenny...do you mind if I come in? It's raining pretty hard out here..."

Beth crawled to sit at the end of the bed so she could hear better over the rain. She really hoped that what she thought was going on wasn't...
"What do you want?" Each word sharply pronounced, Daryl had no patience for whatever bullshit this was.

"Hi, I'm Jenny...do you mind if I come in? It's raining pretty hard out here..."

"You're under the awning, not in the rain. What do you want?" Didn't like having to ask twice.

"Well, we wanted to let Beth...right?...know that some of the older kids are playing games in their R.V. They're probably a little younger than her, but we thought she might like to join them. Then maybe I could keep you company and welcome you to the group..." the woman trailed off, but her smile made him uncomfortable and wary.

He had to process it in pieces...Oh...

"Yeah...none of that's gonna happen." Daryl tried to keep his cool as much as possible. He didn't want to alarm Beth. "Beth and I are goin' to bed if you wanna go ahead and pass around that we don't wanna be bothered." His disgust at the situation really started to set in; he wasn't tryin' to be nice anymore, even if it meant Beth heard.

From the corner of his eye, he could see that Beth was standing in the little doorway of the bedroom lookin' like she was ready to come and join the conversation. Daryl pointed sharply for her to get back in bed. She didn't need to be party to this indecent proposal.

"Oh..." the woman expelled as if she'd just come to an epiphany. "She's your..."

"Yeah." Daryl confirmed definitively before she could put a label on it because whatever she said would basically be coming to the right conclusion in his eyes. "She's mine."

"I'm sorry...I didn't realize..." This was where she needed to turn around and walk back into the rain where she came from, but she didn't. "Maybe I could join both of you..." And she didn't even have the fucking decency to sound ashamed of her offer.

"Get the fuck outta here!" Daryl spat. "And whoever sent you...no, how 'bout you just tell everyone to leave us the fuck alone! We'll be outta here first thing tomorrow morning!" Daryl went to slam the door, but the woman grabbed at it frantically.

"No, please, you can't go...you have to help us. We need you to stay and help make us safe!" She pleaded.

Daryl jerked the door shut and locked it tight.

Calm down...you don't need to go to bed angry...you don't need to go to her like this...she doesn't deserve it.

He took a deep breath and released before rejoining Beth.

"Did you want me to leave so you could...?"
Daryl froze, gritted his teeth, and held back the curse that was itching to come outta his mouth. He closed his eyes until he could cool down.

"Beth, I ain't gonna play this game with you...not tonight!" Why did she have to act all stupid and insecure at a time like this? Especially now, after everything...she knew they were together, what he felt, and together meant together in his book. "I thought we had an understanding...all this stuff worked out?" Forcing his voice softer for her.

Daryl placed himself at the end of the bed, very close to where Beth sat so he could look down on her and maybe bore some sense into her hard head.

"...if it was just...sex...and you needed to..." She got all uncomfortable and didn't finish her thought; he was a little uncomfortable too.

"Dammit, Beth, that ain't how I work..." Daryl was a bit exasperated. It had been a long day, and none of this was helping.

"Well...if..."

He cut her off before she had a chance to get more stupid on him. It wasn't doing either of them any good. But if she needed to get all this insecurity and nonsense outta her system, he would put her on the spot. Maybe he needed her to be a bit uncomfortable.

"Is that what you really think?" Once again, she needed to work this out on her own. "You think it's okay for me to go fuck someone? You'd be totally okay with that?"

"...no...but if you want to..." Beth shied away from the question...Daryl didn’t know if she shied from his harsh words or the content, but it worked. Nailed it!

"Okay. Let's set this straight so we don't have to rehash this later. First, I don't want to. Second, it just ain't about what I want or you want anymore. There's two of us to consider now. You understand me?" Well, it sounded like he was becoming the redneck Dr. Phil.

"Yes." Beth seemed relieved despite her original offer.

"And just so you know, I don't pay for sex, never have, never will." Daryl felt the need to defend his honor...what little honor he had.

"She didn't ask you for money," Beth pointed out so naively.

"Yeah, but she wanted something from me all the same. And there ain't no difference between sex for favors and whoring yourself in my book."

Daryl stood, taking his crossbow to the side of the bed so it would be in reach and sat down with his back to Beth. She really lacked a real world education, and he wasn't sure he was the right one to give it to her.

"They just want your help..."

"We're leavin' tomorrow, Beth. I can't..." he was just too exhausted.

He heard her move back in the bed...saw her sitting up against the wall when he looked over his shoulder at her.
"Come here, Daryl," she gestured, and he laid back, hesitant...resting his head in her lap.

Beth tenderly stroked his hair as he looked up at her. Her eyes possessed a serene quality now, and he saw no judgment in those soft blues. Finding comfort in a woman, in her touch, was still so new to him.

"Lil' Bit, I'm just so tired. I can't be Moses leadin' these people to the Promised Land when all there is me to do their fightin' for 'em..." He closed his eyes, waiting for her to argue with him, to try to convince him.

"I know. No one can bear the weight of the world alone." He could still feel her gentle fingers running through his hair as her melodic voice reached into his soul.

But Daryl wasn’t alone anymore...

The rain was soothing...her touch was soothing...her words were soothing, and he felt safe to be this way around her...vulnerable.

"Beth...why did you say what you did tonight about Merle?" Beth hadn't known Merle very long, and what she knew of him was horrible. Hell, Merle was pretty horrible to begin with.

"It was the truth...everything I said was a version of our truth...our story...and Merle did die trying to save us..." Beth paused briefly, Daryl looking up at her lovely face, hanging on her every word. "And even if he hadn't tried...even if he was only your brother...you loved him...despite everything, and that would have been enough."

Daryl couldn't say anything in that moment...but the fact that Beth accepted his love for Merle...his brother...she got it. And everything she said tonight was a version of the truth? She said Hershel knew if something bad happened that he would take care of Beth. He’d been tight with Hershel, respected him, and it seemed like Hershel respected him too...understood what made him tick...but Hershel trusting his daughter with him...Beth had to have embellished that one a bit. Moving on...there were things she deserved to hear.

"Beth...about the 'just sex' thing..." Was he really ready to go there?

"Yeah..." Hesitantly looking down at him.

"Well...I've never had any real solid relationships before...I already told you that...but I haven't been with anyone since before everything..." Probably too much information, but if they were headed down this road together, he wanted her to know.

"Really?" Beth seemed so surprised. And it sounded like a pleasant surprise. Why would she be shocked? He was so socially awkward and had absolutely no game whatsoever...not that he ever tried. Who did she think he’d been screwing?

"Yeah...so about the needing 'just sex' thing...I don't think that's gonna to be a problem for me..."

* * * * *

Daryl didn't like waking up with Beth gone. He'd heard the trailer door shut behind her as she left, jumping outta bed to see what was going on...watched her through the window as she went for
water, sunlight in her hair. The storm from the night before had passed, and the camp outside was coming alive as people began their day doing whatever it was that incompetents did when they had much more urgent things they needed to be doing...hunting, standing watch, securing their perimeter, going on runs for supplies, and the list went on and on. Maybe they could stay one more day. If he was still mentally and physically exhausted, Beth had to be the same, and a bed for another night didn't sound bad at all. These people were annoying, useless, stupid, and apparently indecent, but they weren't dangerous. If they stayed, he wouldn't be able to save them all, but maybe he could help some of them save themselves. One more day, he told himself. Not for the sake of these people, but for his sake...and especially Beth's.

"Shit...what is this?" A little punk ass kid approaching Beth...one he didn't recognize from the little meet and greet the day before. Kids here had a solid death wish. At this point, he hoped he was overreacting.

Daryl pulled on his boots and headed outside in his wife-beater and very manly plaid pants. These people apparently had a real issue with boundaries, an issue that wasn't gonna stand. He felt like a damned animal having to mark his territory.

"...here...let me...I can carry it for you..." This one didn't see or hear Daryl coming for him.

The boy grabbed the bucket by the handle, trying to take it from Beth, but she held on.

"No...I'm fine, really...thank you." Beth was very insistent about not letting go, and she raised her eyes, catching Daryl's, as he stop close behind the boy unnoticed.

"There a problem here?" Daryl questioned without raising his voice, but he spooked the boy all the same.

The little punk let go of the bucket, splashing water back on Beth. Daryl glared as he felt the anger welling up inside. It was just a splash of water, but it was splashed on Beth...no one had any right to do anything to her! God, he was getting territorial...

"I asked if there was a problem here?" More assertive...more aggressive, Daryl demanding to be answered.

"I...I was just trying to help her with the water..." the boy was trying his best to stand his ground.

"You know what no means, or are you a dumbshit?"

"Yeah..."

"I'm pretty sure she told you no." The boy looked like he had something else to say, but Daryl turned his attention to Beth. "That our water?" He questioned gently.

She nodded.

"Give it here, and go on back," he instructed as Beth set the bucket in front of him and headed off.

"I was just tryin' to be nice...ever heard of chivalry? I guess not...must be dead in your book," the little bastard smarted off as Daryl turned his attentions back.

"Were you here yesterday when your two friends introduced me and Beth?" Daryl's voice was relatively calm. It was a struggle.

"Yeah."
"Do you remember what I said about what's mine is mine, and y'all don't need to be touching or even lookin' at what's mine? Well that goes for her too...especially for her."

"She's a person. You can't own her!" The boy decided to put up a little challenge.

"You're right, I can't own her. But she's mine all the same," Daryl let his voice drop low...low and lethal.

Taking a step forward into the boy's space, their faces only a few inches apart, the boy was the one who looked away and immediately stepped back into submission. There would be no more misunderstandings here, Daryl knew as he grabbed Beth's bucket of water and turned away.

Chapter End Notes

~Author's Note: Just a bit of a disclaimer here...I know the overall picture of the last chapter and this chapter are really predictable, but I felt that it was necessary in my story line to explore Daryl and Beth's reactions to other people that they don't know as well as how they respond to each other and their actions in an unknown group dynamic. I think it is especially important for Daryl's character since everything is so new for him. Being with new people. Being with Beth. Being together and not just himself. For Beth too, she is in new territory, no longer in the protective embrace of the prison where she knew everyone and still maybe feeling just a little unsure about exactly what her relationship is with Daryl. In trying to act "mature" about their relationship, she is being naive, immature, frustrating to Daryl, but she will have her moment in the sun soon, I promise. And I really love a possessive and protective Daryl, not to the point of where he is domineering or subjugating Beth, but protective and possessive because it is his instinctual nature to be that way with her...because he values her and doesn't want to lose her.~
"Everything okay?" Beth inquired as Daryl stepped into the R.V. where she waited.

"Yup." He wasn't divulging much, but she had a pretty good idea about what went down out there. And Beth couldn't say that she didn't like the idea of Daryl being possessive of her.

"Is it okay if we have breakfast before we leave?"

"We're gonna stay today...maybe we can help 'em out a little...have a bed and a roof for another night..." Daryl sounded unsure as to whether or not he could help these people, but she wasn't going to argue about staying in one place for a little while longer.

* * * * *

"Beth...will you hand me my shirt?"

She had been organizing some of their stuff on the bed and hadn't even realized Daryl was getting dressed a few feet away from her. There was the immediate impulse to ask him if he wanted her to leave, but he wasn't being self-conscious; it didn’t even seem like it crossed his mind. Instead she grabbed his shirt and took it to him. Shrugging it on, he watched her as she stood close. When Daryl reached for the buttons, Beth took his place starting from the top.

"You don't gotta...I can button my own shirt." It came out awkward and a bit defensive. He was awkward now?

Beth let go, taking a step back, fearing she had crossed a line.

"I didn't say to stop...you can go ahead if you wanna..."

Gosh, Daryl, make up your mind...

And men said women were confusing. She went back to buttoning.

"So, I guess I'm gonna try to see what these people are made of today. Can you help me out?" Daryl never wanted to be a leader; she could hear it in his voice even now just talking about it. The problem was, he was good at it.

"If I can...I don't know how much help I'll be..." Beth finished the buttons and let one of her hands fall to rest on his side, just above his hip.

She was experimenting with casual affection with Daryl, seeing how it all worked out. At least he didn't shy away, say anything about being too close, or step back to change their proximity.

"You're a survivor Beth...you can teach 'em plenty. They need to be survivors, not dependents." Daryl brushed her cheek with calloused fingers before grabbing his crossbow from the bed and throwing it over his shoulder.

She was so surprised when his hand caught her behind the neck, and he kissed her after. It was quick, just lips, and oh so awkward, like Daryl shocked himself by actually doing it and had
absolutely no idea how it should go. He turned away quickly, not even looking at her.

"Come on, Lil' Bit. Let's get to work..." Daryl's gruff voice came out.

Beth touched her lips briefly. This was the first time he'd kissed her that hadn't followed a moment when they almost died, an emotionally charged separation, or when Daryl had kissed her in his sleep. She smiled to herself...he was no good at this normal affection either.

*                      *                      *                      *                      *

“I want everyone in the common area in five.” Luckily Daryl only had to tell one person, and a crowd started to form in the grassy center circle around the picnic tables. "You with me, Beth?” He confirmed as he watched the people gather.

"Yeah.” Beth answered as if there was no doubt in her mind concerning his leadership abilities.

He sure in the hell wished that someone in his previous life would've told him he would be forced to lead when the world fell to pieces. Followin’ Merle around hadn't prepared him, and he didn't know why everybody wanted to look to him when a damn decision needed to be made. Sure, he could make quick choices when the shit hit the fan; that was just instinct, but leading...he wasn't so sure.

Once it looked like everyone was gathered, he threw a glance over his shoulder to make sure Beth was in tow, and went to face the group. Climbing up on top of one of the picnic tables to make sure everyone could see him and he could see them, Daryl wasn't planning on repeating nothing.

"Alright,” as soon as he spoke, everyone shut their mouths...a good trait for learnin’. "Let's start with somethin' easy. Anyone got any useful skills or training to help defend your camp".

If there were crickets out, you could've heard ‘em chirping.

"Anybody a cop, or military, a fireman..." still nothing. "Any prison guards...convicts...anybody who just liked to fight before?” Shit...no one? "Anybody who handled a gun before the shit hit the fan?"

Three men raised their hands.

What the fuck? This was Georgia, not New York City. People in the South loved guns. How'd he end up with this sorry ass group?

"How many of you have handled guns since?"

Seven raised their hands, an eighth undecided with a half raised hand that was ultimately retracted. What that meant, he had no fucking clue. It didn't matter though; what he did understand now was why their leaders kept the gun cache hidden from them. Less than one-third of the people present had ever handled a gun. Daryl readjusted his bow over his shoulder and let out a deep breath to calm himself. This wasn't shaping up too good.

"Okay...start givin' me your walker count." Daryl started pointing at random people with no responses offered. Did they just not understand what he wanted, or had they really never killed any walkers?!

Then, one of the men raised his hand like they were in a damned kindergarten class. Daryl pointed at
him, giving him permission to speak.

"Hi, I'm Greg..." he sounded all happy and full of himself, and Daryl really needed him to take it down a couple notches.

"I don't care...this ain't no AA meetin'. Tell me your kills." Daryl spat.

"I've got the most kills here. I've taken out fifteen." He said still smilin' like a brainless jack 'o lantern.

"In the last month?" Daryl was being optimistic...hoping...praying for the best.

"Since the beginning..." The man's grin disappeared immediately.

_Double Fuck Me_...

"How many of you here have never taken out a walker?"

More than half the group raised their hands, but what else was he expecting?

"How many have you killed?" Some very brave or very stupid soul shouted out a challenge, and Daryl stiffened.

"Daryl," he heard Beth intone softly from below him where she sat on the picnic table bench. She didn't have to say it, but she meant _calm the fuck down_, or in Beth talk, _control your temper_.

He took a deep breath.

"More than fifteen..." He managed brusquely.

"Since the beginning?" This time it wasn't a challenge, just a follow-up question to clarify that he meant he'd killed more than fifteen walkers since it all began.

But that couldn't be right...they couldn't be serious. How could he have only killed fifteen walkers since the beginning and still be alive? If Shane where here, he would've called 'em all on livin' in _fantasyland_.

"In the last thirty-six hours..." he'd pulled it together again, "and Beth here pretty much matched me kill for kill." _Credit where credit's due._

The group was quiet for a few moments, mulling over what he'd just shared.

"And since the beginning. How many have you killed since the beginning?" This time it was a woman questioning.

"I...I don't know...I couldn't even start to count..." Daryl reached up and rubbed his eyes as images of walkers and the people he'd lost...the people he'd failed...invaded his mind.

He might not know how many walkers he'd taken out, but he knew it hadn't been enough...not enough to matter...not enough to save them...not enough...He felt Beth when she reached out and touched his lower leg, reassuring him...but he knew he could've done more.

"So what have y'all be doin' to survive if you haven't been fighting?" It seemed like a fair question.

"Well, we had leaders and fighters, but they're gone now..." Beer-gut Kent offered after a few moments of awkward silence.
"So what does that make you all, eaters and whiners? If you want to live, everyone has to fight!" Daryl asserted. It might be hard for them to swallow, but it was the truth of their world.

"What about the women and the children?" Someone asked.

"You think they should be exempt from fighting? Believe me, that won't make them exempt from dying. Just make them easier targets." They knew that already, didn't they? There was no way they couldn't understand that...

People started whispering quietly to each other. This wasn't gonna work. He should just grab Beth and the guns and get the hell outta Dodge before things went south. He was about to step down off the table and head out when something made him try again.

"Hey, listen up!" Everybody did. "We all come from a world where we had the right to live. We had rules to protect us and people to enforce those rules. Well, guess what...shit happens, and those rules don't apply anymore!" This was all he had to give, and if they didn't want it...fuck 'em. Daryl paced the top of the picnic table from end to end. He was so wound he couldn't stand still. "Those walkers out there don't care about your right to live, and they sure in the hell don't play by the rules. The only way you get to live is if you're willing to fight for your life and the people you love. Since you ain't willing to fight, you might as well lay down and wait to die or eat a bullet if you got one. I can't help you!" Daryl turned to step down.

"Wait...we could try to learn..." someone called out, and there were murmurs of agreement.

Daryl was ambivalent toward their decision, but at least they'd decided on something.

"Okay, any man over the age of fourteen, I want you to go and get everything you think can be used as a weapon and be back here with me in ten," Daryl delegated. "Women and children with Beth for your assignments." He looked back at Beth who nodded her head as she stood and the women moved towards her.

"I thought you said the women had to fight too?" A random man challenged.

"Division of labor," Daryl stated matter 'o fact. "And let's get some sort of survival skills under your belts before you get shown up in front of your women. But if any of you men would rather join the ladies, go ahead...you're more than welcome..." he offered disdainfully. No one moved. At least they still had some pride.

*                      *                      *                      *                      *

It was strange working in a group setting again. Beth knew they hadn't been separated from their family and friends very long, but there was a difference...now that it had been just the two of them. Maybe it was the group they were with now...or maybe it was because they just weren't two people living in a tight knit community, but they meant something more to each other. Maybe she just needed to stop over-analyzing and get to work.

Beth was trying to get the women and kids to focus on making a crude perimeter alarm out of the scrap they gathered, but most of them were too busy chatting like they were at the ladies' church sewing circle. She took a breath before she tried to rally the troops to get back on track and looked across the camp to see Daryl illustrating effective blows with a shovel. He wasn't good with people, so if he could soldier through it, so could she.
"Maybe he'll take his shirt off..."

That voice snapped Beth right back into reality...the woman's voice from outside the trailer last night. Hadn't Daryl made it abundantly clear that he wasn’t interested? Jenny...

"He puts our men to shame in every way possible I bet..." She continued, Beth actually seeing her...not just hearing her voice. She was pretty. That made it worse.

*I'm right here!* Beth wanted to scream, but then she would just seem like some self-conscious, possessive girlfriend. And Beth needed to appear strong.

"So, how does he measure up?" It was a different woman now, and Beth suddenly realized that the question was being directed to her.

"What?" She hadn't really comprehended what was asked.

"How does he measure up?" Beth was taken aback. She didn't know these people. They weren't her friends. But they were asking her intimate questions that she had no idea how to answer.

Beth blushed and made herself angry by doing so, but she couldn't let her anger show.

"Guys, leave her alone. Look at how sweet she is. She probably doesn't have anything to compare him to," an older woman spoke up. She seemed to have good intentions, but Beth felt ashamed.

Ashamed? Why should she be ashamed? She had nothing to be ashamed of. These people should though. They had real boundary issues, sending a woman to her door last night, with her there, to try to coerce Daryl into staying! Beth should be furious...she was getting there. Daryl had laid claim to her, she should do the same; but he was a man, maybe she didn't have the right.

"I'm sorry, you caught me off guard. Where I come from, questions like that aren't common conversation." Beth kept her tone calm and sweet...even if it was artificial sweetness. "We're much more traditional," she ended, meaning to throw a barb that could never be labeled as such by the way she delivered it.

"I imagine traditional. So young and pretty...been taken care of your entire life to keep it that way." Beth really didn't know if the older woman meant that as an insult or not, but it hit her the wrong way.

But if she snapped, these people would have gotten the better of her. Beth smiled sweetly and internalized the anger.

"I am lucky to have had people who cared about me and protected me when I couldn't protect myself...especially Daryl." That was probably as close as she could get to saying *he's mine* without coming across as hyper possessive.

"How old were you when you met Daryl?" Jenny...Beth couldn't get that voice out of her mind because of the night before...and Daryl's name on her lips...

"Old enough," Beth replied sharply.

"And how old is Daryl?" She put extra emphasis on his name. She was just saying it now because she saw it affected Beth...pissed her off.

"Just right!" Beth came up with the most adorable response she could manage, forcing an innocent smile to her face.
It was received as sincere enough because the other women laughed, and Jenny closed her mouth.

There was quiet for a few moments as everyone focused on their tasks, and Beth's thoughts began to wander. She and Daryl were sharing a life, a future, and she didn't even know how old he was. But the thing was, it really didn't matter. It hadn't even mattered before; it just caught her now because someone asked and she couldn't answer. Ages didn't matter anymore. They were just arbitrary numbers marked by an accumulation of days. What mattered was feeling, connection, and bond. Their world now didn't allow for the measure of time. The sad truth was there were very few categories that mattered anymore. You were either a child or an adult. More importantly, you were either alive or dead. If their world continued on its current trajectory, in a few years, no one would really know how old they were. Their sense of the passage of time had already started to come down to the most rudimentary measurement, the changing of seasons. Everyone would surely know what season they were born in, but with the pace their lives were moving at, days, seasons, and years seemed to melt into each other. It didn't matter. What mattered was that they not only survived, but that they lived. She intended to do just that, sharing in that journey with Daryl, wherever it may lead.

"Beth," Daryl called to her standing some twenty feet from where she was supervising.

She hadn't noticed him approaching, but she went to him quickly, not wanting him to get any closer than necessary to this clutch of harpies. When she reached him, Daryl stepped in, very close, whether to keep their conversation intimate or to assert something to the group, she didn't know, but either way, she was grateful for the gesture.

"You okay...everybody doing their job?" He questioned softly.

"Mmm-hmmm." Daryl was too good at reading her, so there was no use to try for an elaborate lie.

"What is it? What's wrong?"

Beth rolled her eyes and shook her head...childish, but this occasion called for it. He grinned just a little, grabbing the end of her ponytail, looking down at her hair in his hand. Casual again...he was getting better at it...or maybe he didn't even realize.

"It's just, these women, they aren't taking anything really seriously," Beth explained as he looked down at her. "It's like this is just one big camping trip for them, like a vacation..." It was hard for Beth to understand after everything they had been through, everything they had lost.

It was true that she'd let her guard down at the prison. Maybe she had been as stupid as these women, but at the prison, they'd had fences, strong walls, lots of weapons, people, and strong leaders. And if that wasn't enough to keep the horrors of the world at bay, these people should be terrified. In the long winter before their group found the prison, Beth had known fear, and she had been surrounded by people like Daryl, Rick, Glenn, T-Dog, Maggie, even Carl who was more lethal and fierce than any of these people times ten. And Daddy had been alive to protect her too. Again, they should be terrified...

"Yeah...it's the same with the men. Nothin' I do is gonna sink in or save 'em," Daryl confessed. At least she wasn't alone. "Truth is, we'll be movin' on soon, so it don't really matter."

It might be the wrong feeling, but Beth was relieved.

"I should get back..." Beth said reluctantly. "You know what they say about idle hands. I don't want to leave these women up to their own devices."

"That bad?"
Daryl could never even imagine. It didn't seem like his group was getting all chatty with him.

"Yeah...no...I've got it..." She didn't want it to seem like she couldn't handle the situation. "Just don't take your shirt off."

He cocked an eyebrow at her and furrowed his brow as she pulled her forgotten ponytail out of his hand and turned, heading back to the flock of women. Beth could feel Daryl watching her as she walked away. She looked over her shoulder, just to make sure, catching him in a moment that the Daryl she met back at her Daddy’s farm would have avoided, but now he didn't.

"You've got him caught, don't you sweetie?" The older woman asked as Beth returned to the group who had apparently carefully studied her interactions with Daryl, watching Daryl watch her walk away.

Her heart fluttered, and she couldn't help smiling in earnest...it was a very nice compliment.

"She's doing something right, paying for her protection if he's that satisfied. Maybe she's not so sweet after all!" Jenny...she really needed to shut her mouth for good... "Traditional my ass. He sure don't look traditional to me. And traditional from you wouldn't make him look at you like that."

Beth bit back anger, but then the anger melted away. Pity replaced it. Jenny was so wrong. She had absolutely no idea...

"I've never had to pay for protection. That's the same thing as being a whore.‘ It was harsh, but she felt it was necessary to mirror what Daryl told her on the subject. "And as far as you doubting what I say about Daryl being traditional, believe what you want but don't make the mistake of thinking you know him, that you know who he is, because I promise you, you will never have that privilege. I would suggest you try not to get on his bad side. He has a low tolerance and a short fuse. You might want to pass that around to the rest of your group to prevent any unpleasant situations as long as we are here." Beth was calm and collected as she looked around the group of women to make sure they had all comprehended, and they had.

She was going to flash a warm smile to soften the blow of her words, but there was no point. It was the truth, and this was real life. They needed to understand that. If hearing it from the sweet, innocent little farm girl wasn't jarring enough, they were lost.
"I thought maybe in the morning we'd go hunting and try to get these people some food before we head out," Daryl contemplated out loud as they stepped into the trailer and he pulled the door shut, locking it behind them. "They ran through that deer pretty quick...thought they would've rationed it better."

"We...hunting...?" Beth saw her skeptical question brought a slight grin to his face, one he tried to hide, as Daryl squeezed by her and set their bucket of warm water at the sink, putting in the stopper, and pouring out his portion.

Daryl may have taught her some tracking and crossbow basics, but hunting...?

Maybe he was just stalling a little, not wanting to leave first thing in the morning, buying just a little more time, for what she didn't know. She was nervous about leaving too, but something was off here...she couldn't quite say what it was though. Daryl knew it too...probably knew it before she did, but the truth was, they didn't know what was waiting for them out there...if their original plan would even pan out. Maybe it was a better the Devil you know situation they were in, but they both knew they couldn't stay forever.

"Well, I'll go hunting, and you can use all the being quiet skills I've tried to teach you so you don't scare all the game away 'cause you ain't staying here alone." He was concrete about that.

Beth sure wouldn't want to leave Daryl alone in the camp either. He'd already been propositioned once, and the way the women here looked at him...she wanted to claw their eyes out.

"I'm going to grab my nightgown and go get cleaned up." Beth went to slide past Daryl.

His hand rested gently on her lower back as she went by...affectionately, but...

"Oww..." She didn't mean for it to come out or to flinch away from him like that.

"Whoa, what's wrong? You hurt?" He grabbed her upper arm just firmly enough to keep her from moving away.

"No...it's nothing...I'm fine..." Beth insisted, not trying to pull away because it wouldn't matter.

"Here...let me see..." He turned her, forcing the back of her shirt up.

Daryl let out a low whistle and gently let his hand span the tender spot on her lower back where the massive bruise was.

"That from my bow?" He was all sheepish now...knowing the cause of her injury.
"Mmm-hmm." Turning to face him.

Daryl at least had the decency to put his head down in shame to conceal the small smile that captured his lips.

"Sorry."

"Yeah...you should be..." She tried to be stern, but she just couldn't. It had all been too good...too perfect to hate any part of what had resulted from that catastrophic night in the woods.

"Well, Lil' Bit, that's what you get for tryin' to take down a hunter."

Beth liked when he smiled, even if it was just a little one...especially since his smiles were reserved for her.

"Seeing how you were on top, it kinda seems like you took me down." Not that it had been a bad thing at all...

"Good one, Beth...point to you..." She liked this Daryl...actually all of Daryl was perfect. "I'll make it up to you. I'm good for it, I promise."

"You better. I'm going to hold you to that..." Beth ensured him as she walked away.

"All you gotta do is say when," Daryl called after her.

Gosh, Daryl...forward much? She almost said to tease him back, but she stopped her words before they slipped from her lips. Beth wasn't looking at him, but it didn't sound like he was teasing.

The R.V. bathroom was better than no bathroom at all, but it was a tight fit. At least the lantern lent enough light that she could see herself in the mirror as she took her bath from the bucket. Beth sighed to herself as she wiped off the day's dirt. It had been a hard day, challenging and tiring...mentally and physically. She never really minded camping before with her family, but this perpetual camping trip was starting to wear her thin...Daryl too. They needed somewhere safe where it was okay to hope for something normal and not be afraid that it would be ripped away from them at any second. Beth had thought that place was the prison...they'd fought so hard to build a life there...a community...and in the end, it hadn't even been the walkers that had destroyed it...it was people.

Choking back a sob, she looked in the mirror trying to decide whether to put her hair up or leave it down. Beth only had one reason to try to be pretty anymore, and he was waiting out there for her...up or down?

And they didn't belong here with these people either. It didn't feel right. They didn't feel right. She wondered if the only people it would ever feel right with were the people they lost. If any of them where still alive out there, were they thinking about her and Daryl? About where they were and how they were surviving...if they were even alive?

Hair down. Beth struck her thoughts and pulled her nightgown over her head. She had to think about the future, the here and now. When Beth stepped out into the little hallway, she stood very still and held her breath so he wouldn't sense her... Apparently she hadn't taken long enough in the bathroom. Daryl was standing at the sink illuminated in the glow of his lantern with his back to her. She watched as he ran the wet rag across his shoulder and down his muscled arm...taut skin stretched tight over a body built by their world...beads of water dripping down his back. And he was naked. Beth was frozen, just watching, taking in his scarred back, following down the line to where her eyes shouldn't go...then his thighs, his cut calves, and back up again. She was flushed...she blushed, and felt warmth flood her body. She was being so childish! It wasn't like she'd never seen a bare butt
before...it was just that it was Daryl, and the context, and the fact that she wanted him...that made her afraid...afraid of the unknown.

Beth sidestepped slowly back into the bathroom to gather herself, hoping that Daryl hadn't noticed.

*                      *                      *                      *                      *

Daryl was leaning against the pillows thinking on the day when Beth finally came to bed. He watched her intently; it kinda felt like he had a right to now. Things were different.

"What?" She questioned softly as she sat on the edge of the bed.

"Nothin'. Ain't I allowed to watch you?" He wasn't really asking permission.

Beth just gave a timid smile and shrugged her shoulders in reply.

"It's your turn to sing tonight by the way," she informed him. He hoped she was joking 'cause there was no way...

"Pffft...that ain't never gonna happen." He was gonna lay down the law here.

"Why not?" All innocently, turning to him on the bed. "Didn't you ever sing in church, or in the car or shower, or even just sing 'Happy Birthday' to someone?"

Daryl stretched out putting his hands behind his head. She would probably never get it. That just wasn't the world he came from. Maybe it was better for her that way though, to hold on to that little piece of innocence.

"Nah, Lil' Bit. Voices like mine aren't meant to be enjoyed, and the world's a better place for it..."

She scooted closer on the bed, sitting near and looking down on him with those eyes of hers that always saw a better version of him than he knew was there.

"Everybody's voice is beautiful to someone..." Beth looked away so quick that he barely had a chance to catch the truth in her eyes.

And he knew that truth meant...she meant...his voice was beautiful to her, how and why he didn't know. It was a strange feeling...having someone accept the worst parts of him, the whole package for what he was, not what she wanted him to be.

He probably should have said something reassuring or beautiful back to her instead of quietly contemplating her words because Beth seemed to read his silence as awkward silence. But sometimes he just wasn't good at saying something. He didn't have much practice at it.

"You know, you gave a moving battlefield speech to these people today, but you really don't play well with others," she tried on a new subject for size.

It was a good transition though, to tell her how some things had to be. Daryl sat up so he could face her.

"Beth, these ain't our people, never will be. You know that, right?" He was being as soft as he could with the truth of it.
Beth looked at him and nodded her understanding silently, her loose hair falling in her face. He watched her brush it back out of her eyes and was almost lost in the moment.

"I can be like this with you, share myself...I don't mind being close to you...I want to be close to you, and being by you all the time doesn't make me feel like I'm suffocating. And...you don't judge me." Was this coming out right?

"People don't judge you. Our group didn't," Beth reassured.

"Doesn't matter. I'm not gonna take that chance," Daryl asserted. "Even if we find our group again, you gotta understand that just 'cause I'm like this with you don't mean I'm gonna be like this with anyone else; it's just that we share this..." He hoped she understood.

"I know..." She didn't seem to be surprised by what he said.

"And Beth, something else..." She looked, sensing his seriousness, watching and waiting. "No matter who we're with, other people or Rick, Maggie, Glenn, and all the rest of 'em, you come first for me, your safety above all. The only time that would ever change is if there were..." And right there he'd said too much and trailed off awkwardly with no hope of recovery.

He was waiting for her to pull the *you started it, now you have to finish* rule, but she didn't. She just waited. And he was man enough to finish. He didn't have to be afraid with her.

He started again. It was who he was, who he would always be, his code, so there was no reason not to be concrete.

"The only time that will ever change is if there are children. Then I will do whatever I have to do to protect my family."

Daryl watched carefully for her response even though his first instinct was to look away. Maybe a more cynical version of himself expected to see loathing or disgust since in this context and their future situation, Beth was the only person he would ever consider that life with. To be truthful, she was probably the only person in any situation he would ever consider that life with if he had been lucky enough to ever meet and keep her before. But that wasn't the response he got...

"You want children?" The question was so soft that he barely heard it.

Pausing a moment...thinking about their future, a future he could actually see. The problem was, Daryl didn't even know if he would be alive tomorrow. What was the use of livin' in a fantasy? But then, *what if?* His life had recently been a compilation of very fortunate...beautiful *what ifs*? that he would've never imagined. They needed to be honest with each other because there was a future for them...there had to be.

"Yeah," Daryl offered hesitantly, thinking on it, waiting for her to shoot him down, but she still didn't. "Just 'cause I had a messed up life don't mean I don't want kids, that I couldn't be a good father..." he trailed off, not knowing where to go from there.

"I know...I've seen you." There was sadness in her voice alluding to that loss...and that...Judith hadn't even been their own child.

He didn't know what to say to comfort her.

"I'm sorry, Beth." It was all he had to give.

"For what?"
She was so naive. He had a whole shit load to be sorry for.

"I'm sorry I can't give you more than this." Where was this depressing shit coming from?

"If I said it was enough, would you believe me? Because you are..." Beth was so sincere that he wanted to believe her, but how could she really know that?
Chapter 30

Daryl let the question hang in the air as he laid back against the pillows. He'd asked Beth to trust what he told her, not to question his word. Shouldn't he do the same? The fucked up part was that he had more to offer her now than he ever had in his life before. He just watched her, again not really knowing how to reply. He'd probably fucked up by not answering, but she didn't seem offended.

"Can I touch you...just touch?" Beth asked so innocently.

Touch...just touch...just her touching him...that was fine as long as she was setting clear boundaries. He'd never been good at reading mixed signals, in bed or out of. And he'd made it really clear that if she offered again, he wouldn't say no. Beth knew that.

"Mmm-hmmm..." Daryl propped himself up, resting on his elbows, and waited for her to move into action.

Nothing...

She was just waiting...for what?

Still nothing...

Shirt...right...

Daryl straightened, pulling his wife-beater off from behind his head in one fluid motion, tossing it on the bed beside them. As he rested back on his elbows again, waiting, she still hadn't made a move. He sure in the hell hoped she wasn't expecting his pants to come off. This was as naked as he was getting by himself. If she wanted his pants off, she would have to make that move. But Beth wasn't waiting for anything. She was just contemplating him.

He really had no idea what to expect from this *can I touch you* moment, but the anticipation was killing him. The muscles in his upper arms involuntarily flinched as he watched and waited. When Beth's hand met his chest, resting firmly over the point where his heart was beating, a place where it so often rested when she was sleeping, Daryl let out a deep breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. She moved in close...so close...as she drew her fingertips up and across the lines of his collarbone, following through to his shoulder. Beth was slow and diligent, her fingers traveling the line of every muscle, every dip and bulge, stopping to caress every scar, tracing and retracing his veins when her hand slid to his lower arm.

Daryl watched her. He couldn't help not to. Beth wasn't looking up at him, but her eyes were transfixed on him...following where her fingers touched. The strange thing was, there was nothing sexual about what she was doing to him, either in intent or action, but it was so intimate. She was literally getting to know him. He would probably think that this was childish or useless if he hadn't been experiencing it, but he never had a woman do something like this to him before. Sex had always been a selfish act on both sides. Nobody was looking to get to know each other on a personal level. They met, they fucked, then he left. Daryl didn't think he'd ever slept with one woman more than once, much less have one want to get to know him like Beth was now. But the thing was, Beth touched him and explored him like he was new and perfect...like she had never seen or touched someone like him before.

Reaching his hand...trailing her fingers over each of his scarred knuckles, Daryl responded, offering it to her. She traced his palm lightly and then placed her palm against his, stretching her fingers out,
trying to meet his fingertips. It was impossible...her hands too tiny. He folded his fingers over the tips of her smaller ones and eventually allowed their fingers to entwine, holding her hand. Surprisingly, he was calm and his breathing was steady now despite Beth's proximity and her touch. Daryl looked down at their hands together and realized in his life, he'd never held a woman's hand...never wanted or had a reason to...Beth had been the first.

"What..?" Her voice was so soft as he let his eyes linger away from their hands, up to meet hers.

"Nothin'..."

Beth didn't hold his gaze long. She took her other hand, tracing small circles on the back of his. Briefly, Daryl imagined his old man or Merle finding out he'd held a girl's hand...what kind of shit they'd give him for it...but the thing was, Beth made him feel stronger. He'd probably be more likely now to beat the shit outta them for sayin' something about it. That didn't make him a better person, but having someone to fight for...someone who was all his...to protect...made him stronger. It was hard for him to picture ever holding her hand in public, even around the people they'd loved and lost...not because he didn’t care...just ‘cause...well, he really didn’t know why. Maybe ‘cause he wanted that to be just his...theirs...nobody else needed to be part of what they had. But if somebody accidentally saw and had somethin' to say, he'd tell them where to go! A fleeting thought crept into his mind, not necessarily a happy one. Reuniting with their group at this point, even any of them being alive, was probably never gonna happen, but what if? Daryl had apparently subconsciously thought about it enough that he'd asked Beth to promise to stay with him no matter what. If the unlikely ever happened, what would they have to say about him and Beth? And where was all this coming from? Why should he give a shit what they thought after everything he and Beth had been through? The problem was, he cared. Daryl cared what people thought about him. And he cared what people thought about Beth...for her sake. But in this case, he'd done nothing wrong. There was nothing wrong with what was between him and Beth. Nothing to be ashamed of. If their people cared about them, they would be happy they found each other.

Beth's fingertips brushed over the center of his lips. He sucked in a quick breath...so focused on her tracing the lines of his arm and venturing to his chest again that he was lost in the moment and in thought. He'd been caught off guard when her fingers found the sensitive spot on his lower lip. Pulling away so quickly at his reaction, Beth almost lost her balance, but he reached out to steady her.

"Sorry..." She was always so quick to apologize.

"For what? I'll let you know if I don't want you to do somethin'." Daryl had never had a problem saying no when he meant it.

Beth reached out for him again, the pads of her fingers making contact with his side, barely brushing over his ribs. Daryl flinched and his skin quivered causing an unwarranted half smile to force its way onto his face. He whished she didn't notice, but with the way her eyes sparkled in the lantern light, he knew she hadn't missed a thing.

"You're ticklish?!" Her eyes could light the room all on their own, a mischievous smile spreading across her face.

Shit!

"I ain't ticklish!" He expelled quickly...maybe too quickly.

Daryl didn't really know if that was true or not...he had no way of knowing. It was just because she
barely touched him...her fingers barely made contact...but he was sure at this point if somebody tried to exploit that sensation with malicious intent, he probably would be.

And Beth was about to try. He might not be good at reading signals, but he did know a thing or two about reading predators and prey...just most of the time, he wasn't in the prey position.

"Beth...no..." It only came out half serious, so there was no way he could have ended by saying seriously 'cause his credibility was shot to shit once she tickled him; an undignified snorting laugh escaping him joined by Beth's giggles.

As Daryl halfheartedly...playfully...tried to fend her off, it hit him. He realized just how happy he was. Genuinely happy with no exceptions. If he had her and she was safe, he was happy...

Beth was his. There was absolutely no portion of him that doubted that now.
Chapter 31

I love her...

In another life, that would've scared the shit outta him...made him weak, being a slave to an emotion attached to someone else. But this...it made him strong...fierce...

I love her.

The idea had been sitting with him for a long while, but it had never come together in a concrete, fully formed personal declaration. Daryl almost blurted something of this extent to Beth when he left her under the tree to lead the walkers away. He hadn't planned it or even thought it out...it'd just been driven by impulse and the fact that he might never see her again. It had been there then, but now it was deep and rooted and felt all the more true.

Daryl gently attempted to subdue Beth and her evil intent, but she was a fighter! He didn't want to bruise her, so he caught her, turned her away from him, locking his arms securely over her chest.

"What are you gonna do now, Beth?" His voice all gravel and grit as she stilled in his embrace.

Beth wasn't stupid. She knew that she couldn't break free if he didn't want to let her go, but he was glad she didn't try. Daryl wanted to be still and calm...serious in this moment, and Beth complied. Her breathing deepened, and he could feel her heartbeat quicken where he drew her close.

Pulling one of his arms away knowing that Beth had given up her playful struggle, he gathered her tussled hair, sweeping it over her shoulder, and allowed his lips to find the soft place where her neck and shoulder met. Beth's hand came up and gripped his lower arm where it crossed her chest pressing her to him. He reached up with his free hand, sliding the slim strap of her nightgown down her smooth arm so he could kiss her bare skin unhindered. Beth watched him over her shoulder, and he couldn't help it. He leaned into her...kissed her...didn't close his eyes, and neither did shy, sweet little Beth. Daryl gently caught her lower lip between his teeth as he pulled away. The blush on her cheeks, the half smile at the corners of her mouth, and the redness of her lips made her a living, breathing contradiction...innocent and seductive all in one.

It was strange in the moment, Daryl didn't question anything about their future or their life together. He may not be good enough for her, but he was willing to spend the rest of his life trying to get there. That had to be good enough...it just had to. And he could learn to be a good lover to her...not what he had been in his life before.

He'd apparently loosened his grip on her, Beth turning around to face him. She reached up and touched his cheek, brushing back his overgrown hair as she watched him. He hadn't ever been much of a talker, and she never asked too much of him. He was pretty good at letting people know what he was feeling without having to say nothin’, and Beth was so good at reading him, but some things just had to be said. Daryl laid Beth back on the bed, her hair spread out around her head like a pale golden halo...moved over her, propping himself up with one arm. Gently brushing the wisps of hair back from her face...he had to see her eyes. Not saying or doing anything for the longest while, he just contemplated her, felt her chest rise and fall below him as their breathing aligned, her little breasts grazing his chest with each breath...hoped she would say something if he was pressing to much weight on her. But she didn't...everything was right...

"Beth, I love you."
Daryl thought when he said it, he may have hesitated or his voice might have broken, but he didn't botch it. He said it just as it should be said. He did something absolutely right in his life.

He hadn't really had time to imagine how Beth might respond to his words. He didn't expect anything in return; everybody had to come to their own conclusions in their own time, but she gave him absolutely no margin for self-doubt.

"I love you too, Daryl."

He was lost...

The Daryl from a previous life would have told Beth she didn't have to say it just because he did. He may even have gotten defensive because she said it too quickly and couldn't have possibly meant it. The difference was, now, he had no reason to doubt himself or what Beth said. He loved her, and she loved him...he would've never imagined...

And now she was crying?

"Beth...you okay...did I hurt you?" Daryl quickly pushing himself away from her.

"No...please, don't move..." She reached out for him, and he went willingly back into her arms.

"What's wrong then?" Daryl couldn't even begin to understand.

"Nothing...I'm just happy..." She managed softly.

Why in the hell did she have to cry when she was happy? It just didn't make any sense. Daryl wiped her tears away anyway and softly smiled down at her. It didn't matter why, it was his job to comfort, protect, and love her even if he could never understand why she was crying. And she'd comforted him too...she'd seen him at his lowest...

Daryl jerked his face to the side hearing the perimeter alarm just beyond the R.V. rattle.

What the fuck! Can't there just be one happy, quiet moment?

Disentangling himself from Beth, Daryl pulled his boots on, threw his shirt over his head, and had his crossbow in hand before Beth even had the chance to react.

"Stay here...do you hear me! Get dressed in case we need to run." His instructions flew from his mouth as quickly as he flew out the door into the darkness.

* * * * *

Daryl heard cussing and rustling, the voices of both a male and female, two idiots apparently tripped up in the darkness. At least at this point he didn't think he was dealing with walkers, still holding his bow at the ready anyway while shining his flashlight along the line of the perimeter trying to find the snarl up. But who in the hell was trying to sneak outta camp in the dark? And where in the hell were the people who were supposed to be on watch? This was day one of a new system for them, and they were already blowin' it off.

He found them tangled and struggling in the perimeter on the ground, one of the douchebag teenage boys and a girl. Daryl shined the light in their eyes like he would a wild animal to stun 'em so they
would stop their squirming and making of excess noise. They were no better than 'coons mating in
the woods, sure weren't any smarter. If he could hear the alarm, so could anything else in the vicinity,
and these people weren't ready for that reality. And where in the hell where they? Still nothing.
What, did they hear the alarm and run and hide their heads in the sand?

"Just stop your movin'," Daryl kept his voice low while trying to put some sense into the stupid kids.
"You're just gettin' more tangled by thrashing around."

"Ain't you gonna help us? Or are you just gonna stand there and gawk?" The boy snapped. "And get
that stupid light outta our eyes!"

"I'm gonna stand here and gawk." Daryl chose his option and finally redirected his flashlight on the
snarl up after he'd left it in the little shit's eyes long enough to make his point. "You got yourselves
into this, you get yourselves out. I ain't your daddy."

The kids took their sweet time freeing themselves, but at least the perimeter line survived.

"If you idiots wanna screw around, stay inside the camp. Ain't nobody gonna be runnin' after you to
save your sorry asses out in the woods, and if you trip that alarm again, I might shoot first and worry
'bout questions later," Daryl scolded, fighting to keep his voice low.

Once the girl was completely free, she ran off crying in the darkness back to camp, but the little
jackass just stood there and stared at him...trying to stare him down.

"You got somethin' to say? Go 'head, spit it out!" Daryl encouraged.

"You think this stupid perimeter's gonna save us? You're just as big an idiot as the rest of them. Our
leader, our group...we had ex-military with military weapons, and a tank! They're dead. If they
couldn't save themselves, your fucking trash alarm ain't gonna do shit!" The boy's voice was high
and too loud by the time he was finished, but Daryl just couldn't give a fuck anymore.

Going still and silent...Daryl tightened his grasp on his bow...gripping the flashlight so hard that his
other hand was shaking. The boy froze, his face gone scared...and he should be...he should be
fucking shittin' his pants terrified...

The Governor rolled right up to our gates. Maybe if I wouldn't have stopped looking. Maybe 'cause I
gave up. That's on me...and your dad...maybe...maybe I could've done something...

The images flashing in his head were too much...the loss still too fresh...too hard to bear. Daryl
started to see red again...the only other time he'd ever seen red was when Beth was beaten and
almost raped, and he'd lost control...those fuckers deserved it. Daryl took a deep breath, clenching his
eyes, and willed the red to dissipate. Maybe he'd heard wrong...opening his eyes...the boy was still
frozen.

"What did you say?" Daryl's voice remained low, but it carried the unmistakable edge of danger.

No response...

Daryl's flashlight hit the ground, and he had the punk by the collar before he could stop himself.

"WHAT DID YOU SAY?!!" Face only inches from the boy's, Daryl needed to calm down before he
did somethin' rash...he just couldn't...

"You heard me you fucking inbred redneck!" The boy found his balls, but he apparently had a death
wish. He was yellin', so either Daryl would end up finishing the job or any walkers waitin' in the
wings would. "That's right, we had soldiers and a tank! Our leader, he was tryin' to find us a safe place to live. He found us a prison with some nut jobs and convicts holed up in it, people who'd massacred his last town. They had a tank, and they all died!"

Full disclosure. The red was back now. There was no reason to fight it.

He threw the kid to the ground, his boot crunching against the bastard's chest before he had a chance to take his last breath. Crossbow aimed squarely between the punk's eyes, his finger was on the trigger, the boy whimpering incomprehensibly from the dirt...

Daryl's lips twitched as his jaw clenched, and he ground his teeth together. If he did this, he was no better than the Governor. If he did this, he would let darkness win...the darkness that Beth helped him keep at bay. If he did this, his humanity would be gone.

Maybe Beth had been right all along. Maybe he was a good person. But Beth...this kid's group destroyed their home...they lost their friends and family because of them...they slaughtered Hershel...her Dad...his...

Daryl's finger twitched on the trigger. He had to...for his friends...for Hershel...for Beth most of all...

But he didn't...he surprised himself by not pulling that trigger in the last instant. This was the easy way...the easy way to make it right...to avenge Hershel for both Beth and himself, but it wasn't right. It was just easy, and he'd never taken the easy way out.

The easy way would've been robbing the camp outside Atlanta like Merle wanted...

The easy way would've been striking out on his own after they put down the walkers at the barn and the little girl he'd failed.

The easy way would've been letting Rick kill Dale after...

The easy way was killing Karen and David...but he could've never...

The easy way would've been staying away from people, being alone, never letting himself care...but that wasn't who he was...he could never be that again...

Daryl had a code, and easy was never part of it. Right was never easy, but it was what he did. Daryl snatched up his flashlight, leaving the boy frozen on the ground as he headed back to Beth.

"You ain't even worth my bolt," he spat, refusing to look back.

One thing was for sure. He may have made the right choice, but that didn't make the rage and pain ripping at his heart go away.

The only thing he knew was that he had to get Beth out.
Chapter 32

It was extraordinary that Daryl, a man so often driven by aggression and violence from the necessity of their world, could so carefully manipulate their situation without exerting too much power or force. It had to be a hard thing to repress such strength. He captured her, ending a tickle fight before it had even properly started. But then as she felt his arms tighten around her and press her back to his chest, the seriousness of the impending moment washing over her, Beth went still and calmed herself, waiting.

"What are you gonna do now, Beth?" Daryl's voice...that voice that hinted that he was just as aroused as she was...and other pressing signs as well...made her want him even more. Was that even possible?

*I'm going to seduce you, Daryl Dixon...I'm going to make you mine forever.* Beth thought it, but it would never come out of her mouth. She had absolutely no powers of seduction. Daryl was the one doing the seducing.

When he brushed her hair over her shoulder and trailed his lips down her neck, she felt like she was going to jump out of her skin, but she took a deep breath and forced herself to remain calm. She allowed herself to grasp his arm tight to release some of her pent up anxiety in the moment...then Daryl slid her nightgown off her shoulder and continued to kiss her naked skin...definitely seduction. Beth looked at him, watched him over her shoulder, and despite the fact that Daryl was often insecure about his actions, there was nothing but confidence in his eyes tonight. He caught her in a kiss. It wasn't aggressive, but it was definitely forward. He didn't close his eyes, but watched her, and for some reason, Beth couldn't look away either, even though she probably should have. His teeth raking lightly over her bottom lip as he pulled away, well...burning desire might be the best way she could have described it. Daryl was good at this. He might not be good at the casual moments, but this...yeah...he had something good going... It probably wasn't saying much though since this was the most erotic thing Beth had ever experienced.

Beth blushed at her own thoughts and the fact that Daryl wouldn't look away, but she couldn't help the small smile that crept across her lips. He allowed her to turn in his arms so she could face him, brushing back his hair so she could see him looking down on her. That hair...if it got as long as hers, they would have a problem. She waited for him to kiss her, to do something, anything that would lead them to where they needed to go, but that wasn't it. Daryl was calm and still. He was intent on something...what she didn't know.

Allowing herself to be eased back on the bed as Daryl moved over her, his weight was a welcome and comforting feeling. He touched her hair, he contemplated her...but he didn't say anything. Where was this going; what was next? How could he be content to just watch her when he could have so much more?

"Beth, I love you."

That was it. There was no hesitation. No look of regret after. He didn't look away...

Nothing else mattered.

"I love you too, Daryl." It was the truest thing she'd ever said.
And then Beth was overcome, her tears falling. She wasn't sad. Well, she was sad for everything that had to happen to bring them to this point, but it had to be worth it. Love...she was just overwhelmed.

"Beth...you okay...did I hurt you?"

She felt lost as Daryl pulled away from her when he saw she was crying. Beth didn't want him to move; she needed his closeness, his comfort.

"No...please...don't move..." Her voice was broken, but he came back into her arms without hesitation.

"What's wrong then?" So soft...his question. He didn’t understand.

"Nothing...I'm just happy..."

Daryl brushed her tears away and gave her a soft smile that she could build a dream on. Had anyone in the world ever experienced Daryl like this? If they only knew...but then if they did, he wouldn't be her Daryl...wouldn't be Daryl at all anymore. What he said to her earlier resonated all the more true. This was who he was with her, because of her. He wasn't changed; this was what they shared.

The moment was shattered when the perimeter alarm was triggered. Daryl was out of bed, dressed, and armed before she had a chance to be afraid.

"Stay here...do you hear me! Get dressed in case we need to run.” That was the Daryl the world knew. This was their life.

The moment may have been stolen, but what Daryl said could never be lost. She could take solace in that.

*                      *                      *                      *                      *

Beth was dressed and decided to pull on her boots, just in case, while she waited for Daryl to come back.

He loved her. He’d said it, and he'd meant it. And Daryl...Beth imagined that he would ere on the side of extreme caution when considering speaking those words. Daryl said them with confidence. She knew he'd never said it before; it was his first time, and that made it all the more beautiful. Beth reveled in what he said because she knew that Daryl was not the kind of man who would go telling her every five minutes that he loved her. He told her. They both understood and accepted it. She didn't need him to repeat it because she already knew, but Beth couldn't help replaying the moment over and over in her head. It made everything whole...and in a way, it tipped the scales of her life from their current balance between happiness and sorrow in favor of happiness. Daddy would want her to be happy, most of all, loved...so would Maggie.

The sounds of people talking and moving about outside drew her out of her reverie. It was late. Everyone was supposed to be inside.

*Daryl.*

Suddenly she was terrified by the possibility that something awful had happened. Beth went for the door even though he told her to stay put...
Bursting through the door, almost barreling into her...Daryl was barely able to stop in time.

"Get our shit, we gotta go..." The rage on his face...what happened?

It didn't matter; she didn't even need to ask. Beth was with Daryl, wherever he went...and the reality was, they both knew, sooner or later it always came down to fighting or running. Tonight it just happened to be running.

Beth grabbed their bag as Daryl threw on his clothes over his pajama pants and tucked his gun in his waistband. She took a quick look around to try to make sure they had everything when Daryl snatched her by the upper arm and pulled her out the door behind him, not caring what they left behind.

He took their bag, threw it in the trunk, slamming it closed just as the crowd came nearer to them. Daryl went on the defensive, raising his bow. Beth was so confused, but she wasn't about to ask. She just followed Daryl's lead, and palmed her pistol.

"What is all the commotion out here?" Kent demanded, emerging at the front of the group.

"We're leavin'." Daryl didn't need to be much more assertive than staring at the crowd down the sights of his bow. "Just back away and let us go."

Kent took a step back, but the crowd was still too close to the car for them to make their escape. Daryl was looking more lethal by the second, and that made Beth afraid because she had no idea what she should be afraid of. But if Daryl was this riled up, she knew she should be worried.

"Dude tried to kill me!" One of the boys who was close to her age approached Kent, pointing an accusatory finger at Daryl.

"Didn't try to kill you...just thought 'bout it." Daryl's voice was feral and dangerous. "If I tried, you'd be meetin' your maker by now!"

This is bad...Beth didn't know why yet, but it was bad enough that her heart sank.

Kent looked from Daryl to the boy, waiting for someone to speak.

"Me and Annie...we got caught up in the stupid perimeter..."

"Hey! Let me ask you somethin'?" Daryl's question caused the crowd to go silent. "Your last leader, he have and eye patch?"

Eye patch...

"Yeah...what about it...?" Kent hesitated.

"And a tank...your group had a tank too?"

Tank...

Beth couldn't really process the information and corresponding flood of emotions...they were being too loud though...and the alarm had been tripped earlier...they needed to be quiet.

Please be quiet...

She didn't want to hear anymore...she couldn't...
"What did you tell him? We said we weren't going to say anything about what happened..." Kent grilled the boy.

"Your tank, I took it out!" Daryl wasn't boasting. She didn't really know what he was doing.

Beth looked over at him, saw the tension in his face, the muscles twitching in his arm as he held his crossbow at the ready.

"And the prison..."

It wasn't a question, but Kent answered anyway.

"We needed somewhere to go, somewhere with walls and fences...it was full of convicts and murderers."

There it was. The piece that tied it all together...the piece that made it real for Beth.

"That was our home! We cleared that prison of walkers...lost our own people doin' it..." Daryl paused for a moment, seemingly overtaken by anger and pain.

And Beth couldn't hold on anymore...things started to go blurry, but she was able to stay on her feet by the grace of God. Everything, all the noises were muffled around her as a tear dripped down her cheek and she tried to hold onto what little reality she had left. But she could still hear Daryl's voice...it was the only thing that was still clear...it just seemed distant...so far removed from where she was...

"We had a community there, women, old people, children...you pricks massacred them all..." Daryl's voice quavered and Beth, in her state of semi-awareness, waited for the first bolt to fly.

Kent replied frantically, but it was unintelligible to her.

"It don't matter! They were your group, your people. They destroyed everything...our safety...or lives..." Daryl was breaking. "Our friends...our family...there was a baby! And your leader...he cut off her Daddy's head with a sword right in front of us all. You broke us! There wasn't nothin' I could do! I couldn't save 'em!"

The world wasn't clear...but through her blurry state, Beth realized all the noises in the woods were gone...and Daryl's words hit her...

*Think about it this way...they wouldn't be out there makin' all that noise hunting if there were walkers around...coyotes are afraid of humans, and we don't even really ever bother with 'em or wanna eat 'em. Walkers on the other hand will eat anything livin' while it's still alive.*

There was nothing...no night birds calling, no animals scurrying...nothing...

"Daryl...the woods...so silent," Beth managed.

He glanced her way in acknowledgement. He understood. Apparently, Kent had seen Daryl's eyes shift, thought he could catch Daryl off guard, and charged.

He didn't know Daryl...

All they had to do was let them leave.

But instead, Kent's body was lying on the ground, one of Daryl's bolts between his eyes.
Beth looked at Daryl and the people, and it was like everything was standing still, frozen in time except the two of them. The people didn't move, but Daryl swiftly shifted from his bow to his gun. Noise didn't matter anymore. The walkers were close now, even if only she and Daryl knew it.

Her entire world came back into focus when the perimeter was tripped at multiple points in the woods. These people were already dead; they just didn't know it yet.

"Biters!" Several people yelled creating a cacophony of chaos.

Some people ran, probably thinking the shelter of an R.V. would save them. She hoped they all burned in this life and the next. Others remained frozen. If they were planning to make a stand, they needed to move into action. Either way, she couldn't care...

Daryl was still on guard, the people remaining looking to him...looking to him for what? They had destroyed her life, his life...and they wanted to be saved...?

One of their men was already dead at Daryl's hand...she knew there would be another dead man soon if they didn't back off.

Three gunshots in quick succession from Daryl's gun...

Whether they were people or walkers...it didn't matter...their bodies fell...

"Beth, get in the car now!" Daryl yelled, keeping his focus and sights set firmly on those people who were still stupid enough not to move.

She might have regained her senses, but everything still seemed surreal. The walkers were coming...that was the only thing she could really comprehend...the only thing she knew was real...and it would be over soon...

Beth made to move to the car, but for some reason she couldn't...
"No! You're not leaving!" She heard from behind her, the hand clenching her right wrist the reason she couldn't move forward.

"Beth!" Daryl called out sharply.

Beth swung around to face her captor. She knew his name, but it didn't matter...not anymore. Looking up at him as she watched the life drain from his eyes, he released his grip on her. The blood was warm and thick streaming over her fingers where they clutched the handle of her knife. He looked at her with such surprise...shock as he stumbled back, tripping, holding his wound where the blood was seeping out, falling to the ground as his life fled.

She was a survivor...

She wasn't a victim.

It was instinct...

Survival instinct.

Everything was real...

Her senses returned.

Beth understood now...she understood Daryl...as she looked down at the blood on her hand.

*                      *                      *                      *                      *

The man grabbed her so quickly...too quick...

"Beth!" Daryl tried unsuccessfully to warn her.

For a split second, he had a clear shot to take him out, but Beth turned to the man, and Daryl couldn't risk it.

*Shit...what now?*

Something was wrong...or right...something just didn't match up, didn't make sense.

Beth was very still, not even trying to escape. The man released his hold on her...Beth didn't turn from him or try to run, but the bastard stumbled, crashing to the ground holding his stomach. Daryl could see from his peripheral vision that the idiots who’d stayed for whatever reason when the others ran had finally found some sense and were starting to flee. He and Beth...they needed to go...he just didn't know what was happening...he couldn't comprehend. But deep down inside, he knew what he feared. He just couldn't grasp it yet...

When Beth turned around, the picture was clear, the knife and her hand that held it dripping with
blood.

*NO*

Daryl was flooded with anger and hate...for himself. He was supposed to protect her...kill for her...she should've never had to do that...kill someone.

He'd failed...again.

The moans and scrapes of the walkers nearing were quickly joined by their victims who were too stupid to live, screaming in their last moments of life.

They had to leave...

He couldn't move into action...he had no idea what to do. Daryl watched helplessly as Beth slid the bloody knife back home in the sheath at her waist. She examined her hand momentarily before she wiped it clean on her thigh. It was Beth who came to him, calm and composed.

"Daryl, we need to go," she informed him, void of emotion...no fear, sadness, anger...nothing...

It was too fresh...it hadn't hit her yet. When it did, Daryl planned to be far from here in a situation safe where he was in control.

Once it all sank in, the knowledge that these fucks had killed her family compounded by the fact that she'd taken a life...it was gonna hit like a ton of bricks.

He loved her...he just didn't know if his love would be enough to make a difference.

* * * * *

Daryl was so fucking helpless. Driving blindly into the night, he had absolutely no idea where they were going. All he knew was that they were going away...away from the herd, away from the people who'd massacred them, God...away from their past if he could manage it. Maybe he'd always be running from his past. It seemed like there was no escape. They would never get out alive.

Glancing over at Beth who was idly rubbing at the dried blood between her fingers while just staring straight ahead, the obviously bold NE on the face plate of the stereo grabbed his attention. Well, the car had a fucking compass...at least it knew which way they were going...Daryl just still had no idea where they were going. And they were headed east again...they wanted west, they needed west. East was back to the beginning.

How did he not handle this situation differently? Despite everything, surviving was one thing he was damned good at. All he had to do was keep himself alive and fed while keeping Beth safe, alive, and fed. He just had to worry about staying alive and protecting one girl. He didn't have to save the world, he didn't have to stop and put down that deer, he certainly didn't have to go back to that camp and try to help a bunch of strangers survive. All errors in judgment that led them to this point. Maybe he allowed himself to be drawn into the group because he thought Beth needed it. No, he wasn't gonna put this on anyone else. This was his fucking failure. Besides, tonight she'd said he was enough. He was gonna take her word on it.

*Me and Beth now, that's how it's gotta be.***
The problem was, they needed somewhere safe, somewhere they could stay for a while, maybe a long while...maybe the rest of their lives. Two days here, running and fighting...two days there, running and fighting...two days of fantasy followed by the horrors of their world was going to kill them. This wasn't even living, it was barely surviving. Daryl realized there was no quick fix to their situation, especially in their current condition. There were no do-overs, and pushing forward in their state in the middle of the night was a self-imposed death sentence. They were far enough away now that the herd would never catch up to them...the first place he saw, they would stop, rest, regroup, and he would try to talk to Beth about what happened, how he'd failed her. He needed to know what she was thinking...how she was feeling. She certainly didn't need to handle this all alone.

*                      *                      *                      *                      *

She could feel Daryl standing just outside the bathroom door. The night hadn’t turned out anything like it started. Beth poured the bottled water over her hand, rubbing at the dried blood that was crusted between her fingers, picking at the gore under her nails. Their world was so filled with blood...it didn't seem as red anymore.

"Beth, can I come in?" Those were the first words he'd said to her since they left...

Daryl was her constant...her only constant. His voice was so familiar to her now. Tonight it seemed like the only good thing she could remember from her past. He was the only thing that mattered.

"Yeah..." For some reason, her voice struggled...it was forced, and she wasn't sure that any sound would come out at all.

She saw Daryl's reflection in the mirror above the dingy sink. He was tired, drawn, sad, and maybe worried. Why worried? Beth focused on her own reflection. She didn't look any different...did she? Where was that coming from...why would she?

"Are you..." He stopped his question mid sentence, watching her carefully in the mirror. "Let me have your knife. I need to clean it. If you leave it in the sheath all covered in blood, it'll get gummed up and get stuck when you need it."

How did she not know that? She produced the knife, pouring water over the crusted blade once Daryl took it in hand, watching curiously as he scraped the metal clean between his fingers. He wiped it dry on his pants, returning it to her, then washed the blood off his hand under the trickle of water that escaped from the bottle she tilted for him.

Daryl's reflection looked helpless. She really didn't know what to say...

"Do we have any Tylenol in the car...I could really use a Tylenol..." Beth struggled to get it out. It was the only thing she could come up with to give him purpose.

He was right beside her now, but she couldn't turn and face him. She started to feel it...the reality of what happened...what she had done. If she turned and looked at him, what if he hated her...couldn't bear to look at her after...

Instead, she watched Daryl's reflection in the mirror nod his head before he turned to leave. Beth looked down, catching a glimpse of the red patch on her thigh for the first time...where she'd tried to wipe her hand clean of the man's blood. She was stained...and water wouldn't be enough to wash that blood away.
Daryl was waiting for her with the Tylenol when she emerged from the bathroom. She took the pills from him knowing they probably wouldn't help much, but they couldn't hurt.

"Here, have some Southern Comfort," Daryl offered.

"What?" She didn't really comprehend what he was saying.

"It's kind of a bourbon, whiskey...I don't know what it is. You won't like it..." He passed her the bottle. "...but it'll help those go down and take the edge off."

Beth took a swig, and it burned all the way down. Feeling something was good.

"Where did you find it?" She questioned, taking another more moderate sip before handing it back to Daryl.

She watched him carefully, screwing the lid back on. He wasn't drinking. Beth looked around the oddly combined souvenir and camping supply store trying to figure out where the alcohol came from.

"You always find the really good stuff under the counter." He was awkward...maybe she'd lost him. "You took the guns...I saw them in the trunk."

Was this an attempt at casual conversation?

"Yeah, and the ammo too...but not all of the guns." Beth originally had minor reservations about taking the group's weapons, but they didn't even know they had them. And they had already done enough damage without them. Had she done the wrong thing by taking something that wasn’t really hers? Her moral compass was having a hard time distinguishing north at the moment. "I packed them yesterday..." Not that it really mattered. It just felt like she needed to say something else.

Daryl nodded.

"Beth...?" He hesitated again in his question.

"Yeah?" Inside her head, a voice was screaming. Please, please just ask me! She just didn't know exactly what she needed him to ask.

"We should try to get some rest."

Beth knew that wasn't what he meant to say, but she didn't have the capacity to get inside his head tonight. Maybe things were better left unsaid...
Daryl watched Beth carefully as she sat down on the sleeping bags he'd found among the camping gear to make a bed on the floor. She was very still...so quiet. As he knelt down, he noticed the dried blood on her leg, a visual reminder of his incompetence...his failure that she would be forced to live with. Merle's words came rushing back to him.

All them years I spent trying to make a man of you, this is what I get? Look at you...

Merle’d been right all along. He was a failure. Always would be. Wasn't even man enough to protect Beth.

Now you listen to me. Ain't nobody ever gonna care about you except me, little brother. Nobody ever will.

That wasn't right though. Beth loved him, didn't she? She'd said it. Did it still count now...after...

Daryl shook his thoughts away. He wasn't doin' anyone any good sitting there feeling sorry for himself. He just really had no idea what to do. More than anything, Daryl needed Beth to say something; he needed her to give him something to work with...anything.

Please, just cry, God Dammit!

He was uncomfortable with crying, but at least if she cried, he could comfort her. Daryl put his palms over his eyes, rubbing them helplessly.

"You're so far away..." Beth's voice trailing off brought him back to the present.

He looked at her, gauging the distance between them. He'd sat down facing her so he could watch her, talk to her face to face when she decided to speak. Apparently Beth read that as intentional distance.

Daryl opened his arms to her, not sure he should actually make the approach after what she had been through. But Beth didn't move.

"Do you think I'm a monster now?" There was rawness in her voice.

"No...why would I..." He instinctively moved towards her as he spoke, but Beth cut him off.

"No...don't touch me!"

It was confusing. First he wasn't close enough, now she didn't want him to touch her...confusing, but closer to the reaction he expected...something he could work through rather than indifference and lack of emotion. Daryl stayed where he was.

"Why would I think that?" He questioned softly.

"I killed that man..." It didn't sound like she'd finished, but she stopped anyway.

"Beth...I'm sorry. You should've never...I should've killed him. It was my fault..." Daryl couldn't look at her while he said it. His inability to protect her was too much.

"No...it's not your fault, and that's not it." Beth's voice steadied. "I killed him, and it was easy...I'm not sorry."
The night Beth asked him if killing a person was harder than killing a walker came rushing back to him. Was that a lifetime ago...no...it hadn't even been weeks. The thing was, despite their situation and the world they lived in, he never imagined that Beth would have to kill someone on his watch.

"Beth, the world doesn't give us many choices anymore. Most of the time, it's just live or die. That doesn't make us monsters. We're just alive."

"Shouldn't I...shouldn't I still...feel more?"

Daryl shrugged. The thing was, he didn't feel any guilt or sadness because of the people he'd killed...except for Dale...and Merle...but those were different. Maybe he was the monster.

"I don't know...you might someday...you might not...I don't really have the answer to that..."

He wanted to close the distance between them, not just for her, but for himself...he just couldn't risk her saying no again.

"When will it be over?"

Sadness...there it was.

Daryl watched and waited, waiting for her to open up, finish what she needed to finish. Shit, was this how people used to feel around him when they knew he was off but he wouldn't give 'em anything? Beth didn't continue either.

"Please Beth...will you come here? I need you."

Maybe she wouldn't allow him to hold her for her sake, but if he asked for himself...

Beth came to him and allowed him to wrap her in the protection of his arms.

"I just need this chapter to be over, to be closed...the prison...Daddy..." She couldn't hold on anymore.

Daryl couldn't see her face as he embraced her, but he felt a few stray tears hit his arm where he held her close.

"I can't tell you...I don't know. The only thing I can say for sure is that if we're lucky enough to wake up tomorrow, as long as we're alive, we have a chance...a chance to begin again..."

A shuddering breath rocked her body, Daryl feeling her tremble against him. She was letting go.

There was silence and more tears.

"Beth...hope and love are so rare now...and you have them...always have. It's hard not to notice..." It was the truth. Those were her greatest strengths even though she might not recognize them. "You can't let them go. I need your hope. I need you...to...love me..."

And there it was...what he needed. He never thought he'd need love...but he did...

* * * * * *

"Daryl, can we stop?"
He put the brakes on in the middle of the road quicker than she expected...but not like there was any traffic.

"Everything okay?"

It was such a strange question for their world, with all that had happened...everything they had gone through...what she had done and how she felt about it. But something Daryl said stuck with her.

*If we are lucky enough to wake up tomorrow, as long as we're alive, we have a chance...a chance to begin again...*

Her sleep had been fitful, but Beth had woken up and Daryl was there. They were both alive. And the thing was, they had no less than they had the day before, the week before, even the month before. If she was being honest, they had more. They had love.

"Yeah..." She’d taken too long to answer, too long to pull her thoughts together, but the answer was truthful. "It's just so beautiful. Can we go in?" Beth gestured to the little church set back just outside the tree line in a clearing close to the road.

It was beautiful. The little gray stone church looked like it came from a storybook world or some quaint European village. Even the overcast sky couldn't diminish it. Daryl hesitated. After last night, he probably wasn't too keen on stopping at a place that could contain people...and if people around here were alive and still believed in God, a church could be their sanctuary. But if they were in a church, they wouldn't be dangerous, would they?

"Please, Daryl. I want to say a prayer and light a candle for...Daddy and Maggie...and all the rest." He wasn't going to say no, was he?

He didn't say no. He didn't say anything. Daryl didn't look particularly happy either, but he pulled off the road onto the bumpy gravel drive that led to the church. Parking close to the one other vehicle at the front, Daryl felt the hood of the other car when he got out, and turned, assessing the area before he signaled for her to join him.

"I don't like this, Beth. The car don't look like it's been sittin' long...and fresh graves..." He pointed with his crossbow at the mounds of dirt in the churchyard that he apparently just noticed. "Back in the car now!"

He gave her a little push towards their vehicle.

"Daryl, they're burying their dead. That means they loved them. They're good people..." Beth protested.

With their recent experiences, she was probably stupid to think that...but there had to be good people left, didn't there?

"I love you, that don't mean I care about them. They love their people, don't mean they care about us. We're just mutual threats." Daryl's voice was gruff again, but it was there, the *I love you.*

Beth smiled to herself. It was okay to smile...wasn't it? And if Daryl felt that strongly against going in, she wouldn't argue.

But he sighed in resignation.

"Stay behind me. No guns unless there's no choice. You know the drill."
Beth saw Daryl stiffen as the weathered gray wood door creaked when he pushed it open. Tightness welled up in her chest too. This was a church, a sanctuary, a place of peace, a place of forgiveness...if one place in this world was still uncorrupted, it needed to be here. Maybe she was still a child for believing just one place...a sign of hope existed...a sign that they wouldn't have to run and fight forever.

The small church was illuminated by candles, their flickering light dancing off the stained glass windows and reflecting against the polished wood pews. A lone figure sitting in the first row stood and faced them. Daryl reached behind himself, touching her, making sure that she was still where he told her to be, that his body was squarely blocking hers. That he would protect her...die for her...it was a double-edged sword for Beth. Daryl loved her enough that he would die for her, and that meant everything. But if Daryl died, she wouldn't choose to live.

"Are you the priest?" Daryl questioned more sharply than he probably should to a potential friend, but it got his point across.

"The priest is dead. I buried him. I mean you no harm." The man's voice carried no passion...no life. He raised his hands to his sides indicating he wasn’t armed. He looked like a strong man, a capable man, a man who might have carried a gun in the world before, but now he had nothing...nothing when everyone needed a weapon. That was when Beth noticed the blood soaked through his shirt sleeve. Daryl noticed at the same time.

"You bit?" Daryl's tone softened. It was still intimidating but no longer aggressive. Maybe she was the only one who could tell the difference.

Daryl didn't lower his crossbow, but his stance was less rigid.

"I am..." He looked down at his arm briefly, watching his own death. Beth pitied him. "But I'm not dead yet. Stay...rest, pray, do whatever you came here for. I'm just waiting out the end." There was no sadness in his voice, just acceptance of his unavoidable fate.

Daryl looked over his shoulder at her. "Go light your candles, say your prayers, but I want you to keep your distance."

Beth nodded.

* * * * *

"When did the fever hit?" Daryl asked idly as he took a seat on the steps leading up to the altar so he was facing the man and had Beth in his line of sight at the back of the church.

And he kept his hand on his crossbow. He wasn't gonna take any more chances ever.

"Just a few hours ago. I was bit last night, so it took its sweet time getting here."

Assessing the older man carefully...he was older, but he seemed strong. Daryl couldn't figure out why he hadn't ended it after he was bit. Daryl didn't believe in suicide. Never had. It was the coward's way out, the easy way. He would rather go out fighting tooth and nail to the bloody end, but if he was bit and alone, that might be a different story. He'd probably pull the trigger.
"How'd it happen?" There was no harm in asking. He had nothin' better to do while Beth said her prayers.

"I brought my wife here. She made her confession once a week. Yesterday afternoon, she went into the confessional. The priest had turned, ripped through the screen, and bit her. I couldn't do anything to save her. I put the priest down and held her until she died." The man paused, but Daryl knew he wasn't done. He was dying, unburdening himself. Daryl wasn't a priest, but the man saw enough likeness in him that apparently he thought Daryl would understand. He could give a dying man that at least. "It took her...a while to go...I should've...I just couldn't bring myself to...to...and I was selfish. I couldn't let go...I just wanted a few more hours, a few precious moments..."

Daryl made sure his face didn't betray his feelings...but having Beth...this man's story made him sick inside. Would he be weak or selfish enough that he would let her suffer if the same fate befell her? No...that was never gonna happen. It wouldn't come to that. It couldn't. He wouldn't let it.

"After my wife died, she turned so quick. I was lost in grief...she bit me and I..." He knew Daryl knew what happened next...didn't have to say it. "I buried her and the priest. Even dug my own grave."

"I'm sorry..." They were the only words he had, but they were sincere.

"It's better this way. I don't have a reason to live without her."

Daryl nodded his head in understanding. He didn't have anything to say that would make a difference.

"So, you got a name?"

"I'm Daryl. Daryl Dixon."

"And your wife?"

Wife...

"Beth. Her name's Beth."

Daryl felt whole inside. He felt pride in having her, even in this dark moment. Especially in this dark moment.

*She's my light...my life.*
~Author's Note: Here is the new chapter everyone! It is a really quiet, soft chapter. After the turmoil of what happened in the last few chapters, Beth and Daryl needed some softness. I hope you enjoy. Thanks as always for reading. I appreciate all of you!~

Beth lit one candle each for Daddy, Maggie, Mama, Shawn, and baby Judith. She stopped, realizing that there weren't enough candles for everyone she lost and cared about. She would light one more candle...one for all the others. It was hard. Even kneeling before the candles in this place of peace, she couldn't form the words in her head to say her silent prayers. She hoped that God understood her intentions, knew her thoughts, knew her for who she was and what was in her heart. She had just lost so much, lost too many people, saw too much pain, suffering, and death that she couldn't pull it all together into one cohesive thought. Still, Beth knelt before God silently, head bowed in reverence.

Then it hit her, the thing she should ask forgiveness for...killing the man at the camp. But the thing was, like she told Daryl...she wasn't sorry. He'd grabbed her, and she'd reacted to protect herself. She hadn't planned to kill him. It didn't make her a monster, but she still didn't feel anything. Her feelings, tears, and sorrow were now only reserved for the people she cared about and the man she loved. All the emotional capacity she'd once possessed for the rest of the world had run dry. The best thing she could manage was to ask God for forgiveness for not respecting another human's life enough to regret what she did...to ask forgiveness and understanding for the person she was forced to become to survive. It was all she had. She wouldn't lie to God or ask for absolution for what she had done.

Beth's thoughts turned again to those people she cared about...Maggie, Glenn, Rick, Carl, Michonne. She and Daryl were still alive, despite everything. Even Daryl said their group...they were fighters...if anyone could still be alive, it would be them. Beth had never been one to ask God for anything for herself. Her prayers had always been for other people. Maybe just this once, she could be selfish.

Dear Heavenly Father. I haven't prayed in a long time, but I haven't lost my faith...maybe even I found more of it. If Maggie and Glenn, and all the rest of my family and our group are alive out there, I ask You to watch over them and grant them Your mercy. Allow them to find just a little hope and love in our world so they know that their sorrow and pain have meaning. If they die, please allow them to find their place in Heaven at Your side where I know Daddy is waiting. Please God, I know I may never see my family or friends again, but if they are alive or at Your side, I can accept that...but please let me keep Daryl...just Daryl if nothing else. He is enough. I need him...more than anything, and I will love, comfort, and honor him as he deserves. Please don't take him from me...

Beth grabbed the very last candle while brushing her tears away, lighting it for Daryl.
"How did you meet her, your Beth?" It was a simple enough question, but Daryl hesitated. He wasn't used to being all chummy with new people. "I lost my wife. I'm dead already. Nothing you tell me really matters."

Daryl realized he didn't even know the man's name.

"What's your name?"

"William."

Daryl nodded. It was a solid name. At least he wasn't talking to a complete stranger.

"I don't know...just a few weeks or so after the shit hit the fan, my brother and I met up with a group of survivors outside Atlanta. We eventually went to the CDC...they didn't know shit except everybody's infected. We left the city. One of the kids with our group got lost..." Daryl paused and took a deep breath before he continued, "another kid got shot, and we ended up on her Daddy's farm. He was a vet...was able to save the boy, and he let us stay."

"That's where you were all along...what happened?" At least he didn't ask what happened to Sophia. It wasn't doin' no harm talking though. Maybe talkin' it out would do him some good.

"Nope...a herd came through that first fall. The farm fell. Some of us died, but most of us, we made it out. We spent the winter on the road...just tryin' to survive...tryin to find a place. We found a prison, cleared it. Someone tried to take it from us. He lost. We brought in more people...had a community. Then we got hit by a sickness...some walker plague...but we made it. The thing was, the person who tried to take our home came back...hit us while we were weak...broke us..." That was a lot of talking. Daryl needed to let go. This was a church...it was the place for it, right?

"And the rest of your people?"

"Beth's Daddy, he'd been taken prisoner. She saw him die..." His voice wavered. "Her sister, brother-in-law, all our family...I don't know. Beth and me made it out together...that's all I'm sure of. I couldn't save 'em."

"How long have you been on your own?"

"I don't know...a month, maybe more." Daryl had lost track of the days. Days and nights stopped mattering when they were just trying to survive. "We're just looking for a chance..."

"The plague was what got us here. People were making it. Some of the younger men, a lot who made it home after...were military boys...my son...well, they organized and went out hunting the dead. But when the dead brought the plague...nothing could stop it. I lost my boy to the sickness. And my daughter...she was in college...never made it home. Your wife...she reminds me of my girl. Sweet and gentle," Daryl heard the pain in his voice...the pain of a man who'd lost everything.

"Why haven't you ended it?" Daryl asked. It was a fair enough question between men.

"I was going to. I even went out and stood in the grave I dug for myself...gun in my mouth, ready to eat a bullet."

"What stopped you?" Maybe he shouldn't push the issue...
"Do you love your wife?" There was a sad nostalgia in the stranger’s words.

"I never loved no one before her. I won't ever love anyone else..." It was true. Daryl knew love was a one time deal for him. Hell, he'd never even thought he'd love anyone, never wanted to. Never thought anyone would ever love him, but it happened all the same. "I just...I'm not good enough for her...I couldn't save her...she had to...I should be able to protect her, but I failed..."

The dark thoughts of Beth's kill haunted him. The blood on her hands...the stain she would carry because of him...

"That's how you know." Daryl didn't understand what he said. Maybe the fever was finally taking over, and the older man was moving into the end stage.

"Know what?"

"Take it from a man who loved a woman all his life. You think you're not good enough for her...but that's how you know you are. She makes you want to be better, not for yourself, but for her. That's how you know..."

Daryl looked to the back of the church where Beth was on her knees. The candles in front of her illuminated Beth in a heavenly light. He hoped she could really move past what she was forced to do...not just say it because she thought that was what he needed to hear. If her light was extinguished because of him...that was something he could never forgive. He wondered briefly what Beth was praying for. All her goodness, hope, light, faith, belief that there was something in the world for them...if God wouldn't answer her prayer, they were all fucked.

"Would you do anything for her?"

"Mmm-hmm." That was something Daryl was absolutely sure about himself. He would do anything for Beth, without question, without hesitation, without regret...

"Well, I never much subscribed to God, but my wife did. She believed with all her heart to the very end. Standing out there in my grave, I couldn't help wondering 'What if...what if there is something after all this shit?' I heard God frowns on suicide. What if because I was too big a coward to ride out my fate, I lost my chance to be with her again? It was too big of a risk."

Daryl understood completely.

*                     *                     *                     *                     *

When Beth finally stood, her knees were sore, and her back was aching; she hadn't even noticed while she’d been lost in thought. Daryl was still talking quietly with the other man at the front of the church. He'd told her to keep her distance, so she gravitated to the piano tucked in an alcove. Sliding onto the polished wooden bench, allowing her fingers to gently caress the keys, she pushed down on one, the note echoing around the church. Beth wondered idly if their music ever reached the heavens. Could God even hear the melody over the screams and cries of unanswered prayers for mercy that now encompassed the world? It didn't matter. Sometimes music was an answer in itself. Beth played a simple melody, surprised she was able to remember the notes with everything else bouncing around in her head.

It startled her, not realizing Daryl had slid on the bench beside her until they were shoulder to
shoulder, but she kept herself from jumping, playing the repetition of notes again, waiting for Daryl to say something, but he didn't. Beth watched as he brought his hand up to the keys and tried to mimic her melody. She couldn't help smiling at his attempt. His rhythm was alright, but the keys were all wrong. Beth stopped, showing him the right keys, not speaking, just doing. She played the melody again, and he replicated it, shaky and unsure at first, but after they played it together four times, Beth stopped, and Daryl played on his own perfectly. He smiled softly, looking down at the keys.

"He wanted to know if you'd play something for him?" Daryl asked quietly, glancing over at her.

She nodded. She wouldn't deny a dying man's request.

"What does he want to hear?" Beth really didn't know what kind of music such an occasion called for.

"He said something soft and beautiful. I really don't know what kind of song that is, but I'm sure you do." Daryl's voice was odd. It seemed less burdened...less worried.

"I think I know something..." fingers caressing the keys as she envisioned the notes in her head.

"We're gonna stay here with him until he's gone...bury him."

"Okay." Beth didn't question Daryl's judgment. If they weren't in danger, it was the decent thing to do. The human thing. Those were attributes the Daryl she knew and loved was never short on. Humanity and decency.

"And Beth, he promised to give us something..."

"What?" It was a mystery. She had absolutely no idea what this dying man could give them that would make that big of a difference to them...for Daryl to mention it in such a way.

"A chance..."

Daryl reached over and grabbed her hand. Then she realized what she heard in his voice that she hadn't been able to put her finger on. Hope. Real hope.
Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

~Author's Note: Hey guys, here is the new chapter. It has a tiny bit of a cliffhanger, but I promise not to leave you hanging too long. I will try to get the follow-up chapter posted by late Friday or Saturday. Hope you enjoy. Thanks you as always!~

Being in the church, Beth felt secure enough to fall asleep on one of the velvet cushioned pews. Maybe it was because she felt safe. Maybe it was because she had unburdened herself. Maybe it was because she just needed to sleep. For whatever reason, sleep came and took her to a beautiful, safe, warm sanctuary...

*                      *                      *                      *                      *

Beth snuggled further under the down comforter allowing it to cover her head resting on a fluffy feather pillow. Even the mattress was soft and topped with down. It was like sleeping in a feather nest, or on a cloud...it was heavenly. She heard crackling and could smell the comforting scent of a warm fire...it was perfect...a dream...

A dream...

Suddenly startled...was Daryl with her? Why wasn't he holding her? Was Daryl lost to her? She felt compelled to open her eyes, but sleep clung to them and fought her attempt. When she was able to peel her eyelids back, her ethereal dreamscape fully revealed itself. The large airy room was bathed in the flickering light of the fireplace, the heavy drapes drawn tight across the bay window, and Daryl was sleeping soundly on his side, facing her. There was no crossbow in the bed between them. Just to know, Beth carefully slid her hand under Daryl's pillow and found no guns there either. But why would there be...this place was beautiful, safe, peaceful, and restricted to her mind, Beth wishing she could visit more often...

She watched Daryl, appreciating him. He looked so much different when he was sleeping...less fierce, less aggressive, less serious...not so burdened by the weight of the world. But no...that wasn't necessarily true anymore. When they were alone and safe, all those cares seemed to melt away from him...those characteristics were reserved for the rest of the world, not her. Beth reached out to touch him, just to make sure he was really there. It all felt so real, as real as a dream had ever felt. She ran her fingers softly down his arm, not wanting to wake him, but it did anyway.

Daryl blinked his eyes several times until he opened them slowly and gazed at her. The corners of his lips turned up in a slight, sleepy smile. He grabbed her hand in his, intertwining his fingers with hers, letting out a breathy contented sigh. They laid there, face to face, not talking...not needing to.

"Hey..." Daryl was finally the one who broke the silence. It came out almost timid...it felt like
everything was different...different good, like they were two people in love, waking up together, in a normal world. It was a dream...a very good dream.

"Hi..." She replied quiet as a whisper, not wanting to break the spell.

They were just a boy and a girl, a boy and a girl who found each other, a boy and a girl who found love. There was nothing better than this...

"You're beautiful." His voice was soft, still tired, full of sleep.

Even in a dreamscape, Beth felt herself blush at his compliment. Compliments were still so new between them. He would probably think she was silly for blushing at his words, but there was no way he could tell in just the firelight. Even if he could, it didn't matter anyway.

"It's so soft...so fluffy here...I wish we could stay forever..."

"Maybe we can." Dream Daryl was much more positive than real Daryl.

"Forever's not really an option in our world...well, except for love..." Why was she going and ruining a beautiful moment with the ugly reality?

"Maybe now forever is an option for us." Daryl the optimist was a good thing.

Beth wanted to believe.

"We're safe now, Beth. We have a chance." And he believed it...she could hear it in him...he believed it down to his soul.

"It's a beautiful dream. I don't want to wake up." Softly, afraid that if she said it too loud, she would be thrown back into the darkness of reality.

"Hmph...you're already awake..." Daryl kept his voice as quiet as hers for whatever reason. And apparently dream Daryl was a liar...it was a beautiful lie though.

And Beth, he promised to give us something...a chance...

If only it was true...

*                      *                      *                      *                      *

Daryl's first instinct was to wonder how in the hell he could ever be the subject of one of Beth's dreams, but that self-doubting part of himself was becoming more and more distant. He was wide awake now, watching Beth contemplate him. This was his life.

And they were safe, not just for the night...they were secure, stood a real chance. He didn't just want to believe or need to believe it, he knew it, and that was saying a lot.

Daryl thought back to what he felt he needed to make being with Beth good enough for her...he could only imagine her in a soft bed with feather pillows and crisp white sheets. He never thought in a million years that he would be able to give her that, anything decent for that matter, but this...this reality was better than he'd ever had. It was what Beth deserved, and maybe it was what he deserved too. It was funny, the difference a few days could make. The images in his head, what he wanted to
do to Beth...with Beth, things he would've hated himself for, now they all just seemed natural and normal in this beautiful reality. It still scared the shit outta him. Probably nothin' would ever make that feeling go away.

He had no idea what he was going to do, but he had to do something. He couldn't just lay beside her, not tonight. He shouldn't make the first move. Not with Beth. Daryl had promised himself that when they went there, she would have to do it...but why? It didn't matter now, did it? And Beth knew how to say no. Maybe that's what scared him, the idea that there was no safeguard...no guarantee that she would say no. Shit...he was worried about all this, all the uncertainties, but these were choices he would've wished to have had in his life before if he’d ever thought about what he really wanted.

What Daryl wanted now won out over the fear. He drew back the heavy covers, watching Beth carefully, making sure that he was aware of all her reactions. They were both still in the clothes they ran in. That seemed to be how they always ended up...in the state they fought or fled in. He'd put Beth to bed and crashed beside her with only the thought of safety and the sleep that easily followed that rare sense of security. Dirty clothes in a clean bed hadn't even crossed his mind.

Maybe it was too soon for everything, but he could enjoy a little, a small step forward...he had enough self control, didn't he? He would never know if he didn't try.

Daryl found himself close beside Beth, propped up on his elbow looking down on her. She let out a soft breath of anticipation as he leaned in to kiss her. It all started with a kiss, right? He was an animal of instinct...problem was, he had no real instincts for this. If he let instinct take over, he would fuck it all up, and everything would go to shit. Daryl needed to think things out, act carefully, do right by Beth no matter how far they went. He did let go though. He owned Beth with his kiss...deep, passionate...letting out all the pent up desire that he'd had no other opportunity to release. He'd never been a kisser...that was far too intimate for who he'd used to be, but it seemed to work its way out naturally with her. And Beth hadn't ever complained before. She always tasted so sweet...so addictive. Daryl had never been one for drugs...saw what they did to all the people in his life...but Beth was his, and he was addicted. Maybe he wasn't so much different than Merle. Merle had meth, and he had Beth.

When Daryl sat up in bed, offering Beth his hand and pulling her up with him, she apparently knew where he was going. He felt her small, warm hand slide under his wife-beater, finding its way to the scar the bolt left in his side...a scar she couldn't see but knew was there because she knew him...she knew...He reached behind his head, pulling his shirt off and tossing it aside with no reservations. He really had no reservations anymore...at least not with Beth. She watched and waited. Since he made the first move, apparently Beth perceived this as his game.

"Can I touch you?" Daryl repeated the same words she'd used on him the night he realized he was in love with her.

Beth nodded and waited, still calm while he hesitated for a second before he reached out to her again. As Beth's shirt found its way over her head by his hands, a small ball of anxiety took form in his chest. This wasn't the first time he'd taken her shirt off...but this time, he wanted to go further when the other time had been meant to stop Beth from wanting to make what he thought would be a mistake for her.

And he was nervous...he paused, felt his heart quiver...but that didn't stop him from admiring her, seeing the firelight glow against her milky pale skin. Daryl contemplated Beth's half undressed state.

_Damn, girls in pants..._

If Beth had been wearing the slinky nightgown she'd taken from the other house, he might've been
able to pull off romantic or maybe even seductive, at least enough that she would've known he was makin' an effort. But jeans...there was no smooth way to gettin' them off...at least he didn't know how. Better to fumble and get it over with, just rip off the Band-Aid to get to something better. His hands went to the button at her waist, and he couldn't help smiling just a little, maybe from embarrassment, or what he didn't know...but he couldn't look up at her, not in this awkward moment...

"Beth...could you...there's really no way to go 'bout this other than...just the most direct..." Shit, he sounded so clinical. It wasn't comin' out right at all.

Her quiet, breathy laugh reminded him that not everything could be perfect, and it didn’t have to be...they both recognized that. Daryl felt Beth's hand against his face, and he looked up, making eye contact, realizing that she was just as nervous as he was...of course she was. He needed to get his shit together if he didn't wanna fuck it up for the both of them. Beth laid back in the bed, her chest rising and falling steadily, her eyes closed, her lips slightly parted. God, he wanted her...and what was worse...he could have her if he chose to.

One step at a time...no need to rush.

Maybe he wasn't so bad at this. Daryl slid her jeans down and rid himself of that barrier with very little effort...all Beth had to do was raise her hips for him. It went far better than expected, and his prize laid on the bed waiting for him. He wanted to look, not touch, but that would probably make Beth nervous...and this should be more about her than what he wanted.

Daryl allowed himself to run his hand unapologetically up the line of her leg as he moved back beside her. He traced the bottom edge of her lacey bra thinkin' she was as good as Christmas morning, a beautiful gift, just waitin' to be unwrapped. He'd never had one of those Christmas mornings, never go a present to unwrap neither, but he'd always imagined...and this was better. Leaning down, lookin' into those wide, blue eyes, he lost himself for a second.

"Are we good?" He just needed to make sure...needed to know they were on the same page.

Beth didn't answer. She just arched up into him, her lips asking to be kissed. Maybe she didn't realize...maybe she was too caught up in the moment, her hands in his hair and clenching the back of his neck, to notice that he'd reached and unhooked her bra, now letting his free hand trail down her spine. Beth shivered under his touch, pulling away from his lips but face still so close that he could feel a breath escape from her mouth as he urged her to lay back down on the bed. She turned her face away from him as he finished with the bra, bringing her slender arms up, shyly covering her breasts. He would give her the time she needed, occupying himself, letting his fingers linger on top her arm, feeling her light hair stand up on end.

Something caught in Daryl's chest...it was almost unpleasant...the emotion...but he knew it wasn't. It felt like when he was choked up, tryin' to get words out, but he wasn't tryin' to talk now...until he did...

"This is what it's supposed to feel like...life...love...?" It was a question maybe...he just needed some sort of affirmation about what he was feeling.

That brought her eyes to him, and this time, he looked away, shaking his head in confusion.

Even ground...they were on even ground now. Her warm hands cupped his face, bringing him back to look at her.

"It has to be...I don't know what else it would feel like..." Beth's words proved that she was feeling
the same thing.

And her eyes told even more. Beth understood completely...that he was unsure...nervous and as confused as she was. Daryl may have been able to act with confidence, touch with knowledge and a certain amount of basic experience, but everything...all of this was new to him. It was his first time in a situation like this...

Beth knew, and that made it okay.

When his hand found its way to her small, soft breast, his thumb gently caressing the sensitive flesh that stiffened at his touch, Beth put her hand on top of his, assuring him that what he was doing was right. Daryl lost himself after that moment, guided by instincts that he didn't know he had...instincts that moved him to be gentle and slow and attuned to Beth's reactions, not his own pressing desires and needs. His hand wandered down her body as he focused on Beth's lips on his, her kisses that left him entirely unsatisfied...needing more...everything she was willing to give...her hand grasping the tense muscles in his upper arm. Daryl tried to focus entirely on Beth, but it was too hard...he couldn't ignore what she was doing to him just by being there. Pressing his palm against her prominent hipbone, Beth was small and slender, but she had a nice shape he couldn't help enjoy. Daryl ventured further down, catching her outer thigh in his hand, squeezing slightly, feeling Beth's desperate gasp against his lips and her fingers digging tighter into his upper arm where she held him, or was she holding herself steady...

So that was good...remember that. Daryl made note of what pleased her.

Feeling confident, he allowed his fingers to trace the outer edge of Beth's panties, then took the liberty to go just under the edge, barely grazing her downy hair. She tensed, but that was normal, right? When he tried to slide his hand between her warm thighs, Beth was resistive. Maybe another approach, but he didn't want to fight her or force her into anything. That wasn't him...never had been.

"Beth, do you trust me?" Daryl hoped he knew the answer, brushing her hair back from her face so he could see her response.

"Yes..." He barely heard it, but she nodded her head too.

Daryl brought his hand back up her body, moving over her, pressing his knee between her thighs, hoping he wasn't being too aggressive, but she gave in easily. His lips met her neck, her chest, he allowed himself to kiss her breasts, feeling her tremble slightly as his lips brushed against skin that had never been kissed before...going slow, more he wanted to do, but he didn’t wanna scare her. When his tongue dipped into her navel, Daryl heard and felt her let out a small, breathy giggle. Well, there went his limited powers of seduction. Until he straightened, looking up at Beth smile...the tension and anxiety gone...it was just too good...
Chapter 37

Chapter Notes

~Author's Note: I guess I probably don't need to say this because last chapter was a pretty good indication, but just in case-WARNING-there is some sexual content in this chapter. I don't want anyone to have too many expectations yet, so I will say that Daryl and Beth don't go anywhere near all the way, but there is intimacy. Just to preface this chapter, we all know that sometimes intimacy is complex and confusing, especially with two people in love for the first time. I think that Daryl and Beth would be confused and awkward, and that was how I attempted to write this chapter. I hope you enjoy, and please don't judge me too harshly. When this was written, it was my first attempt at writing this type of content. Thank you for reading!~

So it wasn't a dream...it couldn't be...but she wasn't going to ask how. She didn't need to know.

Beth sucked in a quick breath when she felt Daryl's thumbs hook under the waist of her panties. She closed her eyes tight, dealing with the newness, lifting her hips so he could slide them down her legs. Despite Daryl confiding in her that he'd never had any sort of romantic relationship and the nervousness and anxiety his words revealed earlier, he was good at what he was doing...did he know that? He had to...the way he touched her with confidence, kept constant contact with her skin...the room was warm from the crackling fire...but she felt feverish...

Daryl between her legs, his hands firmly on her thighs asked for more space, and she complied, trying to ignore the nerves making her tummy all twitchy. He'd asked her if she trusted him, and she did. It would never be an issue of trust between them...never had...it was just the unknown. And a million things were running through her mind. When Daryl was close to her, touching her, kissing her, beside her...when she could feel him...his proximity, all she could think about was him, but just now there was a disconnect which gave her mind the opportunity to wander...not just wander, but run wild.

She became self-conscious, wondering if she was playing her part right...what should she be doing? She wasn't doing anything for Daryl.

Beth's thoughts were momentarily averted as she felt Daryl's lips make contact with her hipbone, his broad hand firmly pressing her ribcage.

"Ahhh..." The sound escaped Beth's mouth...hoping she didn't sound stupid.

She wasn't touching him. She wasn't doing anything for him...she was ruining it for Daryl. He was going to hate her.

Daryl's lips found their way to her upper thigh. She caught her lower lip between her teeth, feeling the butterflies fluttering in her stomach.

Did Daryl plan to go all the way tonight? As much as it scared her, she wanted that reality, that connection, ever since she thought she lost him in the woods to the herd. They didn't know if they had a tomorrow, and while they had tonight, they shouldn't take it for granted. Time was precious...a gift...
Beth was startled from her contemplation when Daryl kissed her inner thigh. His hand found her breast, but she took it in hers instead, lacing her fingers through his. She needed to feel connected to him. He squeezed her hand tight, so tight it hurt a little, but it was good. Beth tilted her head back in the down pillow, giving herself permission to enjoy the moment.

Maybe she should offer to help Daryl with his pants...or would he do that on his own when the time was right...? He knew, right? He knew that she really had no idea what she should do? All Beth knew was that she was naked, and maybe...probably Daryl should be naked too. That would make her feel less self-conscious...

Sometimes she just thought too much. She'd always had the tendency to over think things. And Daryl didn't seem to have a problem taking the lead...

Beth stiffened and panicked when she felt Daryl's mouth going somewhere unexpected. Was that where this was headed....she wasn't ready for that. That was something couples worked up to, wasn't it? Beth was flushed and embarrassed just at the thought.

"Daryl...no, stop..." It came out more sharply than she intended, driven by fear.

Daryl ripped his hand away from hers and recoiled while Beth propped herself up on one elbow, her other arm crossing her breasts, why she didn't know...he'd already seen...maybe just out of modesty. They were totally disconnected now. Daryl had moved from between her thighs, sitting on his knees at the end of the bed, hands turned out at his sides showing that he hadn't meant to give offense. But it hadn't been that. He'd read her wrong...well, he'd read her actions and words right...that just wasn't how she'd intended them. Beth crossed her legs in the same modesty that had forced her to cover her breasts. She'd hurt Daryl, his pride, driven him away, and now she had no idea how to fix it. She should've just let him...

But it wasn't anger that captured his face in the firelight. His expression was drawn now; Daryl was confused...worried...

"Sorry...I didn't mean to go too far..." Stumbling over his words.

Beth felt a small piece of calm wash over her.

"No...you didn't...I just...I want to feel you close to me. I want to feel you over me...your weight on me. I want to feel you..." She was having a problem getting her words together too, and maybe that wasn't the right answer, but it was what she had, what she needed.

The concern and confusion melted from Daryl's face. He nodded slowly.

"Will you kiss me?" She sounded so timid, even to herself.

Daryl nodded again and moved slowly toward her...slowly, but without hesitation...

* * * * *

"Daryl...no, stop!"

Daryl jerked his hand from hers, shooting up away from Beth, stopping on his knees at the end of the mattress. He'd acted too quick and almost found himself flying off the foot of the bed with his sorry
ass landing on the floor. He held his hands out at his sides to try to calm Beth, show her that he
hadn't meant any harm. Beth was leaning up on her arm, the other defensively hiding her chest, and
her legs crossed in the same protective manner. She was looking at him with
fear...confusion...pain...disgust? Daryl couldn't tell...he couldn't read her.

One thing he knew was that he'd fucked up. He just wasn't sure how.

Never offered to go down on a girl, but he hadn't made it that far with Beth, so he couldn't have
fucked up there. He didn't have the chance to.

He hadn't been touching her in any way that could've hurt her...caused her pain...

Beth had been pretty damned adamant with her no. Maybe he'd just crossed the line. He was
confused and worried to say the least. He wouldn't touch her again. No always meant no.

"Sorry...I didn't mean to go too far..." He kept his voice as soft and even as possible.

Beth seemed to settle down almost instantly at his apology. Was he overreacting? Was she? He had
no idea what in the hell was going on. He loved her...but emotions and feelings were hard to deal
with...even harder to try to understand.

"No...you didn't...I just..." Beth's words were broken, but they were calm, not angry or scared
anymore. "I want to feel you close to me...I want to feel you over me...your weight on me...I want to
feel you..."

Beth said exactly the right thing, exactly what Daryl needed to hear to repair the damage of the harsh
no. There were a lot of wants that came out of Beth's mouth, and he was willing to give her
everything she wanted. He realized he'd made the wrong move. Things didn't just need to move
slowly, they needed to be more traditional. More connected and together. Beth wasn't looking for
pleasure for pleasure's sake. What Daryl had offered would've been just that. She wanted closeness,
intimacy...and Daryl couldn't say that he didn't want the same thing, because he did...even if he
didn't know what it felt like.

"Will you kiss me?" It came out softly...but she didn't even need to ask.

Daryl nodded as he moved slowly back towards Beth. No sudden movements. He didn't wanna
spook her, but he did want to give her what she asked for...

Beth went for his belt. That very forward move surprised him, Daryl catching up her hands, not
wanting to push her away but needing to stop her.

"Whoa, Beth. Let's slow down..."

Beth didn't seem upset by his gentle rejection. She was probably just trying to do what she thought
was the next expected thing, but that wasn't how this went. Daryl unconsciously shook his head at
the thought. It wasn't about what was expected...what came next...it needed to be done for the right
reasons. She just needed to stop and feel the moment. They needed to feel it together...

"What?" Beth's question was laced with self-doubt. He hadn't meant to shake his head or for her to
notice.

"You're beautiful. Just be still a minute. Let me look at you..." It was a quick save, but it wasn't a lie.
Daryl hadn't let himself just look before because he didn't want to make her uncomfortable, but if she
was ready for him to strip too, Beth could give him this.
And she did. As Daryl's eyes appreciated the sights before him, he couldn't help think about Beth's innocence and the beautiful but naive conclusions it left her with. Beth wouldn't let him go down on her, but she was willing to let him have her, giving a very precious piece of herself to him. Daryl was afraid she still had no idea what she was getting herself into...what she actually wanted. Hell, he had no idea what he was getting himself into either. Truth was, Beth may have plenty of experience in the emotions department, but he was the only one with experience with sex...no matter how shitty his experience was, experience was experience...the mechanics were all pretty much the same. Daryl needed to stop Beth from rushing, stop himself from rushing, set the pace despite what either of them wanted...what he wanted. Rushing, especially now, especially tonight, would just ruin it. They were going to need to learn from each other.

Enough looking and way too much thinking drove Daryl into action. Beth was much more receptive to his touch, less awkward, so he was much more willing to be forward, to move with purpose. Beth didn't stop him when his fingers ran through her southern blonde curls. Her body tensed, but he just kissed her deeper to keep her mind in the moment...not on all the other worries and thoughts that were probably rushing through her head. Before going further, Daryl paused, stilled himself, touching his forehead to hers, not giving Beth the opportunity to look away. When he found her warmth, Beth shyly tried to move away from beneath him...not enough that she was saying no, but more of a reaction to the unknown. She thought she was ready to dive head first into sex, but she was still so confused.

"Shhh...Beth, stop worryin'..." Daryl didn't move his hand away, but he wanted to calm her...comfort her.

Seriously...he was not qualified to be the teacher. She deserved someone better at this...someone better...but at least he wasn't some fumbling teenage boy in the backseat of a car. He cared, and maybe that was enough of a difference to matter. Beth's body relaxed under him all the same, despite his shortcomings. It didn't take long for Daryl to find the right spot. His past experiences never really left a lot of room for foreplay, but he wasn't totally clueless. Was it wrong that he enjoyed it when Beth involuntarily arched her hips against his hand? He could feel Beth's fingers traveling down his back, even passing over his scars, stopping to trace 'em, but her touch wasn't judging. She knew that part of him and was comfortable enough with him, with what they shared, not to ignore their existence. If it were anyone else, he would've flinched away...but it wasn't...it was Beth. Her hand found its way under his back waistband, then her movements suddenly stopped.

Beth's body tensed under him again, but Daryl realized this time for an entirely different reason. He smiled to himself...maybe his smile was a little cocky, but that was okay...there was no one to read it that way or call him on it. Her hand left his back to desperately grip his bicep, her other palm planted squarely on his chest. Was she trying to push him away?

"Daryl...please, just...wait..." Beth's voice was ragged and urgent.

What? What the Hell?!

Daryl was so fucking confused, but he stopped.

"Really...?" He needed something...anything...this was beyond him. She was saying no to this?

He watched her so carefully, waiting for any type of answer. Beth shook her head in the ambiguous little way she did sometimes, and once again, she wouldn't look at him. She was scared...just scared...and there was absolutely nothing to be afraid of. Not now at least. But that was okay. It was his job now to show her, to take her there. Daryl bent in to kiss her. Nothing aggressive, no tongue, no teeth, just lips...simple, gentle...a side of him no one else would ever know.
Everything was so much more complicated than Beth ever imagined. The way everyone talked, all her friends, everything on TV and in movies, everything was so easy. Maybe she was messed up...too complicated. But TV and movies were fiction, and maybe for her friends it had been easier because there were no extreme emotions. In this world, everything was so much more vital to survival, every connection and relationship more important because there was so little left, and when you found that person...the one you wanted to spend your life with...everything had to be just right. She couldn't lose him. This was her life...her reality, and she was lost in love with him.

Daryl was doing everything right; she was just afraid she was still doing everything wrong.

Then she couldn't think coherently anymore. Something more instinctual...more primal wiped her mind and only allowed her to focus on the physical sensations. Daryl's fingers on her, their slow circular pressure in just the right place, the presence of his body just above her, his scent...Beth ran her hand down his back. His muscles tensed, and some trembled involuntarily at her touch. She traced his scars, not avoiding them. They were a part of Daryl. They were his past, and she loved all of him, past and present...he was her future. It all made him who he was. Beth let her hand slip under his pants. If he was allowed to touch, so could she. Her hand headed lower to caress his cheek...and it didn't seem like he was going to stop her. Since that last night in the R.V. when she saw him washing himself, saw him from behind, the whole back of him bare...she thought about how beautiful he truly was as a person, and she wanted to touch him, all of him. And since that image was so fresh in her mind, it was as good a place to start as any.

But Beth didn't get the chance. She felt a strange tightness building. Her pulse was racing even faster...her heart beating so hard she couldn't think...Her breaths were becoming short and sharp...it was all just too much...

"Daryl...please, just...wait..." She was barely able to get those words out and keep her senses about her.

Beth just needed everything to be still...to freeze just for a moment...

Daryl stopped. He was still...didn't move a muscle.

"Really...?" He was shocked...Daryl furrowed his brow.

As the intense sensations faded away, Beth suddenly felt unsatisfied...empty...and really stupid for stopping him.

She couldn't even look at him...feeling so naive. All she could do was shake her head a little...hell, she didn't even know what that was supposed to mean.

Daryl's lips were on hers as his reply to her non-answer, reassuring her. Soft, sweet, gentle, innocent...and she allowed herself to just feel...his lips...his fingers circling her place of pleasure, bringing her back to life. The pressure built, turning to tiny pulses of pure bliss, intensifying as Beth gave in. She couldn't stop the small breaths and soft noises that escaped her lips unbidden. Grasping the bulges in Daryl's upper arm, her fingers digging into his tense muscles, her other hand kneading into his shoulder, trying to pull him closer...she hoped she wasn't hurting him. When it hit her, the pleasure racked Beth’s whole being...Daryl's lips were on her neck...she buried her face against him.
and let go, her body shuddering at the release...

Beth must have lost some time...or was just overtaken by the moment of ecstasy. When she came back to him, Daryl was still with her, closer to her now...so much closer. And everything was so much more sensitive. Daryl rested on top of her, propped up on one arm, his other hand stroking back her hair. He was resting against her, between her thighs...his hardness pressed against the most sensitive spot...just his pants in between, every small move sending waves of feeling to her core, so intense that it was almost unpleasant, but she didn't want him to move, ever. And his hips...their pressure, the point where their presence met her...it was just too much...too good...it was like his body was made especially for her...

Daryl shifted, taking his weight off her.

"No...don't..." Beth was surprised the words came out...so desperate...

He moved back into place, where she wanted him...

"Okay, pretty girl..." Daryl spoke so tenderly. He had a soft smile, looking down on her...

No more words were needed.
Chapter 38

Chapter Notes

~Author's Note: Just a little bit more NSFW intimacy in this chapter. Hope you enjoy!~

After allowing Beth time to properly bask in her afterglow, he needed to be closer to her. He needed to have her bare skin pressed against his, wrap his arms tight around her...he just wanted to hold her. Daryl sat up, bringing Beth with him until she was resting on his thighs. She was breathing normally again, now possessing a glow that made her look even more ethereal than usual, even more fucking desirable if that was possible. He was going in to pull her closer when he felt his belt being unbuckled. He froze. How did he not notice what she'd been doing?

"Beth..."

She looked at him; her shy eyes broke him...

He didn't wanna say no...so he didn't.

"Beth, we're not gonna..."

"I know...just let me..."

Daryl closed his eyes and nodded, focusing on his breathing. Everything became more acute...the anxiety building in his chest, his nerves standing on end, the sound of his fly unzipping. Waking up beside Beth in a safe, warm, comfortable bed may have seemed surreal...but nothing about this was...it was all very real. When Beth's hand first touched him, his body involuntarily convulsed, but as she freed him of the constricting restraint of his pants, he literally...literally let out a sigh of relief.

Fuck, this is bad...

Beth was totally naked, on him, just inches away...before, his securely belted, buttoned, and zipped pants provided a very concrete barrier. Now, that safety was off...he was a loaded gun...with a hair trigger...and that wasn't who he wanted to be with Beth. All he could think about was himself...what he needed. This was where the danger of losing all sense of right and wrong came into play.

Beth's touch was soft...hesitant...a caress...stroking the tips of her fingers up and down his hard length...it was driving him fucking insane. Daryl kept his eyes clenched tight. He was already close to the edge. If he looked at her, saw her, saw what she was doing to him, it would be enough to drive him over, and then it would all be done.

Daryl had the burning urge to grab Beth's hand, wrap it around his dick, and show her just how he wanted to be handled...but it was too aggressive. He fought himself...she'd allowed him to explore; it was only fair she had her turn.

Instinct was a bitch, especially when you were fighting the fucker while tryin’ to ignore a throbbing cock, aching balls, and the beautiful girl you loved who was fucking straddling your lap. All Daryl could think about was pushing Beth back on that bed and driving hard into her as deep as he could go until he absolutely owned her...all of her...every part that he would never let anyone else touch. That was what the dangerous side of him wanted, the person he used to be who hadn't totally
disappeared...the feral animal that still lived deep inside. He realized and stopped himself before he
did anything he could never take back...damage that couldn't be undone.

Forcing his eyes open, seeing gentle Beth, her hair falling in her face as she still hesitantly
explored...she was what stilled his dangerous nature. Beth made him a better man. He was loosing
his battle with instinct and need, his hand coming to rest on her upper back as he moved to ease her
onto the bed. This wasn't how he planned it, but hell, when did life ever turn out like anyone
planned? He might be losing the battle with instinct, but he could still win the war. He could go easy
on Beth, be gentle with her, fight his darker instinct, do right by Beth. He loved her. He could make
love to her, or at least he could try.

"Uhhh..."

Daryl didn't even realize what happened until the groan flew outta his mouth. Beth grasped him
suddenly, her firm grip a startling change from gentle caresses. That stopped him in his tracks. He
started to close his eyes again, but he just couldn't. Beth looked up as she stroked him slowly but
with purposeful intent. Biting her lower lip endearingly, her eyes asked questions he shouldn't have
to answer...all her insecurity over nothin’.

Fuck...this ain't gonna be good...it's been too fucking long...

Daryl couldn't hold on even if he wanted to. Instead, when his pleasure hit him, he buried his face in
her hair at her shoulder, his hand desperately clenching the back of her neck.

"God, Beth..." he sighed raggedly into her skin.

When he was finished, Daryl pulled her as close as possible, her hands resting on his chest between
them. He kissed her neck, sucking at her soft flesh...not caring if he marked her...she was his.

"Thank you..." whispering breathlessly behind her ear.

*                      *                      *                      *                      *                      *                      *

He didn't have the slightest urge to run. Normally, once the deed was done, Daryl was dressed and
headed for the hills before anybody dared to get too close and cuddly. Granted, this hadn't been sex,
but it had been so much better than anything he'd done before. He didn't wanna move...ever. Beth
was resting on his chest, her soft breasts pressed against him, her eyes watching him carefully. Daryl
idly raked his fingers through her loose hair tumbling down her bare back. Her mouth opened, and
she drew in a breath like she was gettin’ ready to say something, but he put her off gently.

"Shhh...just give me a minute..."

Beth smiled, twitching her lips back and forth in a cute little manner, her chin resting on his chest as
she continued watching him.

Daryl didn't have the urge to run, but he sure in the hell could use a smoke...old habits died hard.
Come to think of it, he still had the pack he'd found at the house...but they were buried somewhere
out in the car, and finding it would require getting outta bed.

* Hell no to that!
Taking in a deep breath, exhaling slowly, this was all he needed. He let his hand brush down Beth's back where her body laid beside him, just able to reach and run over the curve of her smooth ass cheek. She flinched but didn't pull away. It would just take time...for both of 'em.

"Come here." It came out more aggressive than it should've. It was a command rather than a request.

*Nothin' to do about it now.*

Even though he couldn't have a cig, he could have something better, the taste of her mouth on his lips. Beth wasn't in a mood to say *no*...her hair tickling his chest and shoulders as she leaned down, turning herself over to him.

If he couldn't have her...which was probably for the best at this point, well, this would have to be enough. This was the first time...the only time, he'd ever let himself go with Beth. He crushed her bare body against his chest, thrusting his tongue into her mouth, assaulting her in the only way that made sense in the moment. Beth attempted to participate, but Daryl didn't leave much opportunity for her to do anything except take what he gave her. His better sense tried to intercede, telling him that he needed to beat down this dominant, aggressive bullshit or Beth was gonna hate him...but that thought didn't stop him from catching her lower lip between his teeth as she pulled away, short of breath. It was just a kiss anyway, no damage was done.

"Uhhh...ahh..." An unreadable noise escaped her mouth as she pushed away from him, palm firmly planted on his chest, her fingers coming up to touch her swollen lips.

The weight of her hand on his chest, her proximity, the fact that he was staring up at her small, pale breasts which she wasn't tryin' to hide 'cause she was too preoccupied...he felt a smile crossing his lips, but he stopped it because he couldn't get a read on her reaction. Maybe he'd crossed the line again...but she looked down at him flushed, eyes sparkling in the faint firelight, and there was only surprise laced with what...desire? Having a girl want him like this...someone who actually knew him...someone he wanted too for much more than just sex...it was new...of course he was self-conscious. Only an idiot wouldn't be with someone as perfect as Beth.

Beth eventually came back down to rest on his chest, looking at him, waiting for something...yup...she'd wanted to say somethin'. He'd had his moment. Daryl just wanted to touch, and she wanted to talk...but it wasn't just about him...

"What'd you wanna say?" His voice came out soft and low.

Daryl was relaxed, more satisfied than he'd been in a long time...maybe ever, but Beth apparently had some urgent, pressing thought that she needed to get out in the open...

But she was stalling.

"Ummm...well..." Beth hesitated. "Was I...was it..." She was so painfully awkward. "Did I do it right...?"

Daryl rested his head back on the bed so he didn't have to look at her. His face was warm...was he fucking blushing? No reason to hide it from himself...hell, he was embarrassed...

"Uhhh...there ain't really a wrong way to go about it..." Well, he could think of a few wrong ways, but nothing he could ever imagine Beth doing..."And...normally you...don't gotta ask...the end result...it kinda lets you know..." Why was this so fucking painful to talk about?

"Oh." Beth understood. It had been explanation enough...hopefully.
Silence. Only breathing, the crackling fire, and the weight of his own thoughts.

She needed a girl to talk to...Maggie. Hell, he needed a guy with some relationship experience to turn to...Rick. It would be awkward as hell, probably even for Rick, but he'd be willing to buck up and soldier through a painful conversation with Rick for Beth's sake. Merle'd been the one who'd taught him about fucking, even set him up with his first girl...but none of Merle's shit would ever apply to Beth.

Beth's self-conscious question brought his mind back around to his own very real shortcomings. He came far too quick...like a teenager with the first woman who grabbed his cock. What was Beth thinking about him now? Well, if anything came outta his poor showing, maybe it gave Beth a bit of confidence, knowing what she was capable of doin' to him. And, in the long run, it would be better when they were together that this premature ending was outta the way. What else was he expecting? He hadn't been with a woman since before...

"Beth...you can't do anything wrong...not with me..." He'd never felt the need to praise anyone for what they did to him in bed, but he wanted to...the words just didn't come out as good as they should've.

Daryl raised his head so he could see her, her long hair piled on his chest on either side of her face. She appreciated his compliment; it removed the questions from Beth’s eyes. Quiet followed. Neither of them seemed to be tryin' to fall asleep though.

"We're facing the wrong way."

"What?" Daryl was lost.

"This is the foot of the bed...we can't sleep like this." There was a playfulness in Beth's quiet, whispery words.

Daryl leaned up, looking to see the pillows and the headboard at his feet.

"I've never slept the wrong way before."

He shook his head and smiled slightly at Beth's confession as he rested back on the mattress. Daryl thought about all the nights he could remember. A lot of the time, there hadn't been a bed. Other times, there was a couch or a mattress or a pallet on the floor, things close to a bed, at least in his book. No matter what it was, he just crashed and slept where he fell, just happy to have a roof over his head most times...and sometimes there wasn't even that. He'd slept in places most people wouldn't even set foot in. And here Beth was, at the end of the world, still able to hold onto everything she had before...still never having dared sleep the wrong way in bed. That was what he wanted...that stability, that steady, predictable, normal course in life...and her hope let him believe he might have it...

Of all the places he'd slept, Daryl had once sworn he'd never spend a night in prison...sad part was, that prison was the closest thing he'd ever had to a real, long term home. He would've been glad to spend his life there. It was a random, depressing thought he needed to get over. Things were good now, better than good, better than he ever thought he would have it in life, and he didn't even need to try to convince himself. He had everything he could want, everything he could ever need, and she was right there with him.

"I guess we're just breakin' all the rules now," Daryl commented, soaking her in.

"I love you, Daryl Dixon."
Daryl's heart did some weird fluttery thing. She said it on her own. It was the first time. It wasn't a reply. It wasn't followed by too. And she said his name. She couldn't mean anyone else. Beth said she loved him, and she said his name...
Daryl came to consciousness slowly, but once he was actually awake and realized it, he tensed and forced himself into alert mode. The memory of the last place he'd slept, his complacency and belief that those people weren't a threat...he was wrong. And that could've gotten them killed...because of him, Beth had to kill...

He stopped panicking and realized it was alright now. They were safe, as safe as they were ever like to be. And Daryl was holding Beth close like there was no tomorrow. So, this was *spooning*? First time for everything. Beth fit perfectly with him, her head just under his chin, the soft curve of her ass nestled against him, just where she was meant to be.

And they were safe...

*We're just looking for a chance...*

"You know, I was career military, Special Forces. I spent a good part of my life in conflict zones and wars that people didn't even know the U.S. was ever involved in. I learned a lot though...you learn to recognize the signs, even the little ones, that show you when a country's headed south. Economic hardship, political unrest, infrastructures beginning to weaken, societal distrust. After I retired from the Forces, I started seeing those things here. You're not a stupid man, you've survived this long...you saw those things too, in our society, didn't you?"

"Truth is, I wasn't never part of society. It's always just been 'bout survival for me. What I knew though was most people out there wouldn't stand a chance at surviving if the shit hit the fan. Back then, it didn't matter to me. Society didn't give a shit about me, so I didn't give a shit 'bout them. It was just me and my brother Merle." Daryl paused, thinking on how much everything had changed.

"That's the same thing, being able to survive or recognizing that others won't. When I got home, I was resolved that we would survive no matter what. Food, weapons, security...I knew how to make it happen, and I prepared. You know, I imagined our country being broken by terrorists, economic collapse, internal conflict, maybe even revolution, but who would've guessed we would be broken by a God damned plague of the dead?" He looked skyward like he was waiting for a bolt of lightening from the heavens to strike him for cursing God in his own house.
Pain and loss had a way of fucking with your faith. Daryl knew that first hand, and he’d been lacking in the faith department to begin with. But sometimes, all it took was one person...one person to show you...one person to remind you, give you hope...believe in you. Daryl looked down to the back of the church where Beth was still on her knees. He wondered what she was praying for, but it wasn't any of his business. It wasn't his prayer.

"We're not broken," Daryl said, turning his attention back to William.

The dying man furrowed his sweaty brow at Daryl.

"We're not broken," he repeated. "This isn't how we end." Daryl didn't know what good his words would do for someone who was at their end, but they would do him some good, to remember that he believed that, that he believed what he told Beth. "Me and Beth, we're survivors. And we're not just gonna survive, we're gonna find a way to live."

Fuck it. He wanted to live. He'd spent most of his life just trying to survive...he was gonna live now.

"We're just looking for a chance."

"What?" Daryl didn't understand why William was repeating his words. Maybe the madness was setting in.

The dying man clenched his hand tight over the bandaged walker bite on his forearm, like it was paining him more. Daryl remembered Jim...the torment he went through before they left him at the side of the road to die like a wounded animal. Daryl should've been merciful, shot Jim between the eyes like he had with...no...he couldn't even think on that one...but the images flooded his head all the same. Dale had been annoying as hell, but he didn't deserve to be gutted...go the way he did. There was so much pain...everywhere...and this man was starting to feel his death much more intimately. Daryl would've been merciful if he asked...Dale asked...but he had to ask. All men had a right to choose the way they went if there was a choice to be had. Thing was, Daryl wasn't the Angel of Death going around taking people who weren't ready.

"You and your wife, your sweet Beth, you're looking for a chance for the both of you."

"Yeah."

"I get you, Daryl Dixon. I get your kind. We might be from different worlds, but we're cut from similar molds."

Daryl narrowed his eyes, waiting, trying to figure out where this was going.

"Will you do me a kindness, a solid favor?"

There is was. He wanted something. Most people did, but for some reason, Daryl was willing to help him if it was in his power and didn't put Beth in danger.

"Mmm-hmm," Daryl nodded. "If I can."

"Stay here a while, until I'm gone. Put a bullet or a bolt or a blade in my brain so I don't come back. Throw me in that grave out there that I dug for myself, and cover me in some consecrated ground just in case there is something after all this." The words came outta his mouth like a plea. A strong man didn't plead unless he had good reason.

Daryl nodded his answer. It wouldn't hurt them none stayin'. They could use the rest, even just a few more hours. But that wasn't the only reason. Maybe someone somewhere would do him a favor in
return, maybe even God.

Daryl looked back again at Beth, but she wasn't there anymore, not on her knees before God. Before he had time to worry, one solitary note resonated around the church, and Daryl located Beth sitting at the piano.

"Does she play?"

He nodded. Daryl was apparently having a problem getting words out. Never had been much of a talker. But this was about Beth. "More beautifully than you could ever imagine."

"Will you ask her to play something for me...something soft and calming...?"

Daryl couldn't deny him. He stood, stretching his sore back...how long had he been sittin' there?

"Daryl."

He turned back just as he passed the front pew where the dying man was resting. He was offering Daryl something. Daryl focused his eyes in the dim light on the key ring.

"What's this?" He didn't get it.

"Your chance."

*                      *                      *                      *                      *

Apparently, before they fell asleep, they'd both made the effort to get right in the bed so Beth didn't have to sleep in a bed the wrong way for the first time in her life. The fire had gone out, and the room was cool, just enough to make staying under the covers a good choice. And Beth was still naked, but her skin was warm where it met his flesh. Was it wrong of him to touch her while she was sleeping? If it was, Daryl didn't care as he let his hand run down her side, all the way down to caress the curve of her hip.

Thin. Where did that come from? Daryl let his hand rest on her hipbone. He enjoyed her body, would be lying if he said he didn't, but this wasn't the first time he'd come to the conclusion that Beth was too thin. Was that his fault...or just the world's? It didn't matter either way now. It was on him. Beth was his to take care of...his to protect. Daryl was a hunter, a damned good one at that, and he wasn't all about the self-congratulatory neither. Since they'd been together...after the prison...it had been rough. There was no denying that, but there'd always been enough food. More than Beth could eat. He'd made damn sure of that. Maybe this was just Beth. He thought back on the good month's at the prison, when they'd had meat and fresh vegetables, weren't always running. Beth was small then too, and they'd had it good. Better than all the way back to the farm.

The prison. Both of them avoided that topic when possible. When it was mentioned, it was in sadness, a reminder of everything they'd lost. They never willingly talked about it...it just happened, or things relating to it were said, then pushed away when the moment passed. The funny thing was, they were able to talk about before the prison...what they were doing before the turn, the time after before they knew each other, living on the farm together...but the prison...maybe it was just too fresh. Maybe it was that it was the first place they had hope of surviving together as a group. When he thought about the prison, the first things that hit him were pain and loss, but there was so much more he needed...wanted to remember. Everything they had...everything he gained.
Truth be told, if he was honest with himself, Daryl hadn't been totally unaffected by Beth before the prison fell. He hadn't realized what he might have been feeling then because that wasn't what he'd been looking for in life...never thought that's what he wanted, or maybe he never allowed himself to try 'cause he thought it would never happen for him, at least not the right way. When you lived together in a small group, people got tight quick, but Daryl hadn't really gotten close to Beth until after Judith was born. Watching her so selflessly step into the role of mother for that little girl...well, that would touch anyone. And he'd had a soft spot for Lil' Asskicker as it was. Then, maybe it wasn't until Beth and Zack...Beth and Zack made him confused. That last day Zack was alive, when they'd kissed goodbye, Daryl felt tension and anger...maybe a little disgust...now he realized it had been jealousy, even though it had been unfounded. He'd had no right to be jealous, but even now, thinking about Zack touching Beth, kissing Beth, it made him feel angry, possessive...the idea that he had kissed her, held her, shared secrets and moments with her that he hadn't...Daryl stopped himself. Zack was a good kid, and he was gone now...there was no reason to be jealous of a ghost. Zack wasn't a threat when he was alive because Daryl had no claim to Beth then. Now Beth was his, and he only needed to worry about threats moving forward.

The one moment...the one event that Daryl could now acknowledge when something small sparked, was when he told Beth that Zack was dead. Even though she was the one who lost someone, she possessed the selflessness to ask if he was okay. In that moment, he'd felt safe telling the truth. He didn't have to pretend; he didn't have to be strong. Beth hugged him, and he let her. Daryl wasn't strong enough to hug her back; he'd held her arm instead, but he felt. He would have to tell her that someday, let Beth know that there was something before...it may never have turned into anything if they'd stayed at the prison, but she'd touched him then. That would be a story for later. Daryl let Beth go, sliding out of bed, and tucking the covers around her where his body had been, making sure she stayed warm. Grabbing his shirt and crossbow from where it leaned against the nightstand, Daryl needed to find some food. He was hungry, and Beth needed to eat...off to hunt in the car, the best option he had until he could fully assess their situation. And Daryl was going to find that cigarette he was craving after Beth had...

He stopped before he had a chance to think on the events of the night too much. Daryl had no reason not to enjoy life, but right now he was going to limit that enjoyment to a smoke.
Chapter 40

Chapter Notes

~Author's Note: Thank you guys for being patient with me since I haven't updated in so long. I was recovering from my vacation to LA for TWD 100th Episode Premiere Night. It was a pretty amazing trip. I hope you enjoy the chapter. Thank you as always!~

Beth sat in the center of the bed soaking in her surroundings. She couldn't really see; the only light in the room was the sun peeking in from the edges of the window, but she could feel the smooth white sheet wrapped around her, the soft, warm mattress, comforts she'd once taken for granted. She hadn't felt dread or confusion when she woke even though she didn't know where she was...she felt safe. Daryl was gone, but she wasn't afraid; he was somewhere close. Leaning over to the side of the bed where Daryl had been, she could make out that he'd left his gun on the nightstand, but his crossbow was gone. Beth sank back down in bed where Daryl had slept, still feeling the warmth his body left behind. Maybe they could stay in bed all day...maybe they were safe enough for that fantasy...to start building up more good memories. Last night had been a good start...a very pleasant start to intimacy. Daryl was good to her. In a past life, she would've never imagined Daryl being soft and slow...but he had been just that. Beth still wasn't sure what she'd done had been good enough for him. If it hadn't, she knew Daryl would never say so, never do anything to make her self-conscious or uncomfortable. He told her that she didn't have to ask, but was he telling the truth? Beth just needed to learn, needed to practice so she could be better at it...hopefully he would be willing to put in the time to teach her, help her learn about him.

But back to the prospects of a much deserved day in bed...Beth needed to find Daryl for that possibility to become a reality. That would require crawling out from beneath the comforter though, and it was so warm. Just a few more seconds...she needed a few more moments of warmth. Lying there did her no good either. She could still smell Daryl's scent, kept picturing last night, feeling Daryl, his touch, what he'd done to her. Everything had been painfully awkward, but addicting...so very addicting...

*Find Daryl.*

Beth pulled the sheet with her as she left the bed, wrapping it tight around herself twice then draping the long end over her arm. Clothing wasn't a priority, especially since the only clothes she had near were bloody from...

Beth would always have that blood on her hands, but with time, it would fade...make more sense...wouldn't matter anymore...would it? She needed to remember the good, not the bad. There was enough light coming through the heavy drapes pulled across the bay window that she could maneuver around the room, making her way to the door. Her instincts weren't serving her well as she almost immediately threw it open before she stopped herself. What if there were other people here? What if they weren't alone? Beth didn't want to handle other people, especially not while wearing a sheet. At this point, she didn't even know if she wanted to meet new people. They just seemed to bring danger, and if they weren't dangerous, they were likely to bring heartache. She needed a better plan than just bursting out the door. Maybe it was just best to wait for Daryl to get back.
Anyway, while she waited, she could look around. She carefully slid behind the curtain at the window. Throwing the drapes back could attract attention if there was anyone or anything outside, but slipping behind it, she could go unnoticed. Beth's attention was drawn to the right of the window where an ornate double wrought iron gate loomed, hemmed in on each side by a tall, stone wall. She couldn't see very far where the wall went past the house, but if she looked forward, it went a good distance before it cornered, heading to form a perimeter. This could be good. Did Daryl find a walled subdivision? Beth's thoughts went wild. While a walled subdivision would be ideal, it was doubtful that it would be empty of walkers, and in that case, it would be hard and dangerous for two people to clear. If there were no walkers, it could be worse; it could be people. Anyone who was still alive and knew about a closed community would have jumped at the chance. It could be like Woodbury...the Governor...

What if they were trapped? Her mind did tend to run rampant when she was left to her own devices. Beth didn't even know how they got where they were...all she remembered before waking up with Daryl last night was falling asleep in the church, and Daryl wouldn't have left her alone if they were in danger without waking her up and telling her what was going on.

Beth saw the smoke and found Daryl sitting on the edge of the porch with a cigarette. He looked happy. There wasn't a smile on his face or anything, there was just something there...contentment maybe. He didn't know she was watching him, so nothing he was doing was for her or her benefit. Daryl was lost in his own thoughts. He took a long drag off the cigarette, eventually exhaling a long puff of smoke. Beth smiled to herself. He was still just a little bit bad, and that danger made him and the way he treated her all the more addicting. She composed herself before she tapped lightly on the window to get Daryl's attention. She didn't want to bother him, but she wasn't willing to just watch him either. Daryl's eyes found her at the window, he smiled, and was on his feet, stamping out the cigarette before she could blink...then he was gone from her view.

"Morning, Lil' Bit," he greeted cheerily, dropping various vending machine snacks, remnants from the car dealership, on the bed. Hadn't that been a lifetime ago?

"Good morning." It came out sounding timid she realized.

Watching Daryl from the window had made her feel warm and needy, but now that he was in front of her, she was feeling a strange mix of anxiety, awkwardness, embarrassment, and desire, clearly because of what they had done together. He wasn't showing any awkward emotions. Daryl just seemed to be entirely content as he shrugged his crossbow off, tossing it on the bed, heading towards the window. He threw back the curtain, the bright sunshine pouring into the room she had only seen draped in shadow or in the firelight. Looking around, she still wasn't entirely sure it all wasn't an elaborate dream.

"It's a new day, Beth." Daryl didn't just mean that the sun had risen. It was much deeper than that.

She couldn't help smiling as he approached.

"What's this, a toga party?" He stepped close, reaching out and tugging at her sheet.

Beth caught his hand and stopped him.
"It's still light out." Beth realized she'd said those words to Daryl before.

She also knew how stupid and childish the concept was. It wasn't like people weren't intimate during the day, and he had already seen all there was to see. What did it matter what time of day it was? Daryl looked down, shaking his head, running his hand over his forehead and through his hair, but he wasn't mad. She could see a little amusement on his face.

"And anyway...it's your turn," Beth informed him.

"My turn for what?" He knew what she was talking about; he was just playing with her, as cruel as it might be.

"Your turn to take your clothes off."

Daryl grabbed her so quickly that it startled her and some sort of weird squeak escaped her lips. She'd let go of her sheet to instinctively press her hands against his chest, the only thing holding it up was their bodies crushed so tight together. If Daryl let her go and she didn't act quickly enough, the sheet would fall away, and he would win.

"That ain't gonna happen." Gruff...voice so gruff but needy too...making his less than convincing stand.

"You want to." Beth couldn't help the inflection of satisfaction and knowledge in her voice.

She swayed her hips just the tiniest bit to prove her point. Feeling the solid bulge in his pants pressed hard against her, Beth knew exactly what he wanted even if he wasn't willing to admit to it or act on it.

"You don't need to go telling me what I want. I already know." The gravel and grit in his voice drove her insane.

Beth wrapped her arms around his neck waiting for Daryl to kiss her, but he didn't. Instead, he planted his hands firmly under her butt cheeks, drawing her up, forcing her harder against him, the tips of her toes barely touching the floor. She reached out and kissed him, pulling away quickly when he wanted to taste more. Two could play at this game; she could play hard to get if that was what he wanted.

"Then why not?" Beth tried on her best seductive voice, and it came out naturally...pretty convincing too.

She wanted something. And Daryl did too...there was no way he could hide that, even if he wasn't trying so hard to make her aware...make her feel. Daryl tried to reach her, tried to kiss her without letting go of her, but she refused to give in when he wouldn't. Leaning her head back, turning her face away from him, it was impossible for his lips to meet hers. But that was a bad idea...his mouth caught her exposed neck instead, the unexpected contact intensifying the sensation. A breathy gasp escaped her lips, and Daryl won. Beth let her hand run through his overgrown hair, maybe pulling a little too hard, but he didn't complain. She felt the tip of his tongue trailing up the line of her neck until he caught her earlobe between his teeth.

"'Cause when I get naked, we're gonna be in bed for a good long while." She didn't know what was more arousing, Daryl's hot breath against her ear or the actual words he was saying.

Beth turned her face back to him. He was so close. The way he looked at her, he was fighting himself on this one, and she didn't understand why.
"So? You said we're safe. And we deserve it." Beth took in a deep breath of Daryl. He smelled like cigarettes now, but that was okay. He still smelled like Daryl, like he should, and he was intoxicating.

Daryl made an audible growl before he turned her loose, exhaling deeply, like he'd made a necessary decision that he didn't like at all. Beth looked up, watching...waiting for an answer.

"We're safe, maybe for a long time...but now, now it's time to get the house in order..." He gestured for her to move towards the bed. "Eat something. We've got a long day ahead."

Daryl grabbed a chocolate muffin, ripping the plastic and taking a huge bite as he sat at the foot of the bed.

"I'm not hungry." Beth climbed into the middle, clinging to her sheet, surveying the selection of food anyway.

"God, Lil' Bit, I ain't telling you to eat your vegetables. There's all sorts of junk to pick from. Eat something."

_Eat something_ came out much more assertive this time. Beth grabbed a chocolate muffin too. Biting in to it, she realized just how hungry she was.

"What do you mean get the house in order?" She hadn't been out of the bedroom, but it was immaculate except for her clothes in a pile on the floor and the food spread across the bed. She couldn't imagine the rest of the house being any different. "It seems fine."

"This isn't the house," Daryl informed. "It's the guest house, or gate house, or whatever these kind of people call their extra houses. The main house is up the drive. I didn't wanna clear it last night. I just wanted to hit the bed."

"Oh." Gate house, main house...so it wasn't a subdivision. This could be good. "How did you find this place...how did we get here? I don't remember...I just remember falling asleep in the church. What happened to...?" Beth remembered the dying man.

"He...went. I buried him." Daryl didn't go into detail. They both knew what death entailed now; there was no need to mention it. "You were sleeping so hard, I didn't wanna wake you. You slept so sound you didn't wake up all the way here or even when I put you to bed."

"Yeah...I guess I needed it." It surprised her a little. She'd never been that sound of a sleeper.

"Both of us did." Daryl reached, laying an affectionate hand on her thigh.

"How did we get here though? How did you find this place?" That was the essential component of the story that was missing.

"Beth...what did..." Daryl stopped his thought, shaking his head slightly. "Never mind. It ain't none of my business."

"No...what is it?"

He contemplated for a minute before he spoke again, grabbing another muffin in avoidance.

"What did you pray for?"

Beth didn't see what the big deal about that question was until she thought about her answer. Her
prayers had been selfish. For the first time in her life, she'd prayed for something for herself.

"I prayed for you...for us..." Hesitant even though she knew he wouldn't judge her.

Looking down, he nodded his head.

"That man...that dying man in the church...he lived here...him and his wife. They never had a breach, all the way back to the beginning. He gave it to us...our chance..."

Daryl seemed a little emotional. It didn't matter how tough or hard you were, sometimes all the piled up emotions just hit you. She was feeling it too. Beth fought back the tears at the corners of her eyes. Daryl didn't handle it too well when she cried and he didn't understand the reason...even when he did understand, it still made him uncomfortable because sometimes there was no way for him to make it better. Something she knew for certain about Daryl, he hated feeling helpless. It had been such a hard, sad road, but at the same time, she'd found what she needed to keep going...to make a life...make it all right. He had that now too.

He saw that she was trying not to cry, reaching out and pulling her close to comfort her. This was Daryl. Daryl who lived in his own solitary world when they were on her Daddy's farm. Daryl who shied away from people. Daryl who avoided touch and human contact. Rough, tough Daryl who was more adept to killing than comforting. But this was her Daryl, and for that she was grateful. He still seemed to be all those things, except with her. He'd even told her as much.

Now her tears came in earnest.

"I promise, once we get everything settled here, get everything figured out, everything accounted for...I promise you can have me whenever you want, as much as you want. I won't complain none."

Beth laughed and cried all at the same time as she felt Daryl bury his head in her hair. She didn't know if he was trying to lighten the mood with what he said or if he meant it, but either way, it was laughable...she was the virgin, and he was making her out to be a sex crazed nymphet.

"Beth...I love you, you know..."

* * * * *

It was intimidating...an Antebellum nightmare...but it was his nightmare now...their home. Daryl was afraid to even mount the steps. He didn't belong in a place like this. He'd landed right smack in the pages of *Gone with the Wind*. Beth was quiet, but he could see the excitement in her face...thinking of the possibilities...and that excited him too...but now they needed to be careful and serious.

"Beth, let's pay attention. We don't know what's inside," Daryl preached his familiar sermon as he move forward to unlock the ornate double doors.

"Really Daryl, even with the fences?" Beth trusted easily. He was glad she still had that trust, even though it was dangerous for her...but as long as he was with her...

His life had taught him different. To trust too easily could be to die.

Daryl looked over his shoulder at the fences...the ancient, unbroken stone wall that was no doubt original to the home, surrounding what he estimated to be about fifteen acres, more acres...more of a
safe zone than they'd had at the prison. Then within that stone wall stood a solid fence made of tall, strong cedar posts sunk deep into the ground, clearly an apocalypse era addition to the property, a second line of defense though he didn't see a way walkers could get over the stone wall. But it was a backup he was comfortable with; he could feel safe here.

"Come on, Beth. Better safe than sorry."
They cleared the first floor without any surprises, but Daryl grew more and more anxious with every ornate glass door they stepped through, every heavy carved paneled door they slid open revealing rooms containing treasures he was like to break. Daryl was so out of his element...bull in a china shop...that was him in this place. The dead man told him this was a family home. For some reason, back in the church, he thought family home meant a comfortable home where a family lived. He couldn't have been more wrong in that assumption. Family home in this case literally meant a home that had been in the family for generations. The man in the church didn't seem like the kind of person who'd live in a place like this, but if it was where his family had lived since forever...why would anybody have abandoned it...Daryl wouldn't have either. It was disturbing though that every room they passed through contained precious objects clearly dating back to when the house was built and the faces of the families who'd lived here ages past peering down at him from where they'd been immortalized on canvas in rich oil paints, telling him he was an intruder...he didn't belong.

Daryl's better safe then sorry attitude drove him to proceed with clearing the house, but his gut told him they were safe. After several rooms that seemed to serve no functional purpose, he just stopped and shook his head. He knew what the entry foyer was, or in this case, the grand foyer with an antique crystal chandelier suspended from the vaulted ceiling and bordered on one side by the staircase; what the parlor, and the library were; but these other rooms...if he wasn't good with knowing where he was, he would've likely gotten turned around in a house like this.

"Daryl?" Beth questioned, concerned as he paused.

"Nothin', just tryin' to figure out what all these rooms are for. I don't even know what their called."

Beth giggled. He smiled and shook his head at himself, how serious he was being about nothing. If this was the kind of problem he had to face, tryin' to figure out what to call where he was in a house...that kind of problem he was willing to live with.

They made a game of it...every room they went in, he would try to guess what its purpose was, and then Beth would tell him how wrong that guess was...schooling him in the subject of classical floor plans.

"So, what's this one? Looks just like the parlor to me..." Daryl admitted, hoping the chairs were more comfortable than they looked. Anyway...he wasn't gonna be sittin' in this room anytime soon. There was too much work to be done.

"It's off the dining room, so it seems like the drawing room."

"For art and all that?" Daryl assumed.
Beth's little giggle told him he was very wrong, but he wasn't offended.

"It's short for withdrawing room. It's kind of like the parlor, but the parlor was for receiving guests. The drawing room was where the ladies would go, withdrawing from the dining room after dinner to socialize while the men would stay at the table, drink brandy, smoke cigars, and talk about stuff like politics."

Daryl heard the words she said, but he was more in tune to how she sounded. She had a song in her voice, joy, not masking anything. Maybe he wouldn't have to get her past having killed. Maybe that chapter was closed.

"That's fine, you be all smart now, but when I take you outside to the car and ask you where the camshaft is or where the oil goes, I'm gonna be the one laughing." Daryl leaned in, affectionately nudging her with his shoulder. She smiled brighter, if that was even possible.

He let Beth open the double doors to the adjoining room. It was kinda exciting... like exploring. Beth stopped and stood very still, like if she moved, it would all disappear.

"I know what this room is," Daryl asserted, looking and the polished piano at its center, "your music room."

He was waiting to wake up. His dreams weren't even this good. How in the hell did this happen to him?

*                      *                      *                      *                      *

Daryl left Beth sitting on an odd fancy couch in the foyer, something she called a chaise, while he cleared the second floor. He stood at the top of the stairs, after his rounds, starring down at her. She didn't notice him, and he liked it that way...being able to look at her...watch her without her getting all self-conscious for no reason. He just wanted to remember her, remember every detail, capture every moment.

She deserves this. This home...our home.

His Beth, his home, his life...what would his old man and Merle say now? They'd been wrong all along.

Beth finally noticed him, looking up as he began to descend the stairs.

"Nothin' up there but more stuff I ain't gonna touch 'cause I'll break it."

She smiled at him, shaking her head. Beth thought he was teasing, but he couldn't have been more serious. Daryl stopped at the foot of the marble staircase, making sure he had Beth's full attention. She watched, tilting her head to the side quizzically, waiting. He'd saved the best surprise for last, and it had been one hell of a day already. He reached out, flipped the switch, looking up and watching the crystal chandelier come to life, light dancing and reflecting off the hundreds of dangling strands of glass. Beth was on her feet, hand over her mouth in shock...it was a good day...a very good day.

"Electricity...how?" Beth was apparently unable to form whole sentences faced with this small luxury.
"Man was prepared. There's apparently a solar field out back, and there's generators for backup," Daryl explained what he'd been told.

"Hot water, showers, light...heat."

The fact that she was overcome made him happy...fulfilled. For once, he'd done something right; he hadn't failed.

"Come here, Lil' Bit." He offered his arm to her, pulling her against his chest, feeling her sigh against him.

Daryl spent the majority of his life without love, without human closeness of any kind...and now it was all he wanted. To touch her, hold her, be touched, and be worthy of her love...

"Now we aren't gonna go all crazy and start abusing the electricity. We've learned to live pretty good without it, and if we get too used to it, it'll be all the harder if we have to give it up again." He had to be practical, pulling himself out of his sappy thoughts...at least for the moment.

*                      *                      *                      *                      *

Beth took her own turn exploring the house once Daryl left her to check the basement and out back. Being alone was okay here...there was nothing to be afraid of except perhaps the ghosts of the people who'd once called this house home. It was just by chance the first bedroom Beth entered must've belonged to a daughter. It was a girl's room...the kind of room she would've dreamed of in another life, white canopy bed and all. Those days were over though. She was grown now. She walked around the edge of the room, looking, not touching, not wanting to invade a world that didn't belong to her. She stopped in front of the dresser, compelled to pick up the silver picture frame. A prom picture...a pretty girl in a pretty dress with a handsome boy, his arm around her. She'd never made it to the prom, never got to wear that pretty dress, have her Daddy take her picture while she walked down the stairs as the boy waited nervously at the bottom for her. Beth should be jealous, but she wasn't...just a bit sad...and more than anything, she just hoped the boy and girl in the picture hadn't suffered long when the end came. She could've just as easily been the girl in the picture...gone to prom and dead instead of still standing.

But for the grace of God...

And all those people who protected her, saved her. And Daryl...most of all, Daryl.

Beth carefully placed the picture back so everything appeared untouched, catching her reflection in the mirror as her eyes drifted up. She looked tired and worn...but she was still pretty, wasn't she? Here they had a chance...they could rest, recover, put the past behind them...and she needed to start now. Beth stripped her clothes, trying to erase the memory of the blood that stained them...the man she'd killed. It was over, and she would never have to see the tangible reminder of his death again.

A soft, comfy sweater and a new pair of jeans changed her world, her perspective...allowed her to be herself again...untarnished...unstained.

*                      *                      *                      *                      *
Daryl checked in on her at mid afternoon. There were cattle in the field, a few horses in the barn, food, guns, ammo, and supplies in the basement...and land, lots of good fertile land...to grow crops come spring. The majority of the land was outside of the secured perimeter he told her before heading back out to do whatever it was he was doing. Even though it was fenced, Beth wasn't delusional...she knew it could easily get overrun by walkers. But there was enough ground on the inside that they could survive easily. Beth felt like she could breathe. Come late afternoon, when she actually allowed herself to think about food, she realized that she didn't have to improvise a meal. Daryl didn't have to hunt today for them to eat. Dinner wouldn't be vending machine leftovers. There was enough of everything. When she opened the refrigerator door in the kitchen, the bright light illuminating all her choices for dinner...the world felt normal again...but just like Daryl said, she wouldn't take it for granted.

"...and Merle was pissed as all get out. He'd been talkin' to this girl, the kind he liked, when the bartender cut him off and told him to leave 'cause he was being too obnoxious..." Daryl paused, a grin on his face. "I followed him out just in time to see him misstep off the curb and fall flat on his ass. He saw that I'd seen him, and before I could say or do anything, he was barking at me 'Not a f-ing word baby brother...not a word!' I was smart enough not to open my mouth, but Merle just kept laying there at the side of the street, and then he just busted up laughing. I laughed too 'cause he was so drunk he wouldn't ever remember in the morning so he wouldn't kick my ass for it!"

Beth smiled. She smiled for Daryl. She smiled for herself. She smiled for the memory of Merle. Merle might have been bad, he might have been bad for Daryl, but he was still Daryl's brother. Merle had gone out trying to save them; in the end, he'd made one selfless decision. And if Daryl could share a happy memory of Merle in their new life, she would share it with him. It was a happy moment. Daryl was smiling too...and she had a story of her own to share.

"Back right after Daddy got his prosthetic leg and he was starting to teach Rick how to plant and grow...you were going out on a run I think, because I remember you sitting on your bike waiting for the gates to be opened..." Beth was amazed at how quickly the good memories were coming back for both of them..."I had Judith with me outside, watching Daddy, Rick, and Carl. Daddy was walking...just walking normal...and all of a sudden, he was moving forward, and his leg was left behind. Of course I knew that his leg was fake, but sometimes, in a moment, you know, you forget things...and I was just horrified. I was holding Judith, so there was nothing I could do, but Rick and Carl ran over to help him, make sure he was okay." Beth paused, remembering the moment, not in sadness because her Daddy was gone, but in joy because she shared this happy moment with Daryl. "And do you know what he said? 'The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away!' Then he laughed. Then we all laughed."

"Your Dad, he told me about that...later sometime. He said he'd never forget the look on everyone's faces, like his real leg had just fallen off."

Daryl offered her his hand from where he sat at the head of the table, squeaky clean, in fresh clothes, his hair still damp from the shower. She took it. They were fed, safe, happy by all accounts...and the conversation of fond memories was coming so easily.

"Daryl?"
"Hmmm?"

"Is it okay...to laugh...to be happy?" Why was she suddenly unsure?

"Mmm-hmmm," Daryl nodded. "Time's too short...the world's too uncertain not to..."

* * * * *

He'd built a fire in the fireplace...there was something to be said for old houses...a way to keep warm in most bedrooms, and he would take fire over electric heat any day. Daryl had to hunt for clothes to sleep in. The ones he had...the plaid pajama pants Beth had given him...were too dirty to wear anymore...but they'd grown on him; he wanted to keep 'em. He'd found some Hugh Hefner pajamas in the master bedroom, their bedroom...but there was no way in hell...not in a million years. The dead son's room provided something he could live with, normal flannel pants and another wife beater.

Beth was just on the other side of the door...in the bathroom...taking a bath. His shower before dinner made him feel like a new man. A shower hadn't felt so good since the one he'd taken at the CDC at the beginning. Beth's bath though...it was taking her too long. They'd spent a good majority of the day apart; he just wanted her near. Had he become that fucking dependant? He sure in the hell had. They'd come too close to the end too many times...but wanting her with him really didn't make him dependant or needy. He just needed to protect and be near what was his...and Beth was his. Daryl's hand went to the crystal doorknob. He could at least sit with her, be close to her, watch her...she wouldn't turn him away, would she? But he stopped himself, fought what he wanted again. It was all still new for her, Daryl knew. Just because she was naked with him last night in the dark didn't mean she wanted him busting in on her bath time. He might scare her...make her uncomfortable, and she would have nowhere to go...nowhere to retreat to. Something Beth had taught him...something he'd taught himself with Beth...patience and self-control...but even those awkward, unsure moments...he wouldn't trade 'em for anything.

Daryl drew his hand away from the doorknob, having decided not to barge in uninvited. Instead, he placed his palm flat against the door, leaning his forehead against the smooth, cool surface, just waiting for her.

Come on, Beth...hurry up...

He pictured Beth opening the door suddenly and him falling flat on his face. Yeah...that was exactly the side of him he wanted her to see. Daryl sighed, pulling away from the door, turning then to the monstrosity of the bed. He'd never slept in a bed with curtains before...a canopy neither...really, what was the point? And then, there were wooden steps beside the bed 'cause it was so tall. Who needed a bed with stairs? There was nothing to be done about it, and when he dove into the bed, it was just as he suspected...too soft...but he wasn't gonna complain none. It actually felt pretty damned good.
Chapter 42

Maybe it was the warmth, or his full belly, or the lack of stress and anxiety, or his drowsiness, or probably the euphoria created by a combination of all those things, but as Daryl rested in the too soft bed with his eyes closed and his arms behind his head...he started thinking about life, all the vivid pictures of what could be dancing in his head. For some reason, he started thinking about Christmas...not that he had a right to...he'd never had any sort of Christmas...but maybe this year, maybe there might be a first. He imagined Beth sittin' at the piano, playing and singing carols he'd heard but didn't know the words to...maybe someday he could follow along. He could see her, but when he tried to picture the Christmas tree, he just couldn't get it right. Hell, he could imagine what a Christmas tree looked like; he'd been doing that his entire life...that unattainable image always built up in his head...holiday cards and commercials and movies showed massive evergreens in houses like this passed off as belonging to middle class families...images that made what he wished for seem so much less attainable.

A Christmas tree...a real live Christmas tree. He would find it in the woods...maybe Beth would even come along...the biggest one he could manage. It would be like the Waltons...and they would put it by the stairs. It would look nice there...that's where people who lived in places like this would put it...right? He didn't know where the theoretical tree should go, how could he? Maybe the living room would be nicer, fireplace and all, cozy couches, a place to sit together and enjoy. Hell, maybe they could have two Christmas trees, one by the stairs and one in the living room. One for Christmas Eve and one for Christmas Day. He needed to make up for lost time. Daryl couldn't make up for all the Christmases in his lifetime...didn't want to...but maybe he could make up for the past winters he spent with Beth where nothing was celebrated. One thing was for sure, and he felt warm knowing it, there would be a present under the tree for Beth on both Christmas Eve and Christmas Day.

Daryl wasn't sure if it was a dream or just more wandering thoughts, but there were small children rambling down the stairs towards the imaginary Christmas tree on Christmas morning in his mind with loud, excited voices. There would be presents then too...he'd probably spoil 'em all...but that was okay. He didn't think he would ever tell them the Santa Claus fairy tale, remembering just how painful that had been when he was young, before he understood it was a lie. His mom, his old man, even Merle tried to tell him it wasn’t true, but how could it not be when all the other kids got shit from Santa, they believed, and he was the only one that got left out? He always thought it was his own fault...that he didn't believe hard enough or wasn’t good enough. It wasn't that he wouldn't want his little-ones believing in something...it was just that they would be growing up in a hard, dangerous world...they would need to grow up in reality, not fantasy. And more than anything, if he had children, Daryl wanted them to believe in him...their father.

When he thought about them...his children...Daryl realized they would probably be terrors. He more than likely wouldn't be passing on any quiet or sittin' still genes. That image he had in his mind of them all runnin' down the stairs on Christmas morning would likely turn into tumbling down the stairs, ending with bruises, black eyes, and broken bones, but that would be okay. Daryl wanted a few sons...he could see them...tough, stubborn, rowdy...but he would raise 'em right, be there for them, do right by them so they would grow up to be good men. Their world needed good men. They might challenge him...but they would always respect and love their mother. How could they not...Beth was everything. Then the thought that scared the shit outta him...there was just as much chance there would be a daughter as a son. She would be beautiful, kind, sweet, gentle...just like Beth...everything that their world tried so hard to destroy. And in any world...his heart could probably only handle one daughter...

Where was all this shit coming from? Kids? He needed to push these thoughts away. It was hardly
the time to even imagine or dream...their world was far too dangerous...no place for children. Luckily, he didn't have anymore time to fantasize. The bathroom door opened, Beth as quiet sneaking around the room as he was in the woods, but he could still sense her...feel her when she paused at the side of the bed watching him. He was the hunter after all. He barely felt her slide under the covers...much more graceful in bed than he was, but he knew she was there, still contemplating him, much closer...right beside him now. What, was this the National Geographic channel? Watch the wild Daryl...sleeping after a long day of prowling his new territory...

Anyway, she didn't actually think he was asleep...without her?

"What?" He asked softly, feeling Beth jump slightly in surprise beside him.

"I...I thought you were asleep..." It was like she was a kid that got caught doing something wrong. "What are you doing?"

"Thinkin'." Here he was, back to being the kind of man who only gave one word answers.

"About what?" She pressed.

"The possibilities." Well, that was two words. He just wasn't willing or ready to share where his thoughts had been. They were too frilly and unrealistic. The possibilities. A full life. A real life. A good woman. Children. The whole package. "Come here." He didn't open his eyes, but he found her, pulling her down beside him.

Beth's skin was enticingly warm from the bath, and as she laid her head against his chest, the damp strands of her hair clung to his arm and shoulder. Now they had a place, he could take a breath, the prospect of sleep was starting to seem less like a danger and a luxury and more like a deserved reward.

"So, what's happening tomorrow?"

He'd never been a planner...things in his life always happened at the spur of the moment...he was always good at making quick decisions, but things had changed.

"I'm gonna take a horse, ride the outer fences, make sure everything's secure as possible."

"Okay...are we leaving early?" Boy did Beth get him wrong.

"I said 'I'm', not 'we're'. I'm checking the outer fences outside the secure perimeter. You're staying here." It wasn't a negotiation.

Beth pushed away from him. He could tell this was gonna be an open eyes type of conversation. When he peeled his eyelids back, Daryl saw her looking down, ready to make her stand.

"And what am I supposed to do while you're gone?"

"Uh...I don't know...do some woman stuff...in the house." Daryl realized as soon as it flew outta his mouth, it was the wrong thing.

He didn't expect it, Beth smacking his stomach. He deserved it, but he couldn't help laughing at her reaction...again, the wrong thing, but it was involuntary.

"Oww...what was that for?" He unsuccessfully tried to cover.

"Woman stuff?" She wasn't really mad, because of that, was she? She couldn't be.
Hopefully the glint caught in her eye from the firelight was one of amusement, not anger...

"Yeah...what's wrong with that? I thought your mom...wasn't she a housewife...a homemaker?"
Daryl really didn't know which term was socially acceptable...he'd never been socially acceptable, so probably neither. If he fucked up, he fucked up twice.

"She was...but..." Ah...so Beth had no reasonable answer.

"So?" Daryl waited.

"It's just that...I want to go with you...you can't leave me here alone..."

"There ain't no way that's gonna happen. You're not goin' outside that stone wall. It's not safe. We don't know what's out there." Daryl was making a stand of his own, but his was serious and had good reasoning.

"I'm not staying." Why did she have to fight him? He was just trying to protect her.

"Beth...I don't want you to get hurt." He softened his voice, reaching for her, trying to urge her to lay back down so they were on equal footing, but she wasn't giving in.

"If I remember correctly, the last time you went out somewhere alone on a horse, it didn't turn out so well. You came limping home, shot through with your own arrow.

That was a low blow...but it was part of who they were, who they'd become together. He remembered the night not so long ago that he'd shared his scars with Beth, she'd shared her scars with him...his scar from the bolt through his side and hers from her slit wrist. Those scars both came from a place they'd shared as a home. Her words validated that idea. You came limping home, shot through with your own arrow.

Home.

"We'll see...that's all I can say 'bout tomorrow...we'll see." It was the only thing he was willing to offer, but it seemed to be enough.

Beth continued watching him, but her face softened since she didn't have to fight him anymore.

"So...this bed...it's pretty..."

"Intimidating..." Daryl didn't give her a chance to finish whatever fanciful thought she had in her head. He needed to say it. It was the truth.

Beth furrowed her brow at him, shaking her head a little...kinda smiling.

"Well, we could sleep in the princess room if you don't like this one." He hoped she wasn't serious.

"I ain't sleepin' in a princess bed." Daryl put his foot down then and there. "This one's bad enough, but it's the master bedroom, so we're sleeping here."

Beth finally came down to his chest, in his arms, where she belonged.

"You know, this was always the kind of house I dreamed of living in when I was little, but it's more beautiful than a dream."

Her contented sigh was soothing to him.
"It's my freakin' nightmare. Just a bunch of stuff for me to break, get dirty, or ruin."

"You don't want to stay..." She sounded torn up now.

How could he not want to stay? They had everything they needed. It was a good deal, and he wasn't gonna throw it away.

"That ain't what I'm sayin'. It's just...it's like a museum. I haven't been to one of those since I was little...in school...and that was a catastrophe. My entire day was spent hearin' 'Daryl don't touch that', 'Daryl no' over and over again all day long." Come to think of that, it was a pretty fun day, maybe not for the adults involved, but for him.

"What kind of house did you dream about when you were younger?"

It was an innocent question. Beth just didn't understand the personal implications it had for him. When he was little, he mostly dreamed about food and not being beat. When he got older and could fend for himself, Daryl mostly dreamed about finding a life where he didn't have to live day by day, where there might be some stability until he realized he'd gotten pretty good at playing the hand he'd been dealt, so there was no reason to try to fight it. Of course, there were times when he'd wished for something better. Growing up in a shit hole like he had, how could he not. Maybe he had dreamed of something better but was afraid to admit it. That would've made him weak, and weakness in his world was dangerous.

"I guess when I thought about a normal life, something I knew I would never have, like a family and all that, maybe I dreamed about a place like your Dad had..." Was that stupid?

"Really...my house...that's so normal." What a beautiful world Beth lived in...still able to hold onto it. He hoped she wouldn't ever lose it.

"Yeah...I mean, I always knew that whatever I did in life, I would never make a lot of money, but to have what your Dad had...a sturdy home...and land...a man could provide for his family there no matter what..." He felt Beth nod against his chest...she understood.

"It'll just take a while to get used to here...just like at the prison..." She was right, but the adjustment process here was looking like it would be less painful.

"If anyone can make this place into a home, it's you." The truth was, anywhere could be home for Daryl as long as Beth was beside him.

He'd spent most of his life moving from place to place, one night here, one night there, only temporary homes at the best. He wanted to give Beth a strong, stable house, a home, but they'd learned that sometimes homes in their world as it was now met with devastating ends. What mattered was Beth. What mattered was him. Wherever Beth was was enough for him because his real home was in her arms.

"Maybe we'll go back there someday..." Beth's voice was filled with hope. Daryl sure in the hell hoped she didn't mean the prison...too many fucking demons and ghosts there...

"Who knows, Lil' Bit. Maybe we might eventually make it back to the farm...maybe your home will be ours someday."

That thought hadn't been far from his mind. Before they came upon the R.V. camp from Hell, Daryl had mentioned if their original plan of west to the water went south, they might try for the farm.

"It already was our home...your home too...we'd just be going back home..." Her voice was drowsy
now. Daryl was tired too, fighting back a yawn. "Daddy would've wanted that...his family living there...150 years of Greenes lived there...maybe the Dixons will make it that long too..."

_The Dixons_, Daryl thought, getting the briefest happy vision in his mind before drifting off...
Beth perched on the bed beside him. Breakfast was done, and Daryl was still asleep. He was usually the one awake first...the morning person...so he must have needed it; he deserved it. The opportunity was right there in front of her...it was too good to pass up. This would probably be a once in a lifetime chance knowing him, so she looked carefully through the screen of the little digital camera, focusing on the image of Daryl she wanted to capture, and pressed down on the button. The bright light emitted from the flash even startled her...and she was expecting it. Daryl, however...Beth found herself pinned under him, his arm pressed firmly across her chest as his eyes fluttered, adjusting to the half light in the room coming through the curtain...the camera discarded on the bed beside her. Heart pounding so fast...she wasn't afraid, she just hadn't expected...it had been a bad idea from the start...

Beth gently rested her hand at the center of his chest, not pushing him away, just making a connection.

"Daryl...Daryl, it's me..."

His eyes finally opened all the way; he was fully awake, pulling his arm back and freeing her.

"Beth...what the Hell?" He was hoarse...clearly recovering from being startled, and she couldn't help but wonder if it had been something more than just the flash from the camera...a nightmare maybe. "I'm...I didn't mean to..."

Daryl rolled away from her, onto his back, throwing an arm over his eyes like he was trying to block something dark and horrible. Their demons ran deep...there was no denying that. She wanted to ask him what it was, talk to him about it...help him through it...but asking might make it worse. If Daryl wanted to talk about it, he would. Instead, she turned over to him, took his free hand in hers, and waited. With Daryl, holding hands, it never really turned out to be her holding his...his hand always dominated the embrace which he went to so easily now...but her intent...her support and love, they were there.

"You okay?" He let his arm fall away from his eyes, glancing at her hesitantly, probably waiting for the worst.

"Mmm-hmm," Beth flashed him a reassuring smile.

"What was that?"

"A camera."

"A camera?"

"Yeah...a digital one. I charged it yesterday...and it has its own printing dock and everything..." Beth had been so excited by the find.
"I thought we were gonna go easy on the electricity...Jeez, you gotta go and bring out a camera." His words were serious, but his tone wasn't.

Daryl sat up, leaning over her, snatching the small silver camera from the bed.

"We're making a life...making memories...pictures are part of that, at least while we have the chance."

"Well, this memory's just gonna get unmade," Daryl asserted, pushing random buttons on the back of the camera.

"No, Daryl, don't!" She was desperate. She didn't want to lose that...she didn't want to lose him.

Beth grabbed for the camera, but her serious attempt quickly turned into a playful struggle as she realized Daryl didn't intend to erase anything. She could never win over his resistance either way...his arms were too long, and he was too strong...all she accomplished was pressing her body hard against him and being trapped in Daryl's possessive embrace until he stilled her.

"You want that picture?"

Shaking her head insistently...how could she not? That was the first picture she ever took of him. It could be the only picture. In the old world, pictures were important. Now they were an impossible gift.

"Lay back..." She shivered when she heard his husky voice and he released her from his grip.

"What...why?"

Daryl pressed a firm hand against her shoulder, forcing her back until her head was resting against a soft pillow and he was close over her.

"What's fair is fair..." Raspy voice just loud enough to hear.

"No...I look horrible...I'm a mess." Beth tried to escape, but it was no use.

"Shhh..."

Daryl gently arranged her mussed hair around her face, bringing some of it up over her shoulders, letting it spill through his fingers as he watched it fall.

"You said we're makin' memories...I wanna remember this about you...wakin' up next to you..."

Beth conceded.

After Daryl snapped more than enough pictures of her in her morning disarray, he fell down on the bed beside her.

"Come here..." he gestured, and she didn't refuse his offer. "Ain't no picture of me worth having without you in it."

She might not agree...but they needed a picture together.

The flash made it real.

"Kiss me..." Daryl was clearly having too much fun with the camera, but what did they have to lose?
Beth kissed him and hoped the camera could capture what she felt.

Struggling...pulling as hard as she could, she'd won the right to ride out with Daryl to check the fences...Daryl had given in...but Beth was losing the war with his bow. Despite the chill in the air, she was getting warm under her coat from the effort of trying to draw back the bowstring to load the stupid crossbow.

"Come on Lil' Bit, you can do better than that!" Daryl tried to motivate from his position behind her.

"I'm trying..." Beth really didn't want him to know how much she was struggling, but he did.

"Step harder into the stirrup."

His suggestion was genuine, but it wasn't like she wasn't doing that already. It was hopeless. She hadn't heard him get closer...he was so silent in the woods...but she felt his body press at her from behind, his hands coming to rest on her hips.

"I guess it would help if you weighed more than the draw weight of the bow."

Beth straightened, looking over her shoulder at him, unconsciously biting her lower lip, waiting to be kissed. But he was all serious, except for his hands...she was probably misreading that.

"Let's focus...you were the one who wanted to learn how to shoot."

"Yeah...shoot, not load...I didn't know it was going to be this hard."

Daryl got a little awkward look on his face, and it took a second for her to understand why...how close he'd moved...all snug up behind her like he was.

"Let's focus..." He repeated. "Spread your legs."

"Umm..." Beth was confused. Hadn't he just told her to focus? "Are you serious?"

"Always serious 'bout my bow. Take your foot off it, and spread your legs."

Beth didn't question him again, removing her foot from the crossbow stirrup and widening her stance. Daryl's hands still resting on her hips were driving her to distraction...and leaning into her, Beth felt his chest pressing against her back, urging her to bend down over the bow. His booted foot emerged between hers, stepping into the crossbow's footbed. That was the reason he wanted her legs spread...her mind really was in the gutter. Daryl reached around her, grasping the bowstring on each side.

"Grab the string and pull," he instructed, his words almost seductive in tone.

He barely made her pull at all, and just like that, the bow was cocked, and she loaded it. Daryl straightened, and she did too, but he was still so close that he was touching her. She once heard Shawn joke that guys thought about sex at least five times a minute. She'd been worse than that the past few days with Daryl. Maybe there was something wrong with her.

"Now you're ready to go and conquer the world." She could feel his words warm on her neck. "You
"got your target in sight?"

Beth nodded.

"Okay, take your aim, just like with a rifle. Sight in your target...steady...take in a breath, hold...breathe out when you pull the trigger..."

The thrum of the bowstring releasing and slight swishing sound of the bolt flying was much less startling than a gun, although she'd gotten used to those. Beth looked to find the bolt protruding from a tree, smiling at her success.

"Good...that was the tree you were aiming at?" Daryl praised before he knew the truth.

"Yeah."

"Good job, Lil' Bit." Daryl headed down range to retrieve the bolt. "Okay, let's go again, make sure that wasn't just beginner's luck."

Beth's continued success with shooting, not loading, left Daryl with something she could only describe as pride written on his face. She watched as he pulled her last bolt from the tree, examining it before he snapped it in two, letting it fall to the ground.

"What did you do that for?" Beth questioned, confused.

"Bolt splintered, ain't no good anymore. You can only use a bolt so many times before it breaks."

"Is it because of me...learning?" Beth would hate herself if she ruined Daryl's-their primary means of survival.

"Nope, doesn't have nothin’ to do with you." He touched her reassuringly on the shoulder before taking his crossbow back and reloading it. "They're just being used too hard...too much. They're made for hunting, not constant combat. I'll need to make a run soon to..."

Daryl stopped, pointing for her to look. It was a doe, so pretty, standing just beyond the tree she'd used as her target. She couldn't take her eyes off the deer, and the deer, frozen, couldn't take its eyes off of them. Beth was waiting for it to fall, fatally pierced by one of Daryl's bolts, but it didn't. The serene moment was broken when one of the horses behind them whinnied and stomped. The doe, startled, bounded off into the woods, in turn, startling the horses. One stayed and one bolted, snapping its lead, galloping back in the direction of home. Neither of them made a move to chase the runaway horse; they weren't going to catch it. Daryl glanced her way, looking all satisfied.

"Who lost their horse this time?" Clearly referencing her use of his ill-fated trip on the farm where he came back without his mount.

Beth rolled her eyes, not saying anything, deciding to just let him have his moment.

"Why didn't you shoot her?"

"The doe?" Daryl turned to her. "Didn't need her."

"But you're a hunter...and you're always pushing me to eat more than I can..." Beth was trying to work it out in her head.

"We've got plenty of food at the house. If we killed her, she's dead. We let her go. If she makes it, come spring, she'll have a fawn or two. In a couple years, there’ll be a few generations of deer on
this land. In a few years, we might still be here, and we might need the meat then."

"Oh." It made sense. How was it now that she was thinking about the immediate and he was thinking about life in the long run?

Daryl headed back to their remaining horse, checking the saddle as she waited closely behind.

"I never got hunting as a sport. Two weeks out of the year, anyone can buy a license and go kill a deer whether they need it or not just 'cause they want to. But people who need the meat to survive ain't allowed to hunt any other time or they're poaching and get a fine...why in the hell would they be breaking the law to get food if they didn't have too? There ain't no money to pay that fine."

Sometimes when Daryl got like this, talked about his life before, she really didn't know what to say. She knew now that he was thinking...remembering because he was quiet as he went about his task, but she didn't have any words. Beth always felt sad thinking how Daryl's life had always been cruel. His life had really been no different before everything fell apart. Sure there had been less killing and death, but to a certain extent, Daryl was more capable of fighting and killing than what he had to deal with in his life before. The death part...in any world, that was hard to deal with...but maybe now...no, not maybe...Daryl was happy. By the time she focused on Daryl again, he was mounted, offering his hand down to her.

"Beth...you coming?" Had he already asked her? She'd been lost in thought.

Beth took his arm allowing him to pull her up onto his lap. One arm around her waist to steady her, the other taking the reins, Daryl clicked to the horse to move it forward. If ever there was a fairytale moment in their lives, this was it.

"I can ride behind you...I can ride you know..." Beth didn't want him to feel uncomfortable.

"I know, but I'd rather you be gettin' all cozy with me instead of the crossbow on my back. Ain't gonna have you get all bruised up by it again."

Everything was calm and beautiful as they rode the fence line, following it back to the house. No disturbances, no broken strands of wire, no signs of walkers or people, the birds were singing, small animals were scurrying in the woods...it was like another world...untouched...untainted by reality...and that scared her. Beth wasn't stupid. She knew at any moment it could all fall apart...and she didn't know if she could handle it...again...

"Like I said, I need to make a run sometime soon. My bolts are weak," Daryl broke the silence, finishing the conversation the doe interrupted.

The idea of a run flooded her with panic.

"Why...we have everything we need...guns, bullets, food..." Beth knew the answer, but her protest seemed vital with her knowledge that everything could fall to pieces...

"My bolts are weak...we don't have bolts. If we run, this is how we survive, how I fight...always has been." Beth knew it was the truth. That didn't mean the idea didn't scare her. "I need to make this run, and it's not up for negotiation."

Beth knew she wouldn't be able to sway Daryl on this one. It was out of her hands.
Beth dipped her hand in the water, testing it. It was almost too hot, making it just right. As she stood, she embraced the comfort of the steam that hung in the bathroom, running her hand down her body to smooth the wrinkles out of her nightgown where it clung to her from the humidity. When she slipped out the door into the bedroom, closing it quickly behind so the heat wouldn't escape, Daryl glanced at her from where he stood by the fire, giving her a good long look from top to bottom. Beth knew that the gown skimming her form left very little to the imagination. The only thing it wasn't was transparent. She couldn't help feeling just a little satisfaction at the reactions Daryl had to her...his lingering gaze...even if there was a blush rising in her cheeks.

"Done already?" Daryl questioned, but he had to know the answer to that.

Beth shook her head, taking his hand. She didn't have to lead. He followed willingly.

"What's this?"

He was so full of questions tonight. Beth shut the door, turning to Daryl and taking in the room. He'd told her to go easy on the electricity, so that had been excuse enough for the candles that added ambiance and provided more flattering light than glaring light bulbs. It could almost be deemed romantic if it wasn't out of necessity.

"A bath." Her reply was far from what Daryl expected, and she knew it.

He nodded, standing, waiting...perhaps letting her have control of the situation. Beth circled Daryl like a predator circled its prey before going in for the kill, but she knew she was no more a predator than that doe they'd seen in the woods. How his eyes met hers when she stopped in front of him, the way his breathing was slow, deep, and focused...Daryl was allowing her to act because he wanted to. But this wasn't about power or control...it hadn't ever been with him. Beth had no idea where to start, but there was really no way to mess up...was there? She focused, trying to mirror Daryl's slow, steady breathing...his sense of calm.

All it took was her hands on his sides, pushing up his shirt for Daryl to pull it off from behind his head, tossing it on the floor. His pants...his pants were a different proposition. Not that they were difficult to get off...they were night pants...but she'd never asked him to take them off before. Beth rested her hands low on his waist, her fingers venturing just below the waistband. She looked up at Daryl who was watching her intently. He read her...like he was so good at doing...his hands covering hers, both of them pushing his pants down over his hips.

And then it was just Daryl in front of her...just Daryl...standing before her with nothing to hide. He didn't even make an attempt...but why would he? It wasn't about sex, it was about Daryl, all his defenses gone, nothing to hide from her. All of his lines, his angles, the cuts of his body...his scars...they told the story of Daryl's life...the story he never wanted anyone to know, and he was
willing to share everything. They were hers now, a part of her...the most precious thing she possessed...she was part of his story now too.

She wanted to ask questions. She wanted to know about the women he'd had. She wanted to know who his first was...what it was like for him...but Daryl had once said they didn't matter, so he probably wouldn't answer. It shouldn't matter to her either...he was a new person to her, for her; his past had no bearing on their future. She would know every other part of him though, everything he was willing to share...not just his body, but all the scars he held deep inside...his gentle touch, his soft kiss, his love...every part of him he'd shared with no one but her.

Beth bit back a sob...an audible, awkward noise forcing its way out of her lips...suddenly a mess. Why was everything so damned overwhelming? It was the run...the run Daryl said he was going on...and she knew he was going to go alone...what if? She couldn't even bring herself to think about the possibilities.

Daryl cocked his head at her, trying to read her emotions before he reached out, pulling her into his arms. He was so screwed...she was such a disaster. Why was he willing to put up with her? Beth had no idea except for the obvious fact that she was the last surviving member of their group that he had. She hoped that was just her insecurity gnawing at her. So close to him, Beth could feel his hard length pressed against the curve of her stomach. Maybe she should be shy, maybe she should feel embarrassed, but she felt comfort in every part of Daryl. Even though his body clearly wanted one thing, his arms, his embrace, his hand holding her close, pressing at the small of her back exuded only the attempt to soothe, the promise of protection. When she pulled back, he let her go without question, and she pushed her reservations about the run out of her mind. There was nothing she could do about it now.

Daryl was naked. She should be too. Looking down and away, Beth reached across her chest, preparing to slip her nightgown off. But Daryl rested his hand over hers until she drew it away, allowing him to push the thin straps down her shoulders. His strong hands caressed her arms as the gown pooled on the floor at her feet.

This was different. Daryl had seen her and touched her. He'd been more intimately close to her than he was tonight...but here and now, they were just standing naked, appreciating one another. Beth still couldn't meet his eyes, but glancing up at his face, she could read the anxiety...maybe he wasn't as uncomfortable or as nervous as she was, but he clearly cared what she thought. And what now? For a split second, she just wanted Daryl to take over, take them in any direction except standing still, but this was her time...her turn. She'd touched him...pleased him...but through only the firelight illuminating that night, she'd seen little enough. Now that he was in front of her, she couldn't just stare, stepping free of the piled gown on the floor. Beth moved just a little closer, her hand touching his chest then trailing down his firm stomach, her eyes following the path her fingers traced. She let both hands reach out, dipping into the cuts of his hips, her gaze locking on the part of Daryl that probably scared her the most. She'd held him in her hands, felt him, but seeing everything free and in the open, she was intimidated, a knot of anxiety welling up in the pit of her stomach. Beth couldn't say if he was big or not...she had no point of comparison, but having a basic knowledge of sex, what went where...she pushed the thought aside. How could fear and desire go hand in hand? Daryl wouldn't hurt her, would he...but even if he didn't mean to, he would...

Beth needed to stop thinking, stop staring at what she couldn't change, a fear she would have to overcome if she wanted to share love with Daryl. She let her hand trace across his hips as she moved behind him, tracing the strong lines of his back, her fingers lingering over his scars... each lash borne by his back that once broke Daryl. His muscles tensed when she found them, but he didn't flinch. She wondered sadly if he still felt the pain...still remembered? Beth smiled, drawing over his tattoo, the two winged demons she'd never seen so close before. She wrapped her arms around him,
pressing as close as she could, resting her cheek against his back. This time, Daryl wasn't broken or despondent. He crossed his arms over hers, holding her too. That hug...that hug after they had moonshine at the shack...Daryl needed her to be strong...he needed that support and strength, she knew it...but she'd needed that hug too, even if she was the one doing the hugging.

Wrapped around him, nuzzling into his back, the security of his arms crossed over hers, Beth started to second guess herself. She might being enjoying touching Daryl...holding him...but he wasn't getting anything out of it. The other night...he'd made it all about her, pleasing her...sure, in the end, he'd let her give back, but nothing like he'd done for her. It had been over before she'd really even started, and she felt so self-conscious about that. Beth didn't want to tease him. Freeing Daryl, she moved back in front of him, letting her hand reach down and make contact with the smooth skin of his thick shaft. She carefully appraised his expression...almost pained...as he held contact with her eyes. It was like he was fighting with himself. The muscles twitched in his arms, and looking down, she saw his hands were clenched in tension. Daryl was definitely fighting some inner battle, and there was no doubt in her mind that it had something to do with her. Was it bad that deep down, a part of her wished Daryl would lose that battle, lose control, and just take her? That had to be instinct at work because she knew she couldn't handle Daryl if he lost control...

Beth pushed those thoughts aside...they scared her...thinking about how she could ever want Daryl to lose control...the thought of Daryl going there. Instead, Beth knelt slowly in front of him, looking up, waiting to see a pleasant reaction, offering Daryl what he'd offered to her but she'd been too afraid to accept. She wanted to make him happy, but Daryl's expression was one of confusion and...something else she couldn't define.

"Beth, get off your knees," Daryl's refusal was gentle, offering her his hand.

She took it, allowing him to pull her up from the floor, but she didn't understand why he was saying no. There was no reason for him not to want her to, but Beth wasn't offended. She'd said no too.

*                      *                      *                      *                      *

Feeling Beth embrace him from behind...it took him back to that place...that dark place outside the shack that reminded him so much of the place from his childhood that he wanted to forget. Everything had broken then...it all fell apart...he just couldn't hold it together anymore. Little Beth had been there to put the pieces of him back together. And when she'd hugged him...forcing him to feel that someone cared, someone could be strong for him...something life changing happened. Beth fit...she made him whole. She was the piece that had always been missing. Together, they'd burned that shack...Beth made him purge his demons...gave him the chance to start over. He'd fought himself on it for the longest time, assuming the role of her protector, lying to himself as he knew it now...convincing himself that it would be more than enough...until the group of assholes tried to rape Beth, tried to take what was his, unleashing the savage within that slaughtered them without a second thought and led him to where he stood now.

This time, Daryl felt need in Beth's embrace. She wasn't being strong for him, she was holding him for herself. He brought his arms up across hers just to make sure she felt him. Beth was naked; they were both naked, not just physically, but emotionally. It had actually gone much smoother than he'd imagined, the loss of their clothes, compared to how finicky Beth had been before. True, he'd taken her nightgown off, and most of his clothes too, but she at least made the attempt...the offer. Her skin was so soft and warm where she pressed against his back and ass. He was so rough hewn, so hard, so calloused and scarred; he couldn't understand how she could stand the contact...skin to skin.

In the middle of his thoughts of her, Beth released him and slipped back into his view. She didn’t seem shy about being naked anymore, or him either, which made Daryl feel good about the whole
situation. He assumed she didn't see anything she didn't like, or he would be able to read it on her face. Whatever she had in her head, she was intent upon though. Beth reached out and barely allowed her fingers to skim along the side of his cock. How was it that it was so fucking intense when she barely touched him? Daryl literally bit back the need to act. Fucking instinct...He balled his fists and flexed the muscles in his upper arms to try to draw his focus away from Beth's touch. He'd almost lost his battle with instinct the last time she'd touched him...saved only by a premature ending. That wouldn't be the case this time he knew, and if he let go like that, he would never forgive himself.

Thankfully, he didn't have to fight Beth touching him very long...but then it just got even worse. Beth sank down to her knees on the cold, hard floor. She was offering, and he fucking wanted her to. Daryl wanted to feel her perfect, soft lips wrapped around his cock, her warm mouth engulfing him...no...not like this though... Beth on her knees on the bathroom floor. He'd been here before...in the bathrooms of bars...it reminded him too much of his life before, and those weren't happy memories; they were just memories he couldn't escape. It definitely wasn't what Beth deserved. He wanted to share all her firsts with her...hell, he prayed that even in their fucked up world, he would be the only one to have her...ever...

The way he had Beth set up in his mind, well, she would never be on the floor in a bathroom, giving him a blowjob, comin' away with black and blue knees. When it happened, it would be on equal ground...in bed...with love and comfort.

Her eyes...those eyes looking up and him...killed him.

And who he was...he'd changed. Before...he didn't even need to qualify that in his mind...it was before; it didn't matter. It wasn't who he was anymore. Daryl just wanted to make love to Beth. Make love...fuck, he'd changed...he'd never thought those words about his own life until Beth. But he wanted to make love to her first, and then whatever they wanted to happen after that could happen. Shit, that was traditional. Deep down...maybe he was traditional...

"Beth, get off your knees." He made sure his voice was soft. He didn't want her to think he was being judgmental, 'cause he wasn't. He could never judge her.

She took the hand he offered, helping her rise to her feet. He smiled at her to soften the blow if one hand been felt which he didn't think had.

"I don't think this is where you planned for us to go," Daryl reminded her. "Let's have that bath."

*                      *                      *                      *                      *

He'd never been one to really enjoy long, hot baths. Hell, for most of his life, Daryl had never had the chance at what most people considered simple luxuries. Beth changed all that...his perspective on everything. Engulfed by the hot water, Beth between his legs reclining against his chest...life didn't get much better than this.

Life.

Daryl's mood suddenly turned somber...not bad...just realistic...not driven by fantasy.

Lately, he'd been feeling his own mortality...much more acutely than ever before. Truth be told, his life before the shit hit the fan hadn't been worth nothin', but at the same time, he hadn't been facing life or death situations on a daily basis and sometimes twice on Sundays. There had only been once he'd ever actually thought he might die and was afraid for it. He'd shared that story with Beth...when Merle's janky little dealer almost put a bullet in his skull over a fucking cartoon. Then...it hadn't really
been the fear of dying...no one would miss him; he wouldn't be no great loss to the world. But in what he thought were his final moments, he couldn't make peace with the fact that his death would mean nothing just as his life had meant nothing, his brains blown out by a tweaker who wouldn't even remember what happened the next day. Even Daryl's shitty existence had more meaning than that.

After, when he became a part of Rick's group...it wasn't that his life had more value to him...he still knew what people thought of him...it was just that he knew his death would have value. People started needing him...for food, protection, a fighter to have their back no matter what. When things went bad, he just threw himself out there, never really thought much about it or his own life. He'd always been much better at doing instead of thinking. It was his job to fight, to protect the group, and he was damned good at it. He didn't have a hero complex or nothin', didn't need people to remember him or his sacrifice when he was gone...it was just that he needed his death to mean something. It might have been selfish on his part, feelin' that way, but that was the kind of selfish their world could use a bit more of.

Thing was, since he'd been with Beth...his outlook changed. He didn't want to die. He wanted to live...live with Beth...live for Beth. Daryl would die for her without a second thought, but now his life had real meaning. Maybe it was also...that before...his life had been day by day...he never really saw a future for himself, and now he did. Did that make him less of a man? Was he going soft?

His somber thoughts left him feeling empty and kind of lost. Daryl pulled his arms from where they rested on the sides of the tub to wrap them around Beth...she was there...how could he feel empty? Closing his eyes and soaking in everything around him, Daryl leaned his head back, imagining Beth on top of him in the hot bath. He'd never been a girl on top kind of guy. He'd been dominated too much in his past...not by women; he'd never allowed that, but who it was didn't matter. The scars were still there. But maybe with Beth, he could get there eventually...her small hand in the warm water, finding him and guiding his cock to where he needed to be, her other braced against his chest as she slowly sank down on him, taking as much of his dick as she could...as deep as he could go. Being wrapped in her silky, tight warmth...connected the way a man and a woman were meant to be, hoping that she would feel complete too. It wasn't so much about sex for him in the moment in his thoughts...although that was there too...but he wanted the comfort it would offer in this time when he was doubting himself...the thoughts of death and everything he feared overshadowed by the ultimate act of life. He would’ve asked Beth for that now if she wasn't a virgin...if the thing he wanted most wasn't to make love to her the right way the first time, in their massive ridiculous bed...doing right by her, the way she deserved...and maybe how he deserved too.

Daryl wanted to go there...soon. The house was almost in order...there was only one essential thing left made evident by Beth's crossbow lesson...his weak bolts. He had to make this run. He needed new bolts...knew there was somewhere near he could probably find 'em. The Archer's Nest...the ad in the Yellow Pages told him all he needed to know: All the supplies for your recreational and hunting archery needs-recurve, compound, crossbow! It was about eight miles there, eight miles back, maybe ten at the most by his estimation...a quick run, an easy run. There was no way around it. It was the one thing that had been a constant in his life...all the way back to when he got old enough to take care of himself...had to eat. And it was probably the one thing of worth his old man had ever taught him, that and the fact that he didn't want to grow up and be like his old man. It wasn't about bein' sentimental about his crossbow or nothin', it was just a part of who he was. Daryl was good enough with a gun, even better in close quarters with a knife...but that crossbow...his ability with it, it was the only skill he had that he was one-hundred percent sure of. Like he told Beth, if they ran, it was how they survived, how he fought...always had been.

Soon...he would go soon. He was done waiting on living life to the fullest with Beth, no matter how intimidated he might be about the responsibilities he would bear in moving forward. Daryl wouldn't
take Beth before this run. He was sticking to his guns about getting the house in order...and having that to look forward to would motivate him to get it done and get back to her where he belonged. And if something happened to him...if he fell on the run, he wouldn't have taken something from her that he couldn't give back. Beth wouldn't be left to deal with any consequences.
Laying on the rug, wrapped in an oversized bath towel, drying in front of the fire, Daryl had moved past his somber mood but was still contemplating the reality of life. Right now reality was good and beautiful, but it might not always be. The world outside was an ugly place. Beth was sitting up beside him, her body arched toward the warm flames. He reached, running his hand from the small of her back, up her spine as far as he could go without moving from his place on the floor and then back down again. She could lay down with him, and that would be even better. Glancing over her shoulder and catching his gaze, she must’ve read his mind because she was resting her head at his shoulder before he had the chance to ask. It was quiet and peaceful...the right time to say what he wanted to say.

"Beth, if I die, I want you to keep...to have my crossbow...if you can get it...if you're with me when I go."

Beth pushed away from him so violently that he felt it hard.

"What!" There was terror laced in her voice, but there was nothing to be terrified of. In their life, death happened. No one could hide from it...they couldn't escape.

"I ain't immortal. I'm gonna die...probably sooner rather than later." His words weren't meant to upset her. Just prepare her for the inevitable. He reached for her, tying to pull her back down with him, but she refused.

"Don't say that...you can't..." She was gonna cry. He didn't want her to cry. If Beth wouldn't come to him, he would go to her.

Daryl sat up, brushing her hair out of her face, but she looked away.

"Shhh, Lil' Bit..." He tried to draw her close, but she wouldn't give. "Beth...just listen to me." Just 'cause she wasn't looking at him didn't mean he couldn't talk. Daryl felt lucky to have the chance to say what he wanted to say, make things right before he went, whether it happened tomorrow or twenty years down the road...'cause nobody knew when Death was gonna come ridin' up on his pale horse to collect his due. "I want you to keep my crossbow...you're the only thing I've ever had in my life that I loved...and if you have it, maybe you won't forget me."

Startled, Daryl was thrown off balance when Beth threw herself into his arms, burying her face at his neck, her hot tears trailing down his skin. Instinct and love and everything he was compelled him to hold her as tight as he could without hurting her.
"Why are you saying this...I don't want you to die..." He could barely hear her words, but they hit him hard.

Daryl held her for a long moment, breathing in the soft, sweet scent of her hair now mixed with the earthy, comforting smell of the fire.

"Beth...please look at me..." Maybe the edge of desperation in his voice made her comply.

Her eyes were wide, tear stained, and even bluer than normal. She took a deep, quavering breath and waited.

"I ain't dead yet, and I don't plan on going any time soon without one hell of a fight...but the truth is, nobody gets to live forever." Daryl realized he probably should've never started this conversation, but it was too late to take it all back.

She nodded her understanding, brushing her tears away. In what fucked up world would a girl like Beth cry for him? In what fucked up world would a girl like Beth love him? In what fucked up world would he ever get the chance to know what love was...to fall in love? This beautiful fucked up world.

"Beth...you're the only light I've had in my life..."

"I love you, Daryl...I don't wanna talk about...even think..." she couldn't finish, looking away, shaking her head.

He reached out, lifting her chin so she had to look at him. What he had to say now wasn't sad, so there was no need for her to avoid it.

"You've made everything worth it. Every moment I spend with you...my life feels endless." Daryl was nothing if not thankful for the time he'd been given.
Chapter 46

Chapter Notes

~Author's Note: Hey guys! So sorry it has been so long since I have updated. I have just been really caught up and busy with getting ready for Christmas, spending time with the family etc. And, this will probably be the last chapter that I post before the new year. I will try to post the next chapter before then...but that all depends on what happens over the holidays and how wrapped up I get. I really hope you all enjoy this chapter. And I want to thank all of you who have been reading this fic since I started posting it here earlier this year! You are all amazing, and I appreciate every one of you. Merry Christmas to those of you who celebrate, and wishing everyone a happy New Year full of all the beautiful things you deserve!~

Daryl woke suddenly. It had happened a few times now...been happening since he slept sound...had a place where he felt secure enough to actually sleep. He would wake, panicked and panting, like he’d just had the worst fucking nightmare. What drove his terror when he woke wasn’t the nightmare he couldn’t ever remember, it was the fear that he was alone in his bed, isolated...abandoned. Before, this would’ve never cost him a wink of sleep-it had always been his SOP...alone...but now that he actually had something to lose...

He calmed down as soon as he felt Beth breathing softly beside him and realized he was still in the too soft bed that she loved so much, his heart stopped pounding so hard, and he could breathe again. That was when Daryl realized how still the night was. Still was different than quiet. Quiet had to do with hearing. *Still* had to do with sensing. Quiet could be bad; it meant that something in the natural order of things was being disturbed. Still was different...it only occurred every so often. He slipped out of bed, careful not to disturb Beth, grabbed his flashlight and went to the window seat.

When he drew back the curtain and shined the light outside, it caught the heavy white flakes rapidly falling from the night sky. He knelt on the cushioned bench watching them drift down to earth, feeling excitement welling up in his chest like he was a little kid. A month ago...probably more...a little over a month...no, maybe even more than that...he wasn't really sure how long they'd been together...time really didn't seem to matter anymore, he knew it was gonna be an early and maybe even a hard winter. That had scared the shit outta him 'cause they were on the run. Now they were safe...on solid ground...so let it snow. He thought briefly about everyone else out there and what snow might mean for them, but there wasn't nothin' he could do about it. He had his own priorities now, and the rest...they were all survivors and had to find their own way if they were still alive. No one had thought it would end up like this. Who could've ever imagined? Not him...not anyone. And who knew what spring would bring? Maybe since they had somewhere safe to come back to...had that stability...he could start tracking again. What, was he turnin' into Beth now...hoping for something so unlikely? But she always seemed to have hope, and she gave him hope to hold on to...a reason to believe...

Life had found him when he least expected it, and he wasn't gonna waste it. He told Beth he was going on his run in the morning, and the snow made it an even safer bet. He was getting that done...it was going to be a good day to get things done and start fresh. Daryl threw another log on the fire and carefully crawled back in bed, hoping the snow would stick and stay ’til morning.
Beth could feel Daryl looking down at her before she even opened her eyes.

"Beth..." He whispered softly, apparently trying not to jar her out of sleep, but she wasn't ready to wake up. It was so warm and cozy.

"Lil 'Bit...wake up..." He still whispered, but it was more insistent. "Come on, Beth...open your eyes...time to wake up..."

This time the urgent whisper was accompanied by a gentle shake of the shoulder. Sometimes she wished he wasn't such a morning person.

"I'm awake..." Beth mumbled unenthusiastically. "Come back to bed...I'm so warm."

Daryl leaned down and kissed her forehead. Then it struck her. He said he was going today...the stupid run...she understood, but then she didn't. Fear filled her heart...was he ready... leaving already? Sitting up in a panic, Beth grabbed his arm before he had the chance to move.

"You're not leaving now...you can't..."

"No...not yet...there's just somethin' I wanna show you." He kept his voice low and soft, but she could hear the excitement in it...and Daryl's voice didn't read excited very often. "Get dressed warm and meet me downstairs."

He was out the door in a flash, so it must be something really good. Beth forced herself to throw back the heavy covers and climb off the bed, dressing warm like Daryl said, pulling on thick socks, then her boots...yawning. When she reached the top of the stairs, Daryl was waiting at the foot, holding her coat and a fleece blanket. As she descended the steps, she could see through the windows that the world was covered in a pure white blanket, and it was still snowing. Snow...this early...but it looked magical. Daryl offered her his hand at the last three steps.

"I just wanted to share the snow with you..." He trailed off at the end as if he was unsure whether or not she would want to see.

"It's beautiful..." And it was.

Daryl smiled as he helped her into her coat, grabbed her hand, and pulled her toward the door.

They sat together on the verandah on an ornate wrought iron bench where Daryl had considerately placed a blanket over the iron seat. Wrapped up together in the fleece throw, they watched the snow fall on the silent morning.

"It's so early for snow...isn't it?" Beth questioned, leaning in closer under Daryl's arm. Then she realized she really had no idea what day of the week it was much less what month.

"Yeah...I'd say a bit early, but it's Georgia, and snow ain't really all that normal to start with." He watched the fluffy dancing flakes so intently.

"Do you know what month it is?" Daryl was an outdoorsman, so maybe he would have some good insight. If they were ever going to try to have a normal life again, and that seemed like a real
possibility now, they really needed to be able to tell the time.

"Well...we had a good long harvest at the prison before... Then, we've been on our own...what a month and a half...or over, right?" Daryl looked to her for some sort of confirmation.

How would she know? Oh...yeah...that. She should know, but sadness, worry, stress, anxiety, fighting, running...the general state of their life really didn't make for that kind of regular natural cycle. But Daryl wouldn't know that.

"I really can't say...I don't know...sometimes that just gets screwed up..." Beth tried to explain, but it came out awkward.

"You okay?" Concern. Beth hated when he worried over nothing.

"Yeah...fine...it just happens sometimes. Any little thing can cause it."

At least he wasn't awkward.

"Well...maybe November, mid-November...I don't know. That's just a guess. I haven't really paid much attention to animal patterns or nature signs...I've been worried about other things..." Daryl was apparently just as lost as she was.

"So...November...that's a good place to start..." This way, at least they could have some idea to keep track.

"Sounds good to me. You too cold, Lil' Bit?"

"No. I'm good." He was good at keeping her warm. "If it's November, we need to start thinking about celebrating." Daryl waited for her to continue. He was interested, the way he looked at her.

"Thanksgiving, Christmas...a coming New Year. This is our life, Daryl, and we deserve to be happy...celebrate what we have."

It made Beth sad that Daryl had never had a family to celebrate the holidays with. It still broke her heart thinking about how he never got anything from Santa Claus for Christmas when he was little. This year would be different.

* * * * *

So she wanted to celebrate. He had already seen Christmas in his mind, but last night when he watched the snow falling from the window, he knew it all started today. He would close one chapter with the run and start a new one with Beth. Thinking on it all...this chance, Beth...a real family, his own family...that was what she was...to share a life with, celebrate, have holidays with...it made him nervous as hell, and he was nervous to start with. What if he disappointed her...failed her again? It would be on him...

"You're right...we'll do the holidays up real nice. A big dinner for Thanksgiving, then there'll be a Christmas tree..." He trailed off because he choked up a little for no reason. Beth just smiled up at him.

"It hasn't snowed like this since before..." Beth offered...like she was covering his unbidden emotion for him.
She was right. The winter before everything had gone down, they'd had some snow and even a big ice storm that same year, but nothing much since then.

"I know you don't remember, but back in 1993 I think it was, we got a huge record snowfall of twenty-six inches or so. And the people 'round home thought the world had ended then. Kinda ironic." He smiled to himself a little.

"You really like the snow, don't you?"

"I love snow." It was such a simple statement, but it carried such a deep meaning. And here he was about to open up again. "When I was young, my favorite days were snow days from school."

"Me too!" Beth chimed in cheerily, but he imagined that their reasons for loving snow days were very different.

"You know, when I was really little, I used to like school. I liked learning, I liked playing, and I liked havin' friends. I used to even get to go over to some kids' houses and play sometimes. You see, the thing was, I knew I was different. I could tell from where the other kids lived, the kind of toys they had, what we ate for dinner there—the fact that we ate dinner, but they didn't know I was different..."

A glance to the side told him that Beth was listening intently, but he couldn't look at her and tell his story.

"Then when we all started gettin' older but I still wasn't old enough to take care of myself...well, the other kids started to notice I was different. Sometimes I wore the same clothes to school 'cause I didn't have nothin' else or my Mom didn't do the laundry. Other times, I was dirty 'cause there was no one to make sure I got cleaned up before school. I didn't have no friends, and I learned real quick what the world thought of white trash. And being white trash meant the same thing whether you were eight, eighteen, twenty-eight..."

Daryl could hear the anger welling up in his voice at the thoughts of the past, so he took a deep breath and focused on the snow falling before continuing.

"I was just a little kid then...didn't know how to stand up for myself, so I just started hatin' school. Snow days were the best days, not just 'cause I didn't have to go to school but because I could go outside and everything was white and clean and perfect and so very still. It was like time stopped...the whole world was mine...there was no one to tell me I was nothing...I was free."

"Daryl, you're not nothing...to me...you're everything..." Beth reached over and took his hand. He let her, nodding.

After a moment of silence...accepting what she said and the beauty of meaning so much to someone...to her...he went back to talking. He'd said more words to Beth since they'd been alone together than he'd probably ever said to all the other people in his entire life.

"You know how I said I've never been outta Georgia? Well, I always told myself that when I grew up and got some money, I would go somewhere far away and start over, somewhere where there was lots of snow every winter. I just wasn't ever strong enough to make it happen." He'd been too busy following Merle around and wasting his life.

"If you want to go, I'll go with you..." She was serious, and what Beth said was everything he needed to hear in that moment.

When he'd first sensed winter was coming, before they'd found safety in their new home, he'd contemplated moving them North and West where there were less people and more snow, but he'd
been reluctant to ask her to give up the chance that they would ever see their people again, no matter how slim that chance was. And now he knew she would've been willing.

"Nah, we're set up good here." He took a deep breath and turned to her. "What's important now...the thing is...for me, this is my chance to start over...Beth, I've got something I wanna give you," he managed after a quiet pause.

"A present?!" Beth chirped, a smile brightening her face.

"Well...kinda..." He really hoped this was gonna go better than it was going in his mind.

"Okay..." Beth was awkward as Daryl pulled his hand away from hers to find his offering.

He dug in his pocket until his fingers found the smooth, cool metal. There were two, but he only pulled out the small one, closing it tightly in his fist. Taking a deep breath, he held it for a second. Never thought he'd be here in this situation...hadn't ever put much thought into how it should go.

"Daryl...are you okay...do you want to go inside?"

"No, Beth, I wanna stay right here until I say what I have to say."

He opened his fist, presenting the contents to her, the pale silver contrasting against the skin of his palm. She didn't say anything. She looked at the ring, then up at him, confusion on her face.

*This is going well...*

"I think it's small enough. I found it back...the night...well, in the souvenir and camping shop where we slept. I told you that you always find the good stuff under the counter...well...this was in a counter case. They had some biker stuff there. People who like bikes tend to like angel wings..." Daryl had never been one to rattle on...but he was anxious. Hell, he never used to get nervous before. He should shut up, but he just needed to know one way or another. He just wished she would say something or at least take the damn ring he was offering her.

Beth tentatively reached out and touched the ring with her finger. She ran it over the intertwined wings that made up the ring, but she still didn't say anything. She just looked up at him with those wide eyes and waited. Daryl was questioning everything now. He thought about the sparkler Glenn gave Maggie, and this was nothing in comparison...inadequate. It wasn't even gold...just silver...no precious gems.

"If you don't like it...I mean, I can find you any kind you want...a big rock or lots of stones...it was just...this one spoke to me. When I saw it, I couldn't imagine giving you anything else. I never thought about this much before, but it seems like it should come from the heart." That he was sure of. There could be no more concrete reason for why he picked it. And why in the Hell was he still talking so much?

"It's beautiful..." She finally spoke, and he was able to breathe again. She withdrew her hand from where it had been touching the silver. "I just..."

Beth trailed off, and he knew he'd fucked up.

"Oh...too soon...it's okay."

Daryl closed his fist on the ring again, feeling suddenly stiff and uncomfortable. How could he not have seen this as a possibility? He assumed that with Beth, the kind of girl she was, that if she wanted to sleep with him, if she loved him, she would want what he was offering her. He had the
immediate instinct to retreat, throwing the blanket they shared back from his shoulders.

"We should go in...we...I need to get going...get this run done..."

Beth grasped his arm to stop him.

"Daryl...it's beautiful...but I don't know what this is..." She sounded just as hesitant...as nervous as he'd been.

*Fuck, am I that shitty at communicating?*

"You mean what the ring's for? What I'm askin’ you?" He was calm now. This needed to come out right.

Beth nodded her head.

Deep breath. Let it go. Start over.

"Beth, I've never done anything right in my life...the right way...the way things are supposed to be. Never really had the chance. If I've learned anything from all this change in the world, it's that I got a chance to make choices for myself without anyone tellin' me who I am or who I should be. I'm doing things right now. I love you, we're sharing this life together, and I wanna do everything with you the right way...that's the only way I see it."

He paused momentarily...took another breath.

"I know I'm damaged...not the kind of man you ever pictured yourself with...but I know I can take care of you, provide for you, protect you. And if we ever find our family and friends again, I want them to know the promises that I've made to you." Wow, *that all came out really good*. He'd laid everything out on the table.

Beth brought her hands up to her face, covering the surprise and shock, but her eyes...he could see her eyes...and they sparkled...were so full of life...joy.

"Will you take the ring?" *No, that's not right...that's not what you're supposed to say. "Beth, will you marry me?"*

Daryl was more nervous than when he'd told Beth that he loved her for the first time, but just like then, it came out solid with no hesitation or insecurity, because it was right, and he knew it.

She let out a little breathy laugh that sounded like it was mixed with a sob. Finally pulling her hands away from her face, smiling shyly, Beth nodded. It was the best answer in the world.

Daryl opened his hand to give her the ring before he realized he almost botched that too. Taking her left hand in his, the ring in his other, he slid it on her slender finger, consecrating his promises to her.

It fit. At least he hadn't fucked that up.

She looked down at the ring and touched it tentatively, those two angel wings embracing each other. It felt cool and heavy and meaningful, like it encompassed the hope of the entire world. Beth had
worn rings before, but none that represented so much...the joining of two lives that experienced so much shared loss, pain, sorrow, but in the same turn survival, understanding, faith, hope...and love. Twisting it back and forth, feeling it slide across her finger and warming under her touch, Beth realized just how real it was. She always imagined she would get married young, start a family like she always wanted, maybe go to community college...and she couldn't help feel sad that she had no one to share this moment with...none of her family, but Daryl was there. She wouldn't trade his life for anything...anyone. Beth smiled a little to herself. She'd always dreaded the idea of a boy having to ask her Daddy's permission to marry her in an awkward exchange where the boy would be stammering and sweating bullets, and Daddy would be strong, silent, and formidable. The thing was, she could almost imagine the conversation between Daryl and her Daddy, two equals...two men...with the same purpose in life, making sure she was protected, happy, and loved. It would be a bittersweet day where her Daddy would begin letting her go and Daryl would take his place, but there would be shared happiness and hope in what was being gained. Daddy always told them...her and Maggie...that no man was ever good enough for his girls until one day, one was. She really hoped that he was watching her from somewhere and thought today was that day. Beth looked up to Daryl who was watching her like a hawk.

"Aren't you gonna say somethin'?" His voice raspy and insecure...questioning her silence...so endearing.

Just shaking her head no until she could find her words and breathe again...taking the moment to adjust to the beauty of her life...their life...

"Sometimes speechless is good..." She was finally able to manage.

Apparently that answer was good enough, Daryl nodding, his eyes sparkling, hearing the joy she knew sang in her voice.

"So...we're engaged now?" Hesitant...she didn't really want to put a label on it...not quite sure how Daryl felt about labels, but he asked her to marry him.

"I...what good's an engagement? This is us, Beth...we're together." Beth really wasn't sure what came next but listened to him intently. "They were a set...they had one for me too..."

Daryl reached in his pocket, offering her an exact version of the ring he'd given her, just in a bolder, larger size. Taking the ring from him, examining the detail, Beth thought back to the day she followed him into the woods, the wings on his vest comforting and guiding her. Even if this was somehow the end of their story, it couldn't have been more perfect.

"I never thought I'd get married...even if it happened, I'd never wear a ring. But this ring...it's a ring I want to wear." He was hesitant in his words, like he didn't know where he stood or what she was going to say.

There was no way in any world...any place or time that she would ever say no to Daryl, his offer...the chance to share a life with him. Beth caressed his hand before taking it in her own and guiding the ring onto his finger, considering its strange and foreign presence against his skin. His hands were scarred, rough, so often covered in blood, but it belonged there. It was right. Their hands together, Daryl’s now embracing hers...those matched rings...there was absolutely no question that they belonged to each other.

He leaned in and caught her lips in a gentle kiss...a kiss full of promises. Beth kissed back, but let him lead...let him make her breathless. There was an innocence to this...their first real kiss as two people who chose to be one...something as pure and beautiful as the snow falling around them. A new world, a new start...all the blemishes and darkness of the past erased.
Daryl gazed at her...contemplating her...taking in all of Beth after he forced himself to pull away from her lips. Pale and beautiful, stray wisps of hair framing her face, cheeks reddened from the cold. He remembered back...back to the first time they kissed. The truth was, he lost who he was...who he used to be...that day when he kissed her. He'd become who he was because of her. He wanted to kiss her again, but it was too cold. There would be time for that later. Instead, he stood, scooping her up in his arms.

"Daryl...what are you doing?!
" There was laughter in her voice...untarnished happiness. It was still hard to believe that Beth feeling like that had anything to do with him.

"Doing things the right way..." He thought he'd made that clear to her.

He didn't mess up the threshold thing, keeping her in his arms even after they passed through the double doors. It may not have been Beth's family home where a hundred and fifty years of Greenes had lived. It wasn't a home he built or made for her, but this place...this place was where his family started...where the Dixons began.
She made him lay down on the ground, stretch out his arms, waving them back and forth in the snow cover, Daryl feeling awkward and stupid. He'd carried her inside so she wouldn't be cold and risk gettin’ chilled, but she'd insisted on coming right back out.

"Snow angels," Beth explained.

Thing was, he was the only one...the idiot laying in the snow. But she smiled at him...laughed, and that made it all worth it. Then the flash...the damned camera again! He was about to tell her to stop with the pictures when he realized it was fun...

Fun.

Beth thought she was able to get a head start as he made it to his feet, moving slowly, allowing her to get away. It wouldn't have been any challenge if there was no chase. Daryl let it go on until they were both breathless from the cold, Beth barely able to laugh when he went in for the kill, catching her in his arms and bringing her down in the snow with him. She rested on his chest as they both caught their breath. He felt young. It wasn't that he was old or anything...Daryl just never really had the chance in his life to feel young...be young...had to grow up so fast. And here was the chance when he least expected it. Daryl reached for the camera Beth gripped tightly, but she didn't want to give it to him, probably thinking she'd never get it back.

"If there's a day for pictures, it's today." Couldn't really believe he just said that...but it was the truth...the truth of his life now.

She handed it over nice and willing then, his arm around her, pulling her in closer as they both looked up at the camera. He took more than one just to make sure the pictures turned out. They had to. Laying there in the snow, in the quiet world around them, Daryl's mind was actually still.

"Daryl?"

"Hmm..."

"What do we do now?"

What do we do now? "We live."
Beth's question, *What do we do now?*, there had been only one answer in his mind, and Daryl gave that to her, *We live*. She accepted it happily, reaching down and kissing him while the snow fell all around them, but she had been asking a practical question that needed an answer with more immediacy. There were things to be done...the day was far from over, and their celebration would have to wait until later, after he got back from his run. Beth was making breakfast; he was starved...love was exhausting, and that was just the emotional part. Daryl went to do what needed to be done before he left, heading to the stable to feed the horses their morning rations. The snow was falling heavier again, covering everything in a pure white shroud, erasing all the dirt and death and sorrow that had preceded it. It was the perfect day...and this sanctuary of theirs, he hoped it could last, but he would take what he could get while he had it.

Daryl sat down on one of the hay bales inside the barn and took a moment for himself...some time to let what had gone down really sink in. He was happy. Daryl hesitated even thinking it, afraid he would fuck it up somehow. He wondered briefly if Merle would be happy for him, but if Merle had still been around, something would've gone wrong. And his old man...Daryl just wished he had one last chance to talk to him, to say a big *Fuck You* and tell him that he wasn't nothin', he had a meaningful life, and he had a good girl that loved him. He'd made something of himself. But getting to say all that really didn't matter. The fact that he'd beat the odds was validation enough. And he had a new family, Daryl realized. If they were still out there somewhere, he had a sister-in-law and a brother-in-law.

But what he'd gained today, his new family...she'd still lost, and Beth must be missing them now more than ever. Maybe if they ever met up again with their group...their family...they could do it over so everyone could be there to share in their promise like it was supposed to be. Daryl didn't have anyone he needed to be there...hell, if they'd been alive, he wouldn't have even invited them...even though a part of him wished that in a different world, Merle would've stood up next to him like a real brother would. Their group would be alright by him though...everyone he would need. The problem was, even if they all somehow miraculously reunited, there would be one very important person missing. Hershel. Even Daryl wished Hershel would be there...Beth in a white dress, a veil over her pretty face, holding her Daddy's arm as she passed from Hershel's protection to his...Daryl wanted to do everything right. It hurt him too...knowing he was the reason Hershel would never be there for his daughter again...He forced that thought away...he couldn't handle it...not now.

Under their circumstances, he'd done the best he could manage for Beth. In a different world though, he would've been man enough to ask Hershel's permission to marry her, but he never had the chance. Maybe it wasn't too late...

*Hey, Hershel. I really don't know what I believe 'bout all this heaven and hell stuff, but I know you believed, so maybe you can hear me out there somewhere. See, the thing is, ever since you died and we lost the prison, me and Beth have had a rough road. I've tried to protect her the best I can, and she's given me something to believe in. She's given me hope. I know I'm not the kind of man you ever pictured your daughter with, but I fell hard. I've never loved a woman before Beth. It's too late to ask your permission, but I would've said something like this. Hershel, I respect you, and I love Beth with everything I am. In our world, I can't promise that the things I'll do will always make Beth happy, but they'll always be to keep her safe. I promise to love her and protect her until I'm dead. I'm not always the best person, but I am a better man than I used to be, and I'll spend the rest of my life trying to be good enough for her. Beth is my life now, and I will die for her without a second thought. I really hope that's good enough for you, 'cause it's all I have, and it's too late now not to*
It was still snowing, but it didn't feel all that cold with Beth by him. The flakes were lighter now, gently drifting down from the sky, clinging to her pale hair.

"You shouldn't go...the snow...you could get stuck or stranded," Beth made her argument to the ground. He knew she wouldn't look at him because she knew he was resolved to go, and her argument was weak at best.

"Stuck or stranded in that thing!" Beth looked up, off behind him to where the four wheel drive was waiting for him. Daryl almost felt bad pulling the thing outta the garage, it was so clean and shiny. Looked like it'd never seen a day of bad weather in its life, much less the apocalypse. "Beth, listen...this snow, it's a Godsend. We know the walkers are slower in the cold...add in the snow and they're gonna be clumsier than hell...slippin' all over...no traction. If they're any out there, I'm just gonna be dodging 'em, not fighting 'em. And people, they wouldn't be out on a day like today."

Beth nodded, but he knew she wasn't appeased by his words, even if he believed them. She was so sad...he hated himself for it.

"Hey, Lil' Bit, come here."

Beth in his arms...he needed it as much as she did. He'd fallen fast and hard, the change came so quickly that sometimes it was difficult to deal with. That was why he'd been having the sinking feeling in his gut...the pain in his heart...the fear of death. It was all because of love...the fear of losing her or leaving Beth alone. The bad feeling about this run...it had nothin' to do with instinct, it had to do with emotion. He just needed to learn to separate the two.

"Beth, listen to me. It's an easy run. Eight miles there, eight miles back, ten at the most. Even if the car gets stuck, on foot I'll make it back to you by tonight."

"Promise?" She nuzzled further into his chest. She'd tried to insist on going with him, but he'd shut that down quickly so she didn't have much more to say. Still, for Beth, she was unusually quiet.

"Promise."

Beth pulled far enough away so that she could look up at him. Those sad eyes were killing him.

"What am I supposed to do while you're gone?" Her voice soft and forlorn.

"I don't know...you could try to find something pretty...to wear for me tonight..." The words came out awkwardly...Daryl’s face starting to burn warm.

Planning things like this...well, they'd always been spontaneous...that was the way his life went. But now...that ring on her finger, the one on his...it meant that if she wanted to, there was absolutely no more reason for him to doubt, to stall, to worry about her waking up the next morning thinkin' she'd made a mistake and hating him. They could to be together.

Her smile was shy, but she nodded as she averted her eyes.
God, she's so beautiful...so everything...

Daryl lifted her chin to kiss her goodbye. He'd never kissed a woman goodbye before...never been much of a kisser before Beth. It left his heart feeling raw and sore...he had to go now.

"Love you, Beth." Cupping her cheek in his weathered hand before he turned away.

"Daryl..." Beth's voice was urgent as he looked back at her. She wanted to say something...but she stopped herself. "I love you..." Her declaration breathy and filled with pain.

He didn't say goodbye...they both had the same opinion on goodbyes, but it was a goodbye all the same. He smiled and nodded...she loved him. Daryl knew welcome home would make goodbye worth it. Almost there...he was almost to the SUV, but Daryl wanted to...needed to turn back...see her once more, just as she was, standing there watching him walk away. He stopped, closing his eyes, fighting a battle he could never really win. Fighting himself. He wished Beth would come to him, wrap her arms around him one last time before he left...give him the strength he needed to carry on...but this wasn't a fairytale.

"Daryl, wait. Please!"

Beth ran to him as if she'd read his mind. Catching her in his arms, Daryl hoped he had the strength to turn away again. There were tears in those pale blue eyes. Since they'd run together, there'd been so many tears. Daryl wished...prayed he could make her life better, make all the pain and sorrow worth it.

"Beth, please don't cry...today's a happy day."

"Then don't go. It could be the end..." Fearful and urgent, Beth’s voice cracked in the cold air.

"Have some faith in me." Daryl smiled to himself, stroking the hair at the back of her head.

"Daryl...it's not about faith...why risk it? You need bolts...you can make them...you did at my Daddy's house...made and used them part of the winter after the farm...we all survived."

He could make his own bolts. Daryl had considered that option. The thing was, they weren't as strong, weren't as accurate. They worked just fine when it was just him hunting or he had a whole group at his back, but now it was just him and Beth. He couldn't...he wouldn't take that chance. He wouldn't risk her if he had any other choice.

"We survived as a group. It's different now. I'm goin'." Daryl was stern. He had to be. But he would hold her for a moment more.

"Daryl...please...come back inside. Come to bed with me...be with me." Daryl pulled her tighter, tight enough that it probably hurt her, but he couldn't risk her pulling away and seeing the pain on his face...the doubt that was really setting in. It would give her leverage.

She was a mess. And she couldn't even say it...what she wanted, wanted from him...wanted him to do to her, with her...But that was okay. Her innocence was beautiful in their raw, gritty, grim world. Light in darkness. Beauty among the ugliness that had dominated his life. Daryl sighed, his shoulders hunching, leaning further over Beth to feel her more. He almost gave in...almost swept her off her feet to take her to bed and stay there until the world burned down around them. Almost...but he didn’t.

"I'm goin' now." Forcing her away so he could look at her...make her see him, understand how much his words meant before he lost his resolve.
After she looked up at him, saw him...Daryl leaned down, resting his forehead against hers. Even though he couldn't stay...couldn't give her what she wanted...what he needed...he'd say it.

"Beth, I'll make love to you tonight..."

Making love...it had been a new idea to him when he'd first thought it about Beth, and now the words actually came out of his mouth. His life before just never called for 'em. Daryl just hoped he could carry though with his promise and not fuck it up...ruin it for Beth...her first time.

The tears stopped, and she accepted it. Maybe what he said was enough. Daryl grabbed her, rougher than he should, and he knew it. He took that last kiss from her...took what he wanted, not giving much back. It was the kind of kiss he needed to fortify his strength. When Daryl pulled away, Beth was left breathless, still, and shocked. He hoped she didn't judge him...this kiss...as violent; that hadn't been what he wanted at all. He just needed...fuck, it didn't matter what he needed! He needed to check himself and his actions. There was no excuse...he needed to calm the fuck down...

"Sorry..." What else was he supposed to say?

Beth shook her head no, stepping close again, reaching her hand behind his neck, and gently letting her lips meet his. She lingered, on her tiptoes, close to him...her lips tempting him to taste them again...

"Beth...go in the house."

"Daryl..."

"I said go inside now!" He was sharp, but he had to be, for both of them. He couldn't fight Beth and himself...didn't have the strength.

Daryl fought himself every step that he took away from her. He fought...he couldn't look back...if he did...he would be lost...

Once he was in the car, outside the gates, driving away, he was calmer...more centered and focused. He had to be. So many things he had to be in order to survive...for them to survive. Out in the open where there were threats, instinct kicked in, overriding everything else to make sure he kept himself alive.

Daryl glanced down at the ring on his finger. Its presence felt strange but comforting. This one thing, a little piece of metal changed the world. It didn't change the way he felt about Beth...he was in too deep to be able to love her any more...but it changed him, how he saw himself, and maybe how Beth saw him. It had nothing to do with the outside world, how other people saw them; there was no one else. But with the rings...those symbols...Daryl gained something he never knew he wanted until Beth. Today had been hard...leaving her behind. One thing he realized, understood about himself, being with Beth...having a woman of his own...his wife...Wife...made him a real man. More of a man than he'd ever been. He was a husband...her husband.
Daryl crouched behind the counter, crossbow at the ready, gun in his other hand, not knowing which one to use. He was a fucking idiot...should've listened to his gut. Outnumbered...two men and a woman, at least from what he'd heard. Everything about this run had been too good to be true.

There'd only been minor obstructions on the main road. Only took him 'bout a half hour from the house. The small town seemed deserted of both walkers and people. The only thing about the day that wasn't like he hoped was the snow cover. The pavement and concrete were still too warm for the snow to stick, only showing a dusting and wet spots on the road and sidewalks. But since he'd planned the run before and the snow wasn't part of the original plan, it was no big deal. There were no signs of walkers, so he didn't need the snow to debilitate them.

The side door to the archery store hadn't been locked, and it was stocked with enough bolts that he could be good for years even if he needed to take out a small herd of walkers a day. Daryl even took the time to look at the high-end crossbows hanging on the wall behind the counter. Crossbows wore out...didn't last forever...especially with as hard as he used 'em. If he was gonna get a new one, well, he would take one or two or three of the best-the kind he could've never afforded before.

That's when he'd heard 'em. They'd been outside, so he couldn't make out what they'd said, but it didn't matter. His vehicle was parked at the side door of the shop, and that exit was clear across the store. The handle of the front door turned before he had time to think. Even with his swift reaction time, there was no way he could make it over the counter to escape without being noticed. He'd done the only thing he could...hunkered down, weapons loaded, waiting for the opportunity to fully assess his situation. He would kill anyone...however many people it took... to get back to Beth.

The bells hanging from the door handle jingled, banging hard against the glass.

"God Dammit, draw every walker in a klick down on us!" One of Daryl's new problems cussed angrily.

Well, they weren't too bright of a bunch. There'd been a reason he'd come in through the side door. Sporting goods stores that sold weapons always had some sort of noise mechanism on their front door...needed to know who was around the guns and bows. He'd been worried about walkers, and luckily there'd been none after his sweep of the shop. They were worried about walkers too when they needed to be worried about him.

They had to be a scavenging party, out looking for supplies, just like Daryl was. The problem was, anyone who wasn't him or Beth was a threat. His heart was beating hard and rhythmic, but not fast. Fast wouldn't come until he needed his adrenaline to be up, for fighting and surviving. Daryl listened as one set of heavy footsteps crossed the store.

"Mother Fuck me...not a gun or bullet one!" That one was loud and stupid, or just didn't give a fuck because he wasn't afraid. Any of those things made him dangerous.

The stranger was away from the other two, standing by the small wall area and display case that at one point had contained the store's limited selection of guns and ammo now stripped clean.

"I informed you earlier that the probability of there being firearms or ammunition in this location was nil to none as it catered to the archery minded individual. I may have uncharacteristically misjudged that possibility, but the guns and ammunition were clearly the first commodities to be coveted." What the hell? Who talked like that and was still alive now? "Maybe I should take up the bow..."
"That would be a fucking negative. I don't know what scares me more, your actual inability with a firearm or the idea of you with a weapon that propels a sharpened stick. You'd probably find a way to kill one of us or yourself with it." The loud one, he was gruff and opinionated, clearly their leader. And he talked too much.

Now Daryl knew that the other man couldn't use a gun to save his life even on the off chance he was carrying a loaded weapon.

"In our present situation, with the scarcity of guns and ammunition, bows would be ideal. They are silent, and arrows can be reused."

The leader crossed from the display case back to where the other two waited. He didn't even try to walk quietly. Inflated confidence.

"Well, unfortunately God hasn't given us the time or luxury to learn how to use this ideal weapon. How 'bout you stick to what you're good at-thinking-and not about bows. Leave the weapons to us. You don't need to go getting yourself killed because then we'd all be fucked."

There it was...the thing Daryl needed to know to survive. One of them was more important. They were protecting him, for whatever reason, he didn't care. That one was Daryl's target...his ticket out. He might not even have to kill anyone.

"Guys, just shut up. We're looking for bullets. It's that simple. You're down to what, four rounds? I'm down to my last two. Let's just get this job done and move on." That was the woman. She seemed to be the most grounded and even tempered of the group. And between the three of them, they had six rounds. He had had sixteen, plus his extra clips...and his bow.

Maybe he should just show himself. Maybe they weren't a threat. Maybe they would just let him go. That was just too many maybes for him to chance. These people were survivors. They'd survived this long. You didn't make it in this world by not seeing everything as a potential threat. If he popped up from behind the counter, not only was he a threat, he was a surprise. If they reacted like survivors had to, at the least, they would be staring down the barrels of their guns at him. At the worst, he could be dead, their limited ammunition wouldn't make one bit of a difference in that moment. He needed to keep the upper hand.

"Check behind the counter. They might've kept their personal weapons there," the girl suggested. Daryl knew she was talking about his counter, taking a deep breath and silently putting his crossbow back over his shoulder. His gun was his best option.

"I knew there was a very definitive reason I liked you. Beautiful, deadly, and intelligent. Our own femme fatale." It was the wordy one. The one they were protecting because they needed him.

Maybe some higher power was on his side today. He was frozen in Daryl's sights as soon as he came around the counter and spotted him. For a second, Daryl wasn't sure he was the right one...maybe there were four of them 'cause this one...well, he looked dumber than a box of rocks and didn't look like he'd missed a meal a day in his life...but looks were deceiving. Daryl knew that from a life full of being judged.

Daryl was on his feet, had the important one in front of him to block any flying bullets, the muzzle of his gun pressed to the back of the man's skull before anyone had time to breathe. He'd overestimated them, their reflexes, their ability to survive, but overestimating put him in a much better place than underestimating.

"Fuck me!" Their leader seemed to have a very limited vocabulary.
Really able to assess them now...a stern, stocky soldier type; a slender, capable looking woman; and
the smart idiot, the pork chop he had in front of him who looked like something that just crawled
outta his mama's basement...they weren't all that impressive. They had their weapons drawn, but they
wouldn't do them no good unless they were gonna shoot him through their buddy, and Daryl knew
that wasn't gonna be the case.

"It seems that we may have had a serious lapse in judgment by not thoroughly inspecting the
building for threats." You think? Daryl thought as he listened to the words fly outta the man whose
head was getting nice and intimate with the barrel of his gun.

Right now this game was being played on his terms.

"Let's just make this nice 'n simple. Y'all are gonna lower your guns. Your friend and me, we're
gonna have us a nice little walk out the door where we'll say goodbye and never see each other
again," Daryl asserted as civilly as he could, edging sideways towards the end of the counter, forcing
his hostage with him.

Nobody said nothing...didn’t make a move to stop him. Daryl made it around the counter, halfway to
the side door, guns trained on him the entire way, but he was almost there...almost free.

"Walkers...herd...cover!" The shout came from outside.

There were more of them. A group. And now walkers. This was a game changer. He was probably
dead already.

Beth...What could he do to get back to her?

"Lock the door," their leader issued his order to the woman. The big man was calm now. Seemed
like he really got his head together when there was a threat near. Same thing always happened to
Daryl...most fighters.

The girl followed directions without question. The slow click of the deadbolt, a quiet noise in the
scope of things, was as jarring as a shotgun being racked in their precarious situation. Daryl watched
over his shield's shoulder, saw the leader's gun still aimed squarely in his direction, its bearer
unwavering. He allowed himself to glance to the side to watch the woman who took a moment to
look out the window before sliding past the glass door back to stand beside the soldier.

"How many?" He was staring straight at Daryl, but his question was for the woman.

"Thirty...maybe more." She wasn't sounding too confident.

With only six bullets between the two of 'em, probably the same problem with the rest of their group,
Daryl would be worried too.

"Everyone off the streets?"

"As far as I can see." Their communication short and clipped now.

Daryl's survival mode was still in high gear, but he was calm for the moment. Strange as it was,
when he thought logically about it, the walker herd drastically improved his immediate situation.
They wouldn't shoot him...wouldn't risk using their guns. That would bring the whole damned herd
crashing through that glass door. One bullet to take him out if they were lucky with their shot...two
more likely...would leave them with no more than five rounds. He paused his thoughts, listening,
hearing walkers moaning and scraping past the side entrance of the store where he'd entered. One
bumped against the door, rattling it in its frame. He wasn't escaping out that way anymore.
"Might wanna send your girl to lock that side door," Daryl rasped just loud enough for the others to hear, jerking his head to the left to indicate the location of the entry set back in the short hallway. They hadn't cleared the building. Probably didn't even know it was there.

The leader took his eyes off Daryl, nodding to the woman and moving her into action like a pawn on a chessboard.

Daryl's situation might be changing, but it was still improving. The soldier looking away from him, taking his sights off the target proved that he was contemplating a bigger threat than Daryl...the herd. They couldn't use their guns without killing themselves. Taking the guns out of the equation, they were left with their knives, and he had his crossbow too. Daryl was better with a blade than anyone he knew, always had been, but he wasn't so sure about their leader. His actions, stance, demeanor all read military...could pose a challenge with a knife. If it came down to it, Daryl would drop the commando with a bolt between the eyes. Pork Chop in front of him wouldn't cause a problem...wasn't a threat at all. With their leader out of the picture, the girl might stand down, but if she challenged him, he would take her out too. Strength alone pretty much guaranteed that he'd win that fight. He didn't want to kill a woman, but she was an enemy, and he was gonna be the one goin' home at the end of the day no matter what.

Problem was, his advantage only lasted as long as the herd of walkers did. They would likely just pass through...eventually...unless they were stimulated by noise or movement. Once they were gone, Daryl was fucked. There were more of them...more people...a group, how many he didn't know, but it really didn't matter. They outnumbered him. Their leader cared about Pork Chop who Daryl had at gunpoint. They needed his useless ass for something, and that something sure in the hell wasn't fighting. That had been made abundantly clear. He was also concerned about the rest of his group...asked the girl if all their people were hunkered down. Those were his weaknesses. If Daryl remained a threat, as soon as the walkers were gone and the group found them, he was dead. Daryl had an advantage now and only now. He knew it. They knew it. He would press that advantage the only way he could. There wasn't anything he wouldn't do to get back to Beth, so he rolled the dice.

Lowering his gun and tucking it in his back waistband, he fought to keep his breathing steady and his movements slow so they couldn't read just how vulnerable he felt. Pork Chop took a few clumsy steps forward, almost falling flat on his face, turning around to stare at him in disbelief. Daryl didn't act like he paid him any mind although he was hyper aware of everything going on around him. Had to be if he wanted to stay alive. Pulling his crossbow over his shoulder to have it in hand, he didn't aim it anywhere except at the ground. Just had it ready. Then Daryl made a point to look at them, the three strangers that were watching him, waiting to see what his next move was. He wanted to have their full attention when he played his card, the only decent one he had.

"I don't kill the living. I fight for the living. I kill the walking dead." He was calm, his voice solid and confident because it was the truth. His truth.

Their leader lowered his gun, and the girl followed suit. Now it was time to lay out his terms.

"When this herd's gone, you let me leave. If it attacks you or your people, I'll fight 'em with you, then you let me go." It all came down to life and freedom.

"I can't promise you anything. I don't make decisions for the larger group, but their leader's fair," the soldier replied for them. So, he wasn't their leader...well, it didn't change nothin'. This was who he had to deal with. "He might even offer you a place in the group if you fight as hard as you look. I wouldn't support that decision, but my say ain't worth shit." He was bitter about that...clearly.

Well, it was the best Daryl could hope for...this uneasy truce.
"Don't wanna be part of your group. I'm better on my own." Daryl was gonna make that clear.

He didn't want nothin' to do with their group or any group. He would fight by them if it came to that because he had given his word, but that was it. If they saw him fight, Daryl knew they'd want him with them, but it wasn't ever gonna happen. Back to Beth. He was getting back to her. The soldier nodded his understanding.

Now we wait.
They had all turned out perfectly, every single one of them. Beth looked at the pictures on the table in front of her. Going easy on the electricity didn't mean that she wasn't going to print the only pictures they had...what were sure to become rare and eventually extinct as the world as they knew it continued to decay. And she deserved it...after Daryl left her all alone. She had to have something to do to abate the sadness of what had started out as the most beautiful day.

For all his complaining, Daryl was actually pretty photogenic. She let her fingertip trail over the picture of Daryl sleeping, like if she touched it, he would be right with her again. Beth printed two copies of each picture, one for them and one for the bag they kept ready by the door at all times in case they had to run. She felt safe. Daryl felt safe. But the prison felt safe too...and there, they'd lost everyone and everything. She didn't have a picture of Daddy or Maggie or anyone. Would she begin to forget what they all looked like? Beth stopped herself. No sadness. Not today. She flipped each picture over, inscribing the back.

Daryl Dixon Sleeping in Our New House. Georgia. November. Two Years After the Turn.

In our new house. It sounded so normal, like they were two people in a normal world starting their life out together where a new house would just be a joy, not a chance at safety, security, and life. This was as normal as it was ever going to get for them, and it was beautiful...almost surreal.

Daryl Dixon and Beth Greene. Morning in Bed. Georgia. November. Two Years After the Turn.

Her Mama always taught her to write on the back of pictures. A picture was worth a thousand words, but it was worth writing a few words to remind yourself of the picture. After inscribing each picture, she matched it to one of the frames she'd gathered from around the house. She couldn't bear to throw away the family's pictures or even take them out of the frames, so she just put the pictures of her and Daryl over them. Even though the people in those pictures were dead, their story was part of the house. She wouldn't erase their existence. Fate had been cruel enough to them as it was, and it was the least she could do to show kindness to the man who had given them his house...given them a real chance.

The last pictures...they were breathtaking. The snow, the lighting...them. She would've sworn they were taken by some artistic minded photographer, but no...just taken by Daryl when he'd been laying beside her in the snow. Maybe the pictures weren't that extraordinary but rather the moment they captured. Beth penned the same thing on the back of each one.

Wedding Day. First Snow of the Year. Georgia. November. Two Years After the Turn. Daryl and
Beth Dixon. The first time she wrote it, it was odd, her head wanting to write Greene, but her hand and heart signing Dixon. Beth's heart was beating faster...butterflies fluttering on the inside. That was it...her name now. Beth Dixon. That was who she was. There was no piece of paper to prove it, no priest had bound them together, no one had witnessed it, but that didn't make it any less true. The world as it was put them all beyond such conventions. The only thing that mattered was the people who were willing to open themselves up to love despite all the pain and darkness that surrounded them...that by letting themselves love so deeply, they would be all the more vulnerable to heartache and tragedy.

When you care about people, hurt is kind of part of the package.

Beth had known that all along, but love was worth it.

Raking her teeth over her bottom lip, she longed for Daryl to walk through the front doors. Beth was full of love, desire, anxiety, and fear, but she knew when Daryl came home, he would return the first and help her fight the last.

*                      *                      *                      *                      *

"So, where are you from?"

They were sitting with their backs against the wall on their respective sides of the shop in the shadows, staring at each other, waiting for the walkers to leave town. They were taking their sweet time, scratching at the doors, bumping into windows setting them rattlin', putting them all on edge, but Daryl was better at hiding it than the strangers were. Apparently for Pork Chop who'd just asked him the most irrelevant question in their world, talking was his nervous habit or outlet for anxiety.

Daryl furrowed his brow in reply...his mind occupied with much more important things. There was no clock, but Daryl could feel the minutes slowly ticking by, realizing that hours were passing. From what he could see through the glass door, the snow had stopped, the sun was getting low, and there was a pink cast to the sky telling that dusk was near. The walkers seemed to be in no hurry to make their exit. Night was coming. He'd promised Beth he'd make it back by tonight, even if he had to walk. He had until midnight to make good on that promise...thankfully midnight was still a long way off.

"Have you always been the solitary traveler, or did you lose people?"

Daryl’s eyes narrowed at his interrogator. He was a fucking idiot. Wasn't nobody in the world that hadn't lost someone. He sure in the hell wasn't gonna answer, but he'd lost.

"God, just shut up with the twenty questions! Does he look like he's going to answer you?" The woman...aggravated...spoke out to her annoying companion.

"There is no reason not to be civil and pass the time with idle conversation. I foster no animosity towards him just because he held a gun to my head. The world is different now," Pork Chop explained.

He was right about that one.
The world doesn't give us many choices anymore. Most of the time, it's just live or die. That doesn't make us monsters. We're just survivors.

"He's from Candy Land. Got it. Seriously. What in the fuck does it matter? If you don't suck back and swallow the shit pouring outta your mouth, it'll be my gun kissing the back of your skull," their de facto leader warned, and they all went silent.

While GI Joe was threatening Pork Chop, Daryl focused...there was something he heard...something outta place.

"Shut up," Daryl spat a sharp whisper, and they listened.

There it was again. How did they not hear it? They looked at him like they were waiting for him to tell them something. This time, it was unmistakable. They heard it too, and he saw the fear on their faces.

"You've got a baby in your group?" Daryl was on his feet while they were still sitting on the floor, nodding their heads.

Things just went from bad to worse. The crying was louder. Walkers wouldn't ignore that...it might as well have been a dinner bell. Then there was glass breaking, people yelling, Daryl headed out the door as the dimwit brigade finally decided to get up off their asses.

"Mother dick me..." He heard from behind him as the company leader and his one foot soldier assessed the situation. His focus was on.

"What're you carrying?" Daryl was in go mode, but he needed their backup.

"Both 9's." At least the commando communicated well under pressure.

This was another risk, but now it was about surviving. Without hesitation, Daryl grabbed his two extra clips from his pocket and turned back long enough to toss one to GI Joe and GI Jane. At this point, three people with sixteen shots each was better than him with forty-eight shots. It stopped being about Daryl versus Commando and company because now it was about the living versus the dead. The woman's count of thirty walkers was off. If they were going to make it, everyone had to fight together. They looked at him with a little shock but weren't taking the gift for granted.

"Try not to shoot me in the back," Daryl spat.

He charged towards the action leaving the others to strategize. He'd never been one much for planning. Doing was his thing in the fighting department. Fight mode was SOP for Daryl—he didn't even have to try to get into the right frame of mind. It just happened. Hyper focus, hyper awareness of everything that mattered. Other shit wasn't even on his radar.

"Take the left. I've got the right. Draw their attention away," the soldier shouted.

Daryl heard that. It was a good call. Needed to get some of the walkers away from the shattered plate glass window they were pouring into the building through. Once more unto the breach...he knew that from somewhere...picked it up along the way...it didn't really matter, but it fit the moment. There were seven gunshots from inside...he counted seven...from at least three different guns. Then no more shots were fired. Ammunition had run dry. Daryl tucked his gun away. With people inside fighting and him on the outside, he couldn't risk a stray bullet taking out one of the living. One shot with his crossbow just outta habit, a walker who didn't even know he existed hit the ground. Then it was just him, his knife, and cutting a path to the broken window. GI Joe and GI Jane had the outside covered. He needed to get inside where the people were with tight quarters and apparently no way
Something slammed into him, grabbed at him, pulling him down as it fell. He hit the ground hard, landing on his crossbow strapped to his back. A walker was on him, and the thing that pulled him down was apparently a person because she was rambling to herself.

"We're going to die...we're going to die..." she repeated, sittin' her useless ass on the floor doin' absolutely nothing to save herself.

Daryl had lost his knife in the fall. Holding the snarling walker back by the neck...rotted skin sloughed off in his hand making his control over his situation shaky. Its face was inching towards his, its jaws snapping, biting at the open air.

*Come on Dixon. Get your shit together.*

He struggled, reaching back, pulling, freeing one of his bolts, stabbing the walker through the eye. Throwing off the dead weight, finding his feet, and reclaiming his knife, Daryl stared at the girl on the floor in disgust. If she wasn't at least willing to try to save herself, she didn't deserve to live. He jerked her off the floor by her arm, roughly pushing her away. He didn't need to be tripping over her sorry ass.

"Get outta the fucking way before you get someone besides yourself killed!" He'd had much closer calls, but this clumsy mouse of a girl sure in the hell wasn't gonna be the reason he didn't make it back to Beth.

The situation was manageable. People were fighting...hard and fierce. Daryl was fighting with them; the gunshots from outside diverted enough of the walkers that it was just a matter of getting the job done, not whether or not they survived. It was all so familiar to him. The fight became a memory. These people...the people fighting around him...took on the faces of those he'd lost. Although fight mode made him hyper aware, sometimes reality was blurry in these kind of moments. They were almost gone...the walkers almost entirely dispatched. His survival instinct was still in high gear. Once the walkers were no longer a threat, he would have to contend with the people. Something backed into him, catching him off guard. There'd been no one there to have his back. He swung around defensively, knife gripped high, ready to make another kill, but...

Daryl lowered his arm, no longer prepared to deliver a deadly blow. Almost lost his grip on his knife. He was totally losing his grip on something else. Reality. The baby cried in the background, but other than that, there was complete and utter silence. He could barely breathe let alone move. The other man was in the same state. His face showed the same emotions Daryl was feeling.

"Rick...watch him...he's not a friendly!" The soldier broke the silence, and Daryl heard heavy booted feet crunching on the shattered glass as the other three came in to join the party.


Nope. Still there. All of it. Everyone. The person in front of him...Daryl took a step back to brace himself...his balance off...everything was off...

"Rick," the soldier tried to get his attention, but Rick just cocked his head to the side, brow furrowed.

"Daryl?" Yes, that was his name. That was Rick saying it. Rick's voice was quiet, unsure, maybe not questioning Daryl about his existence but rather questioning what he was seeing.
"Stand down, Abe. He's one of ours." That deep, booming voice...that was Tyreese.

Reality. They were there. He was there. Rick had asked him a question, and he hadn't answered. All he could do was nod his head.

"Daryl." This time it wasn't a question, rather a blissful realization.

Rick stepped forward slowly, but Daryl was still caught off guard when Rick embraced him. He hugged back though, still trying to come to terms with the impossible. After Rick let him go, there was a long succession of hugs, Maggie, Glenn, Carol, Sasha...he felt stiff and awkward being hugged, but he accepted them, how could he not...claps on the shoulder from Ty and Bob, a non physical acknowledgement of mutual existence between Michonne and himself. They all said something to him, but he couldn't hear. All his thoughts were blurry, except for one. Beth. He was bringing their family home to her...the impossible. And finally, Carl was in front of him...that was when he started to come back into focus...when Carl handed him Judith, and she reached for him.

Lil' Asskicker.

"You're letting him hold the baby?" The soldier just wouldn't shut up, but Daryl couldn't give a fuck.

"That's Daryl." It was Glenn speaking up for him this time.

"I don't care who he is. He went all guerrilla insurgent on our asses..." he was angry clearly 'cause Daryl had caught their little crew with their pants down.

Daryl pulled Judith close to his heart and kissed the top of her head before passing her back to Carl. It kinda felt like the shit was about to hit the fan. He didn't know what the soldier was so up in arms about; no damage had been done to either side. Maybe it was just that Daryl had gone from the outsider who'd wanted nothing to do with their group to more of a member of the group than he was.

"Daryl's one of us. Has been since the beginning. He did anything to you, it was because you were a threat to him. I don't see any scratches or bruises on you. No arrow wounds either. I'd say you came away lucky." So Rick was the leader the soldier resented, the reason the soldier had no say. The way Rick spoke to him, Daryl could tell that their relationship was tenuous at best.

"He tried to kill Eugene," GI Joe tried to assert to Rick.

"What?!" Daryl couldn't stomach liars, never could. "How 'bout you try tellin' the truth. I put my gun down before y'all, told you I'd fight the walkers with you when this herd came through..." He felt Rick's steady hand pressed hard against his chest, holding him back. Apparently he'd made an aggressive lunge forward without noticing it. Daryl was pissed.

"If Daryl tried to kill Eugene, he'd be dead, no question. All three of you'd be dead before you even realized Daryl was there if that's what he wanted." Rick had his back. "Okay everybody...this is all exciting and everything, but the sun's going down, and we need to find some supplies and try to secure a place to hunker down for the night. Get back to it."

Daryl was glad Rick was practical. He needed a minute to breathe before whatever came next started happening. Rick probably sensed that. Maggie and Glenn paused in front of them before heading out.

"Go on, there'll be time for catching up later," Rick moved them on their way.

Daryl took a seat on a rickety chair against the wall, exhaling for what seemed like the first time since the fight started. He looked at all the bodies on the floor, all the blood everywhere, realizing just how
desensitized he'd become regarding certain facets of his life and how much more emotionally capable he'd become in others. He thought about Maggie and Glenn stopping...Maggie, what she must be feeling. Did she want to ask about her sister? Daryl should've said something, but he just wanted to hold on to Beth as only his for a few moments longer. Besides, a surprise reunion for Maggie would be all the sweeter.

"I didn't try to kill him. I was in the store. They just came in...didn't clear the building or nothing. I just needed a way to get out." Daryl didn't know why he felt the need to justify himself. And it seemed like the most ridiculous thing to say...it was Rick...Rick was here...alive...everyone...

Rick pulled out the chair beside him, turned it, sitting so he could face Daryl.

"Nothing to explain," Rick assured quietly.

Daryl watched Rick appraise him, tryin' to read him like he used to. That was gonna be impossible. Daryl couldn't even read himself. There was so much to say...where did people even start? Daryl caught movement over Rick's shoulder, watched the girl who'd drug him down with her in the fight try to creep outta the storefront unnoticed. But he saw her...he knew her...what, from a different life?

"Who's the girl, the one that won't fight?" It seemed like a safe place to start.

"Tara...she was with Glenn when we all caught up..." Rick was hesitant 'bout something, but now wasn't the time to push. "The others, Abraham-Abe, he's former Army, the woman, Rosita, and the one you apparently made good friends with, that's Eugene," Rick let out a breathy *hmmmph*. There was more to that story too, but Daryl didn't need to know yet. Rick would tell him when he was ready, when Daryl needed to know.

"Well, you know me. I'm all about making first impressions," Daryl smiled to himself, thinking on the first time he'd met Rick.

He'd been crawling outta the woods, string of squirrels over his shoulder, pissed as all get out 'cause a walker'd chewed on the deer he'd shot and been tracking. How'd they get here?

Rick's forearms rested on his thighs, he was leaning over slightly, relaxing, picturing the same moment Daryl saw in his mind. He shook his head, smiling too.

"Yeah...I remember..." How could he not?

It was so calm, the world around them, him. If Daryl thought on anything too much, he was like to get emotional. It was a lot. The whole day was a lot. The sky outside was pinker now, with dark blues following. Daryl sat very still. There was nothin' in his way of getting home to Beth, and he wanted to start back soon.

"Where've you been, Daryl? None of us...well...once we all met up...no one thought you were dead. We just didn't know how to look for you. You can't be tracked." Daryl nodded his head when Rick paused. He was right. "We figured you headed off into the woods somewhere, going deep enough no people or walkers would ever find you again."

"I did, for a while," hesitating...thinking on the way everything went down... "didn't work though. Things tend to have a way of finding you no matter where you go."

Had Rick been implying a question? Why he didn't try to track them? When the prison fell, after Beth brought him outta his dark place, it had been about her, keeping her safe and alive. Rick would understand that soon enough. It was all about Beth.
"What happened?"

"Lots of things. I just needed to find somewhere secure. Somewhere to hunker down and not have to worry about fighting or running every day." Rick cocked his head slightly. Daryl wondered if Rick thought something had changed in him. He'd never been afraid of fighting or moving on. But things changed...he'd changed...maybe Rick saw that.

"Did you find that place?" Rick questioned hesitantly. "We've been on the road, sometimes running in the middle of the night. It's been...almost as bad as that winter after the farm fell...before the prison..."

Daryl could see it now. Rick's eyes were hooded and heavy, dark circles ringing them. The lines in his forehead were deeper, his face drawn, his voice tired. He was gaunt too...weighed down by hunger, exhaustion, stress, fighting, running. Rick had his family and a whole group to look after. He only had Beth to take care of, but she gave something back. She took care of him too.

"I found a place."

Rick raised his head, looking him square in the eyes. The Daryl he was before...before he and Rick got close at the prison...would have been uncomfortable, but he didn't look way. He felt a strange twinge in his chest at what he was reading from Rick. Defeat. Like if this didn't turn out, he had no idea what came next. This was Rick. How did Rick, of all people, get to this point?

"Do you have a place for us...can you take all of us?" There was actual desperation in his voice this time, but his eyes didn't leave Daryl's.

"That question don't even need to be asked." Daryl reached out, laying a sturdy hand on Rick's shoulder as he bowed his head in relief.

"Thank you..."

He wanted to tell Rick that his thanks were unnecessary, but it wasn't the time. It was the time to make a plan and move. There was just one more thing.

"Rick...these new people...you trust them?" He sure in the hell didn't, but he needed to know exactly what Rick was thinking, what he was bringing into his home, to his wife. He just needed to know where Rick stood.

"No." That was the answer Daryl was hoping for, the truth and the knowledge that Rick was being guarded. "But they're not a threat. They're manageable."

"You got cars?"

"Parked just the other side of town." Rick's eyes seemed brighter...more alert.

"My car's parked beside the archery store. I came out 'cause I needed bolts. I'm about ten miles out, take 'bout half hour to get there, a little more if we lose the light. You go get everybody rounded up. I'm gonna go load up, then we'll head out." Daryl was energized, excited as hell. He couldn't wait to see Beth's face.

"What about supplies?" Rick questioned, standing slowly.

"Got it covered back at the house."
"There's enough food for everyone...for a few days?" The way Rick asked him, the tremor in his voice, it told Daryl everything he needed to know about what they'd gone through since they'd all been separated.

He and Beth...they'd had it rough, but it had never come down to that all encompassing need of survival...food...the thing that occupied your every waking thought when you didn't have it...debilitated every other function or thought you should be doing or having. Daryl knew. He'd been there before, and he didn't wish it on nobody.

"For more than a few days. Rick, we've got this. Get everyone together. Meet me in ten near the store. We're going home."

* * * * *

Bolts, bolts, and more bolts. Wasn't no reason to leave anything behind. And those new crossbows he'd been eyein', no reason to leave 'em hanging on the wall. He'd made two trips to the SUV at the side door so far, loaded it down pretty good. He was taking everything he could. He and Beth weren't just holing up for the winter...they...everyone would be there for the long run if they could hold it...making a life, getting a chance to start over. He paused for a minute, before heading out with the last of his supplies, catching a glimpse of Glenn and Maggie maybe twenty or so feet from the glass door. His brother-in-law, his sister-in-law, the newest part of his family...what were the odds in their great, wide, cruel world? He couldn't hear what they were saying, but Maggie was cryin' and inconsolable...looked like Glenn was tryin' his best. Daryl understood what was going on. No one thought Beth would've gotten out with him. Even if in her most desperate thoughts, Maggie prayed they were together, meeting up with him today shattered those hopes no matter how thin or irrational they had been...she'd still had hope to hold on to, until now. And it had to be even harder, Rick, Carl, Judith, Michonne, Carol, Tyreese, Sasha, her husband Glenn, and now him...everyone who'd been close at the prison, some goin' as far back as the farm when they met the Greenes, all of their group who'd still been alive, alive at the moment of Hershel's death at the hands of the Governor, had been miraculously reunited. Everyone except Beth...her baby sister.

Maybe he should go to Maggie, tell her Beth was alive, tell her their good news...but this wasn't his conversation. He was an intruder in Glenn and Maggie's private moment...shouldn't even be watching. And it would just be a little while longer 'til Maggie saw with her own eyes. Daryl looked around the store one last time before he headed out. Then he stopped and thought. This thought had crossed his mind before, and he'd just told himself *Fuck it!,* but then it...all of this...catching up with their group...it had been so improbable. Now, everyone was here. What if they had something to say about him and Beth...didn't approve? Would Maggie begrudge him for loving her sister? Nope, that wasn't gonna happen. He'd done everything right...the way it was supposed to be. They were family, all of 'em, whether tied by blood, marriage, or life. They might be surprised, even shocked, but today, every single one of them had gained more than they lost. Ten was about up. Daryl picked up the remaining bolts and headed out.

The side of the alley where he was parked was covered in shadow, the sun quickly retreating. He headed towards the main street where Rick and the rest of 'em were no doubt waiting, going deadly still at the mouth of the alley...hidden in the shadows...as he heard the angry exchange between Rick and Abe.

"You gotta be shittin' me. There's no way I'm following him into some trap he's got set with his *Deliverance* brother-cousins! I wouldn't trust him with my dead dog's fleas." The soldier-Abe,
seemed to have a major problem with him...his opinion based on what? Nothing.

"He makes me uneasy as well. He seems to be of a violent, changeable character." Pork Chop...and Daryl let him live.

"That man, Daryl, he's more than a friend. He's a brother to me. He's saved us all more times than I can count. He's saved my children," Rick shot back.

Brother...Rick called him his brother...

"He's such a good friend...your brother...and didn't you tell us he was some sort of expert tracker. Why didn't he track you down? Instead of trying to find you, he lit off, first chance he got, into the wilds of Georgia to save his own skin."

Yeah...he lit off, but not to save his own skin...to give them both a chance...

We gotta go, Beth. We gotta go.

...to save her.

"Daryl's never made a questionable decision while he was with us...not one. Never put himself before anyone else."

"Put your fucking head on Rick. Have you taken a look at him? White trash in a trailer park would kick his ass out. Ain't nothing lower than that. He's been on his own for two months. Probably made some questionable decisions out here." They were being so loud another herd was likely to hear 'em...damned dinner bell.

By this point, Daryl was seething. Been judged his entire life...was stupid enough to think those days were past him. He held his rage in check...didn't need to go proving them right. He stepped out of the shadowed mouth of the alley into the fading light headed towards the group. Everyone was too focused on the alpha males havin' a go at each other to see him approaching, everyone except Michonne who glanced his way, eyeing him, waiting to see which path he was gonna choose.

The prick who was tearing his character to shreds, did he even consider Daryl had just fought with him, shared precious ammo? He knew nothing about how and why he left the prison...just assumed it was to save his own ass. Daryl could've shot all three of them back in the shop far before the herd came through, but he didn't wanna kill anybody he didn't have to. And here he was, being judged.

"I trust him with my life." Rick offered, and his family all agreed either vocally or by nodding their heads as Daryl neared their location.

"He's wild, dangerous, and unpredictable, and you trust him? That makes me question you're ability to successfully lead this group." Was the soldier threatening Rick? Daryl wouldn't let that shit stand.

"You think I'm dangerous and unpredictable? Threaten Rick again, and you'll know just how deadly loyalty can be."

Abe swung around to face him. Everyone else was stiff and still, holding their breath, waiting for the confrontation.

"You threatening me, boy?" Abe spat venom at Daryl. He'd hit a vein, caught the soldier off guard again.

"Ain't a threat, it's a promise..."
Rick stepped between them before something good 'n violent broke out...had his back to Daryl showing where his trust lie, telling Abe how it was.

"We're going. You can stay." Rick had calmed himself. Probably knew he had to once Daryl threw himself into the mix. Rick knew he had no problem losing it when it was called for. "Daryl, you want to meet us at the cars at the edge of town? We'll be right behind you." Solid, he'd given his final word.

Rick looked over his shoulder at him, Daryl silently nodding his response. If Rick had his back, Daryl would walk away from this one. One thing he told himself though...this new group...these people he didn't know, or even some of them he did...they caused conflict in his home, even gave him the slightest hint that they were a threat to their life or Beth's happiness...those things that were his...he had no problem putting them out on their asses. Walking away, Daryl focused on the positive. Beth. Rick. Their family. Beth waiting for him to come home.

"We're not staying long. A day or two, then we're moving out. We gotta get Eugene to D.C.. We've lost enough time getting chased halfway across Georgia." This Abe, he was unrelenting in his need to force decisions.

Daryl just kept on walkin'. Rick could fight this battle on his own. Daryl didn't know what this D.C. thing was...didn't care...it didn't matter to him or Beth, and Rick wasn't gonna pass up on safety, shelter, food...or keeping his group together, especially with how defeated he'd been.

"We're gonna stay where we're safe. Rest. Recover. Eat."

"Son of a dick! This is important. Everything is depending on us. Everything. Nothing is more important..."

"Nothing is more important than family, than US." Rick didn't give the soldier a chance to finish his righteous spew.

"All this family...US...Rick, you're trusting the wrong people. You don't know him anymore." Daryl had reached the entrance to the alley listening to the fervent hate coming from a person who didn't even know him. Maybe he was just sayin' all this 'cause he needed ammo for his cause, whatever it was. Maybe it wasn't personal. Either way, Daryl didn't give a flying fuck. He was almost to the car, almost on his way home when the last words caught him. "Open your eyes, Rick. He's nothing...no one..."

Nothing...no one...

They cut deep...to the bone...because it was true...

You want to know what I was before all this? I was just drifting around with Merle doing whatever he said we were gonna be doing that day. I was nobody. Nothing...

Daryl didn't hear anything after that. He just stepped back into the shadows...
Chapter 50

Chapter Notes

~Author's Note: Hey Guys! Here is your updated chapter. Thank you for being so patient with me while I was on vacation and subsequently recovering from it. I had an amazing and much needed time away though. About this chapter...it seems like we might have some sort of reunion in store. It's been a long time coming, but being realistic, it isn't without its complications, confusions, and self-consciousness...they're complicated people these characters. Everything will eventually balance itself out, but life isn't always easy...not always butterflies and rainbows. Anyway, that is enough explicating from me. I hope everyone enjoys! Thank you all!~

Beth hit the ground hard. She didn't see it coming. One second, she'd been running towards Daryl...he'd finally made it home to her...when she realized it wasn't just him...there was more than just the SUV he'd left in that morning.

"Beth...Beth!" She'd heard her name called just before the collision...the fall in the snow when they both slipped, entangled in each others' arms.

That voice...she'd known that voice her entire life, but it had been absent her for so long. Maggie...it was Maggie...she just couldn't find the words.

They were both crying. Crushed under Maggie on the ground, Beth couldn't tell which tears streaming down her face were hers and which were her sister's. Maggie was kissing her forehead and cheeks, brushing back her hair like she had when she was little.

"I thought you were...dead...I thought I lost you with...with Dad..." Maggie was barely able to get out.

Maggie sat up, giving Beth a chance to breathe, but she still couldn't catch her breath...on the verge of hyperventilating, Maggie drawing her up into a warm embrace, hugging her tight.

"You're...alive..." Beth still wasn't sure if it was happening...real...it was impossible.

"I'm alive...you're alive...we're alive." She could feel Maggie nodding her head. It was real.

Pulling away form her sister so she could see Maggie's face in what little light was cast on them from the front porch...the light she'd left on for Daryl so he could find his way home to her...it was a happy moment. It should be a happy moment, but seeing Maggie, Maggie being alive, what Maggie said...I thought I lost you...with Dad...brought back the reality that they would never be whole again.

"Daddy's dead..." Beth couldn't help the tears.

Maggie nodded, reached out, brushing Beth's tears away from her cheeks, then from her own.

"I know, Beth...Dad's gone...there's nothing anyone could've done..." Maggie was just as broken as she was over their loss.

Beth thought she'd moved past his death, but truthfully, their world gave them very little time to
mourn for their dead. They hadn't even got to bury Daddy. And it was her sister. Daryl had helped her through his death. He'd been there for her more than anyone ever could've...even Maggie...and Daryl had been broken too, but seeing Maggie ripped the wound open again. Maggie...they shared Hershel's blood...the only blood that tied them together, and he was gone.

"It's just you, me, and Glenn...we're all the family Dad has left...the only ones to carry on. Beth...you're the last Greene..."

Glenn...Glenn was alive too? Beth hadn't looked...it had just been Maggie. Then it hit her. It was bittersweet when she realized the magnitude of what Maggie said. You're the last Greene. She wasn't a Greene anymore...the chance of their name carrying on had ended that morning. But her Daddy wouldn't begrudge her that...he knew, having daughters, that one day they wouldn't be his anymore. They wouldn't be Greenes anymore.

No man is good enough for your little girl, until one is.

He wouldn't be sad losing Beth because Daryl was good enough...better than good enough. He'd always respected Daryl, loved him as part of his family...after all they'd been through together...all Daryl had done. It was just that the conflicting emotions of a life lost and a life started made the tears fall even harder, but she was able to calm herself. She could breathe again. It wasn't just her, Maggie, and Glenn. It was Maggie and Glenn, her and Daryl. The Rhees and the Dixons were left to carry on for the Greene family...two new branches. Daryl...where was he? She couldn't find him in the dark. She'd been going to him when Maggie intercepted. Beth wanted to go to him now, wanted to share their news...how did everything today just fall into place? It was impossible...beautifully impossible.

"How did you...how did you get away?" Maggie was fighting her own complex emotions.

"Daryl...we ran together...he took me away. We've been together since the beginning. We..."

Before Beth could share, she felt a strong hand gripping her upper arm and pulling her off the ground. It wasn't Daryl.

"Come on. We need to get you both inside. Wouldn't do any good if you both caught your death of cold." It was Rick.

Rick was alive too. She swung around, hugging him even before she saw him, so hard that he took a step back off balance, wrapping his arms around her and hugging back.

"Who made it?" It felt safe to ask Rick. He'd always been a pillar in their group.

Her stomach was in knots. She couldn't look for herself, too afraid of who she wouldn't see...but she had to know.

"All of us...except for Hershel..." Rick was feeling it...his final admission.

Beth finally let him go, looking up at him, knowing that when Rick said us, he didn't mean the whole prison, but their core.

"...me and Carl, Glenn and Maggie, Michonne, Carol, Tyreese and Sasha, Bob..." Rick listed for her "...and I think someone who would really like to see you."

Beth turned, saw Carl...saw Carl with Judith. It was too much...too much happiness in one day. With Judith in her arms, Beth finally found Daryl. He was standing on the porch by the front doors illuminated by the light behind him. He smiled. They were all finally home.
It was a mess. Everyone piling into the house, bringing in what little they had, all stopping and smiling at Glenn when he flipped the foyer light off and on three times checking to make sure the electricity was real, the antique chandelier probably never having suffered such abuse and indignity. Beth directed everyone to the great room, the only room big and comfortable enough to seat all of them until she figured out what to do with everyone. The group separated her from Daryl who was bringing up the rear. She kept glancing back at him, wanting to find a way to him, but it seemed impossible. He looked a bit distant. She couldn't help wonder what happened out there today. He would share later she was sure. And maybe she shouldn't go to him...maybe she shouldn't tell their family yet...at least until she had a chance to go to Daryl privately. She remembered something he'd told her that he'd been very clear about.

* * * * *

And if we ever find our group again, you need to know that just 'cause I'm like this with you don't mean I'm gonna be like this with anyone else. I'm still the same person; it's just that we share this.

The last thing she wanted was to make him uncomfortable. They had been alone for so long, and Daryl had to be happy to have their family back, but he was the kind of person who needed his own space and time to adjust. Beth would let it be.

"Beth...do you have any food..." Rick caught her off guard, in her own world. The tone of his voice...it was...desperate? "They haven't...none of us...we haven't eaten in a while."

Of course they were hungry. All Beth had to do was look at them to tell. She had cooked special, for her and Daryl when he came home...to celebrate. Enough that there would be a lot of leftovers. There would be enough meat for everyone to have something, and with things she could heat up quick, nobody would be going hungry tonight.

Once most everyone had a plate and Beth was going around pouring the sweet tea...sweet tea during the apocalypse, no one would ever be able to say her southern hospitality was lacking...Rick was beside her, introducing the people she didn't know. Eugene...he smiled, a little bit too friendly. Rosita, she was pretty, looked tough though, but she smiled too. Tara...another girl, probably close to Maggie's age, but she barely made eye contact with Beth. With what happened in their world, that didn't seem unusual. Abraham, clearly a military man with flame red hair.

"Thank you, sweetheart. You're a pretty sight at the end of a long, hard road," he commented sincerely as she poured his tea.

Beth nodded her head, didn't smile, but looked behind him where Daryl was leaning up against the door frame, arms crossed. His eyes were narrowed, and she could see his jaw tensing. Was Daryl jealous, or was there something more...? He seemed to be controlling himself carefully whatever it was.

Beth went back for two more plates, bringing one to Rick who was sitting with Judith in his lap near Maggie and Glenn.

"No...I'm fine..." Rick refused what she offered, but she wasn't about to take no for an answer.

"Rick, take it. You said yourself, no one's eaten in a long time," Beth insisted.

"It's better if we make it last...have supplies longer," his voice just loud enough for her.
It really didn't seem to matter. Everyone else was too engrossed in their food to care what was being said, all except Rick...and Daryl whose eyes she could feel on her when he wasn't watching the rest of the room. Beth could sense he was uneasy even though she wasn't looking at him.

"There's plenty. Not just for tonight." She didn't know how much Daryl had told Rick, if anything. She didn't even have any idea how they met up.

"Thank you..." He eventually accepted.

Finally to Daryl...her heart beating so fast. She needed him to kiss her, knew that wasn't going to happen because of everyone else around them, but just finally being near him...it was good enough. Beth tried to pass him his plate, but he wouldn't take it either.

"I'm good," he insisted quietly. What was with all the men refusing her food? Daryl was wound up about something. He took it though when she wouldn't move the plate away. "Where's yours?"
Keeping his voice quiet and intimate, she did the same...

"There's more in the kitchen. I'll get something if I want it." The truth was, she was too excited to eat anything, be hungry, or even think about food.

"I wanna see you eat somethin'." Daryl and her eating...he was always so stuck on that.

"I've been eating all day. You didn't leave me with much else to occupy my time. I made this for us."

Eyes cast down...a bit shy...just the hint of a smile at the corners of his mouth, Daryl in that brief moment, became endearing and was entirely hers.

Beth could feel eyes on them. They weren't alone anymore. She picked a piece of meat off Daryl's plate, eating it, knowing he wouldn't let it go. Daryl followed suit.

"It's good," he praised after swallowing a mouthful.

"Did you find your bolts?"

It seemed like a stupid question since Daryl found their family, but after all the trauma of their earlier separation on their wedding day...that tearful, heartbreaking goodbye, she prayed that he at least got what he went out for so he wouldn't need to do it again. But if he did need to make a run, the whole game had changed. It wouldn't just have to be him, although she didn't want anyone to go out there ever if they could help it.

"Got my bolts. Enough for a good long time. A few crossbows too for when mine wears out."

That made Beth happy. She brought her hand up to touch Daryl's forearm, and it was tense, his muscles taut under his skin. It hadn't tightened or tensed at her touch, so it wasn't something she did...at least she didn't think.

"Are we okay?" Questioning self-consciously, a little doubt bouncing around in her chest.

"Mmm-hmmm...go on back and be with Maggie and Judith."

Beth was holding Judith on her lap as everyone finished their meal. It seemed like a safe time to ask.

"So, what happened today?"

"There was a herd. It was close. Daryl was there," Rick started.
"Was anyone hurt?" Beth’s voice came out frantic.

"No, everyone's fine," Rick answered, but her question hadn't really been for him or anyone else in the group.

Beth's real question was *Were you hurt? And that question was* directed towards Daryl, looking at him with worry; he shook his head *no*. She let out the breath she’d been holding, barely able to restrain a sigh of relief. After that, Glenn, Maggie, Tyreese, and even Carl got in on telling the events of what seemed like a harrowing day but were told in such a joyous manner because of the most unexpected outcome.

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Beth was so beautiful, sitting there, holding Judith on her lap. She was perched next to Maggie, her sister, the person she was the closest to. On her other side was Rick, the man who was like a brother to him. Daryl watched the room carefully, especially the strangers. He'd always been wary of strangers, but after today with Abraham and his crew, then adding in the girl he couldn't place but knew, well, they hadn't exactly made a great first impression. He was supposed to feel safe here...in his home...and here he was, uneasy about the whole situation. But they were all taken by Beth. How could they not be? She was a light in the darkness...that's what she was for him...always would be. Their group, their entire focus was revolving around her. Beth had everyone who had been impossibly reunited to try to share her attention with, but the only person they’d regained was Beth, now their joy and happiness. He was tense...anxious...stressed. It was their group, their family, but everything was new and different. Daryl waited for Beth to mention him...them...but it didn't happen. He was just the man on the outside, looking in. It was okay. He’d been on the outside before. His whole life. He'd just been stupid enough to think things had changed.

Daryl realized how selfish he was being. Beth was happy. She was smiling. Judith in her arms. Maggie close. Rick grinning beside her. Carl on the floor in front of her, laughing while telling some sort of animated story. Beth had never really been his, had she? He'd just been keeping her safe...protecting her...’til he could return her to the people she belonged to. It was the right thing to do, but that didn't make it easy for him. Daryl just needed to get away from everyone. Let Beth be. Let her be happy. She deserved it, and he was suddenly tired. He caught Beth's eye from across the room and held it. She smiled at him sweetly. There was something different about her smile, different from the one she gave all the others. It was like a drink of cool water on the hottest Georgia summer day. Did it even matter? He smiled back and nodded before he slipped away unnoticed. It was all how it should be...how it was meant to be...

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Their room was empty. The house was so very full of people, but he was alone. Beth had been at work in their room while he was gone. Pillar candles waited on the mantle and bedside tables to be lit. Something subtle caught his eye...the silver frame that had been on the nightstand all along, but now it was their picture in it instead of a picture of strangers. Their picture from the morning in the snow. And then...the nightgown laying at the edge of the bed...
I don't know...you could try to find something pretty...to wear for me tonight...

Had that just been this morning? He reached out and touched it, letting the slick fabric slip through his fingers. It must've been silk...he'd never felt silk before, but this is what he'd imagined it would feel like. It was white. Beth hadn't had a white dress to marry him in, but she'd found something white to wear when she gave herself to him. He let it go, the gown spilling back onto the bed. If he touched it too long, he was like to soil it...ruin it.

Nothing...no one...

Who in the hell was he kidding, thinking he'd have a wedding night...even get near a girl like Beth if she had any other choice.

Nothing...no one...

Daryl knew where he fit in the group...what his place was. Sure, they respected him to a certain extent, looked to him to make quick or even hard decisions, but it was his capacity for violence and survival that they wanted...needed. That wasn't a bad thing. It was just who he was, who he'd been, who he'd always be. It was just him...he couldn't change. And his place in the group sure in the hell didn't make him good enough to stand up next to one of the Greene daughters...Beth. They were from different worlds.

He stopped himself from thinking, deciding just to wait. If Beth came through that door...came to him...he would know. Maybe it could work. Maybe nothin' else mattered.

But the door didn't open, and Beth didn't come to him even though he stood there waiting longer than he should've. Daryl grabbed his pillows, threw them on the floor on the other side of the bed, grabbed a blanket, and promised himself that everything would be back to normal in the morning...how it was meant to be. He'd thought the massive monster of a bed was too fluffy, but the floor was now too hard and cold for his taste. He'd gone soft...and weakness was like to get someone killed.

Daryl went to put his arms behind his head, but his hand slammed against the wood of the nightstand, the metal on his finger clinking against it. He brought it up in front of his face. Even though he couldn't see it, he knew it was there. He twisted the ring back and forth on the top of his finger, the silver warming at his touch. It was amazing how quickly it became a part of him. Would she want him to take it off? Could the promises he'd made to her by giving her that ring, by wearing one to remind him of his promises, be forgotten by simply taking it off? Not for him. This morning, it had meant everything...a lifetime. Now, it probably meant less than nothing...but his promise, his love meant the world. He'd never stop loving or protecting her. He would love Beth until the day he died even if he could never be with her or claim her as his own. That was who he was.
Beth woke with a start...the fear that she was waking up somewhere she didn't know...but that wasn't the case at all. The room was lit with one dim light, and she could see everyone sleeping where they'd sat. Judith was nestled in her arms, she was leaning against Maggie, and Daryl was gone. Maggie stirred and sat up as Beth moved away.

"Can you take her for me?" Beth passed Judith to Maggie, not waiting for a reply.

"Everything okay?" Maggie murmured sleepily, pulling Judith close.

"Yeah...I'm fine..." She wasn't fine. She didn't mean to fall asleep. Beth wanted to be next to Daryl in their bed. That's where she needed to be.

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Daryl couldn't sleep for nothin'. He was overtired, pissed at himself for being stupid, and hating the world because once again, it had given with one hand and just as quickly, taken away with the other. For the second time in the day, the minutes and hours were ticking away at the slowest pace imaginable, now made more punishing by Beth's absence even though she was so near. For an instant, Daryl thought about getting up, throwin' on his clothes, packing a bag, and leaving. It would kill him, but it would be easier than having to see what he lost every day. But he couldn't...didn't want to. He thought about that day...that day that seemed like a lifetime ago...when three men tried to...rape Beth. So much had happened since then...but it all went back to that day...his first promise to her. I promise Beth...I'll keep you safe until I die. She hadn't asked him for that promise. He'd given it of his own free will, because he wanted to. Leaving wasn't an option because of that promise. Who was he kidding, leaving wasn't an option at all. Maybe he would just move down to the guest house until things went back to normal...until he could separate himself. He'd been living in a fantasy...he should've known better.

And he wasn't mad at Beth. There wasn't anything to be mad at her for. She was just at the center of his crumbling fantasy so she was the most painful thing to lose. What would be the hardest part was that he loved her...he'd never loved before...wouldn't ever again. After everything they'd been through, everything they'd shared, there was no way they could go to a place where they ignored each other; he could never be indifferent. There was just no room for him in her life...at least where he wanted to be...up until tonight, where he was. Beth had her real family back now, what was left of them...Maggie and Glenn. Then there was Lil' Asskicker. Beth was her mother, always had been, and Judith was a package deal. Rick and Carl came with her, and they loved Beth. They all worked well together. That was what she deserved. Daryl balled his fist and pounded the floor, trying to get everything out...the delusion of what he thought his life could've been.
Wake up...this is the real world.

How in the hell did he let himself get so lost? And children...he'd really outdone himself with that one...thinking about that future...shit, he'd even talked to her about it. But girls like Beth didn't ruin their bloodlines with children by men like him. If it happened...well, it was just because the girl got herself in trouble, and the kid grew up a black mark on the family, never knowing anything about his loser father because of the shame. That had never been in his future...Beth...him giving her a child...her giving him a child...

Daryl was too lost in thought to hear the footsteps in the hall. The door cracking open caught him off guard.

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Beth pushed the door quietly...slowly...in case Daryl was asleep. There was a huge part of her that hoped he was sitting on the bed waiting for her, but she was smarter than that. Daryl was practical. If she was tired enough to drift away downstairs without even realizing, Daryl was asleep too. His day had been a hundred times more taxing than hers. She let the slender beam of light from her flashlight pan over the bed, but Daryl wasn't there. Had she missed something? Was Daryl downstairs asleep with the others?

"Daryl?" She called softly, but there was no response.

Silence.

"I'm here."

That was odd. Beth flipped on the bedside lamp, crawled across the top of the mattress, and found Daryl laying on the floor beside the bed.

"What are you doing?"

"Tryin' to sleep." His words were closed...no emotion. Something was wrong.

"On the floor?"

"Where I belong." Daryl sat up, gaze fixed, just looking straight ahead...not at her.

"I'm sorry I fell asleep downstairs. I don't know what happened." Beth had a sinking feeling in her stomach. It wasn't just Daryl's words that were closed...he was closed to her.

"Nothin' to apologize for."

"You should've woken me up when you wanted to go to bed..."

Everyone was back now, and that meant everything had changed for him, and, in extension, them.

"Ain't my job to drag you off to bed." His clipped words verging on...something she couldn't identify. Beth was right. Everything had changed. "Besides, when I left, you were still awake."

How did she not see him leave?
"Should probably go back to 'em..." Daryl continued. His tone was distant. He was distant. Maybe she was reading too far into it... "before they notice you're gone and start forming a bad opinion of you."

No, definitely not reading too far into it. Beth sat up on the bed, looking down at him, trying to understand.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Just like it sounds. Don't want them to form a bad opinion of you. You've been out here alone with me all this time. You sneak off to me in the middle of the night, they're gonna think something happened...start talking. I don't wanna get you dirtier than I already have." She could see the tension in his shoulders, the muscles in his neck and face tightening. Daryl's body language would have given him away if his words didn't.

"But something did happen...everything..." Well, almost everything.

"You don't want 'em to think we're fucking..."

The sharpness of that word cut her deep. Daryl put his head down, avoiding. She could tell he regretted saying it, but he'd said it. Why? And he didn't take it back. Was he trying to hurt her?

"Daryl...I...what..." Beth couldn't get her words together.

"Truth is, now everyone’s back, you need to distance yourself from me. Start thinking 'bout your place in the group."

How was she supposed to think about her place in the group when he was her family? Why was he trying to push her away?

"But we're..."

"We're what, Beth?" Daryl cut her off. "That was a fantasy. It's real now, and we need to start living real."

Beth froze on the bed, haunted by the very real demons of her past. Daddy dead. The prison destroyed. That horrible night hiding in the woods while Daryl led the herd away from her to what she knew would be his death. If all those things were true...real...how was this not? And she'd killed. That blood was still on her hands. She looked down on them...even though it had been washed away, the stain would always be there. Her life with Daryl had been distracting her from that truth. If she'd killed and it was real, why couldn't they love and it be real? Beth couldn't look away from her fingers that had once dripped warm with blood. There was the ring now, the wings wrapped around her finger, a sign of his love and protection...their new beginning...a purification. But if there wasn't love, if that ring meant nothing, she didn't know if she could handle the rest of their reality. When she glanced up, Daryl was sitting on the edge of the bed, close, but so very far away.

"Beth...you deserve something better...someone better than me. I've told you before...I'm nothing...no one...that's who I'm always gonna be," Daryl’s voice was quiet now, softer. Was he trying to lessen the blow, because it still hurt like hell.

"That's not true, Daryl, and you know it. We're the same. No one's better or worse because it isn't you and me anymore, it's us." Exasperated...but Beth wasn't going to cry. "You don't get to do this. You don't get to be a part of somebody's life then just cut and run for no reason."

"I'm not running. I'm right here." True, he might not be running, but he was still leaving her. He
hesitated, breathing deep. "Why didn't you tell 'em?"

It took her a moment to realize what he meant...

"I thought...I didn't know you wanted me to. Why didn't you tell them?"

"It wasn't my place." *It wasn't my place.* If that wasn't one of the biggest cop outs she'd ever heard!
"It's better you didn't though. No one knows."

*No one knows?* She knew, and he knew. They were the only people that mattered.

"Better for you?" Beth was mad. She didn't understand anything that was happening. There was no reason.

"No, better for you. You can have a clean break. A fresh start." Did he actually believe this bullshit that he was using to push her away?

"Why are you doing this?" Voice raised in frustration...anger...disbelief...she worried for a second that they might hear her downstairs, but then realized she didn't care.

"I'm doin' it for you..." Daryl responded in kind, no longer calm.

"That's bullshit! You're doing this for you. You don't get to play with people like this. That's not how the world works."

Beth challenged...called him on it, and Daryl stood up from the bed, moving away from her.

"What do you know about the world? You have no idea about nothin'...nothin' but that pretty little perfect place you came from!" He was aggressive and defensive in his words, pointing at her, then towards the window, out there somewhere to the *perfect place* that no longer existed. It lit a fire inside her...the need to fight for what was hers.

"I know you have a good heart." Beth stood too, stepping into his space.

"You don't know nothin'." Daryl backed away when she reached out and tried to touch him. It hurt...

There was something more, something that happened to trigger this...there had to be. It wasn't just something she did...coming to bed late. She just didn't know what.

"You promised me you wouldn't leave me. Asked me to promise I wouldn't leave you..." Beth was being desperate, she knew it, and he would hate her for it...but she couldn't stop. It didn't really matter anymore anyway, if he was done with her...

"Do I seem like the kind of person who’s good for his word? My promises mean shit."

She knew the real answer to that question, without a doubt. Daryl was a man of his word, but for some reason...he'd gone back to a dark place where she couldn't reach him.

"And I ain't leavin' you, Beth...I'm still right here. I'll still protect you..." Daryl's voice was starting to lose its edge of anger.

Beth jerked away when she felt his hand on her shoulder. Daryl didn't want her comfort when she'd reached out to him. If he was pushing her away, he didn't have the right to touch her.

"I can take care of myself!" She wouldn't accept his pity protection. If he was going to break them, it had to be a clean break. He didn't get to hide behind the idea that he was doing the right thing, have
the comfort in the fact that he was her white knight protector. That wasn't the way he got her. "And Daryl, just so you know, you can work it out in your head all you like, trying to make it right, but it's still a broken promise." He was hurting her. She was going to hurt him back.

Daryl was trying to do the easy thing. She sure wasn't going to let it be easy on him. There was a cost to copping out like this.

"Yeah, well...shit happens. But I remember a promise you made me make. I didn't wanna, but you didn't give me a choice. You made me promise that I'd find you a safe place to stay before I left you. Think I made good on that one...better than good. I found you a home. I brought your family back."

Beth remembered that promise. It had been a different world. She'd never imagined that it would turn out like this...just trying to survive then. And did he say your family? They were his family too...they had been since before she knew him. How had she lost Daryl? Should she just resign herself to it, accept it for what it was...a heartbreaking loss? She turned away from him so he couldn't see her when she broke.

"So, what do you want me to do now?" It wasn't like she could run away...leave...and Daryl leaving wasn't an option. Who would she run to? No one knew. No one could know. It would risk tearing the group apart when they'd just been reunited.

There was a long silence. She could hear Daryl move. He was close to her now...she could feel him. One step closer and he would be pressed against her. Beth wanted that, but it couldn't happen...not now.

"Maybe you should go to Rick. He's a good man. The kind you deserve. He'll love you like you should be loved..." Daryl sounded so contemplative...so serious...like he actually meant it. She was floored. He'd driven a knife through her heart.

"Okay, Daryl. If that's what you want. I'll go to Rick. Just tell me, who's next for you, one of the new girls, or Carol, Michonne...maybe Maggie...or, more than one? I think I deserve to know." Beth was going to inflict the maximum amount of damage...she just didn't understand.

"That ain't even how it is...you know that!" She turned to him...Daryl was in her face as he spat his rebuke. She wasn't afraid of him. Maybe this hit him where it needed to for her to get some answers. "This ain't about nobody else. I don't want nobody else...I can't even think about anybody but you. There's never gonna...I'm doin' this for you!"

He kept saying it, I'm doin' this for you. The problem was, he believed it...Beth was sure of that now...she had to fight...fight Daryl, fight for him, fight to keep him...fight for their love.

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"So, what do you want me to do now?"

Daryl's heart was breaking. The things he'd said to her...they were unforgivable. But he knew this wasn't gonna be easy. The right things never were.

"Maybe you should go to Rick. He's a good man. The kind you deserve." That surprised him...those words comin' outta his own mouth. But it was the truth, just not the truth he wanted. "He'll love you like you should be loved."
If that happened, it would be like a hammer pounding his heart to a million pieces, but it would be the best for Beth...and that's what he wanted more than anything...what was right and good for her. And deep down, as much as it crushed him, if anyone else was to have Beth, he would want it to be Rick...his friend...his brother.

"Okay, Daryl. If that's what you want. I'll go to Rick. Just tell me, who's next for you, one of the new girls, or Carol, Michonne...maybe Maggie...or, more than one? I think I deserve to know."

What? Her voice read hurt and serious. Hurt he could understand. But serious...how could she even think that...that he wanted another woman? Couldn't she see how hard this was for him...how ridiculous she was being about everything? Beth's words...they hit the vein.

"That ain't even how it is...you know that!" She turned to face him, and he didn't back down...didn't back away. He was saying the truth. "This ain't about nobody else. I don't want nobody else...I can't even think about anybody but you. There's never gonna...I'm doin' this for you!"

"Don't sit there and tell yourself you're doing this for me. That self-righteous attitude...you don't get to use that to make yourself feel better! You're not doing me any favors!" Beth spat back at him.

"I'm not doin' you any favors?! Listen up, Beth. Listen up good and hard! I'm not made to deal with this relationship shit. I would've fucked you, and everything would've fallen apart." Daryl cringed as soon as the words flew outta his mouth. He was tryin' to break Beth, chase her away...but he only broke himself. "I might've tried not to...I would've regretted it...hurtin' you...but I would've done it all the same...it's the only thing I know how to do..." Daryl's voice was high, barely squeaking out.

He felt almost as desperate...as broken as he'd been after the whole world had fallen apart...outside the shack...too much moonshine...too many emotions. That was how their journey started, and this was how it was going to end. Daryl couldn't breathe.

Beth stepped close, into his space. He didn't step back. He couldn't. He needed her close even if he couldn't touch her. For all her anger, all her fight, she was calm and still now...she was so constant, like his North Star. She touched him. Daryl let it happen...didn't pull away...told himself it was okay because she was touching him, not the other way around. Her fingers trailed down his forearm, over his hand, tracing over the metal wrapped around his finger. He looked down at her, watching Beth looking at that ring...that symbol.

He was caught off-guard when she looked up, catching his gaze.

"Daryl, if you want me to walk away, I will," Beth paused, exhaling deeply. It wasn't what he wanted, but it was the right thing. "But you have to take your ring off. Take your ring off, and I'll go."

He couldn't. He wouldn't...ever. The cost was too high...and she knew it. Beth broke him. Daryl put his head down, shaking it no, the tears comin' unbidden. He wasn't even a man anymore...cryin' like a little girl. He felt Beth against him, her hands on his chest, her body asking him to hug her, and he couldn't say no.

"Beth...I'm gonna ruin you...I'm gonna fuck you and ruin you...ruin everything..."

He could feel Beth shaking her head against his chest.

"You can't ruin me, Daryl Dixon...you already did. You stole my heart, and I'll never be the same. I won't live without you."

Daryl squeezed her tighter, pulled her closer, hoped he wasn't hurting her...he'd done too much of
"Why can't you see me for who...what I really am? All people have to do is look at me to know..."
Beth would've been much better off if she wouldn't have been so naive, gotten herself so entangled with him. But he was to blame too...most of all. He let it happen. He pursued her...took advantage of the situation. He let himself feel.

Abraham had reminded him today of who and what he really was. It wasn't a surprise. Daryl just let himself forget for a while. He felt Beth pulling away from his grasp, but not away from him.

"Any idiot can see what he wants to see, but I know...I know who you are, Daryl...in here," Beth's hand pressed over his heart. He realized then just how hard it was beating. "I know who you are because you're mine."

Her hand came up, brushing his hair back from his face. She smiled up at him like nothing else mattered, like there was no one else in the world besides him even though her world had become so much fuller just a few hours before. But she was wrong about him...lying to herself.

"That's not true, Beth. You're afraid of me..." All Daryl's insecurities were coming to a head.

"What...?" That surprised her?

"You're afraid of me. I can't even touch you...in bed...without you gettin' all tense and scared. You might try to hide it, but I know what fear looks like...feels like..."

Beth nodded. "You're right..." Daryl knew he was. "I'm sorry I'm afraid. I'm sorry I'm a virgin."

"No...what? Why are you sorry...you shouldn't ever be sorry for that. It's me. I'm not good enough..."

"No, Daryl. You are good enough. You're good enough because I say...I know you are, and that's all that matters."

"I'm not," Daryl insisted.

"You are, and that's the end of it." Little Beth was firm. She was putting her foot down...using the most serious voice he'd ever heard from between her sweet lips.

Daryl shook his head but kept his mouth shut. This was a different Beth.

"And yeah, I'm afraid, but that's kind of part of the deal with virginity. I'm allowed to be afraid, and you're just going to have to get over it. You have to take me as I am." She said it like that was a flaw...an imperfection, but that couldn't be further from the truth. He was the one who had to be accepted as he was. Beth was the one being forced to settle, and she shouldn't be.

"Beth...all I know how to do is fuck...it's all I got." Maybe if he kept saying it, she would get it. "You're better than that...but that's all I can give you."

"Stop saying that...you're wrong! You love me, and that's what you're going to give me. You're not going to make love to me like you promised me this morning...well, not tonight, because tonight's almost over." Daryl looked out the window where the first grays of predawn were on the distant horizon. "We're going to take the night, take our time, you're going to make love to me. We're going to learn together."

Daryl was seeing Beth through new eyes. This fight...her spirit...there was nothing naive about what
she said. She wasn't the shy girl who couldn't even mention sex, actually say she was a virgin, or vocalize her fears to him. And Beth was fighting for him...someone was fighting to keep him in their life. She was a beautiful young woman who'd just opened herself up to him entirely...the woman he wanted to spend the rest of his days with. It was everything he needed from her.

Nodding, it was all the answer he had. It was enough though. Beth wrapped her arms around him. He flinched away involuntarily...sore from the fight earlier in the day, from falling on his bow. It was ironic, thinkin' Beth had sported bruises from falling on his bow too, but those bruises had come from much more pleasant circumstances. Beth pulled away. That wasn't what he wanted...that wasn't why he flinched...but how else would she read it after everything he'd said to her.

But she didn't...that's not how she took it. She was more perceptive than he gave her credit for.

"Are you hurt?"

"No...I'm fine...just sore from the fight..." It had been a long while since he fought so hard...that night in the woods, running and fighting beside Beth, knowing they were going to die, but then they didn't. There had been no time to be sore then...no promise of a soft bed after that fight...they lived...that was all that had mattered.

Daryl caught her wrist when she started to walk away.

"Come on...come to bed..." Beth urged, climbing in, leaning up against the headboard. "Take off your shirt. I'll rub your shoulders."

Daryl found himself sitting between Beth's legs, forgetting the trials of the day, her fingers grazing across the tender flesh where the bruise from his crossbow was forming.

"What happened?" It was just a bruise, but Beth was so concerned it might as well have been a mortal wound.

"My crossbow got me." He wasn't having too good of a track record with his bow since everything went down. He'd shot himself, and now he didn't even have to be touching that damned thing for it to cause him a pain in the back.

"Did someone try to take down the hunter?" There was amusement in her voice, no doubt recalling his words to her when she'd fallen on his crossbow not so long ago in the woods.

"Yeah...didn't try...did..." That girl, the girl who'd pulled him down...Tara...he would figure it out sooner or later...

Beth's delicate fingers found the knots in his shoulders and neck. Her touch could've been harder, but the pressure she was applying was more than enough to ease the tension in his body, make him forget, and allow him to lose himself in love for the moment despite everything else. No one had ever done this for him. No one had even offered, and if they had, he would've said no. But now, with Beth, he wanted this life...this intimacy. Daryl ran his hands from the tops of her tiny feet as far as he could up to her bent knees where her legs were around him...just to feel her...

"I love you, Beth Greene."

"No..." What? His heart shattered. Beth's voice was quiet though, filled with something too complicated for him to understand. "No...that's not me."

Daryl turned around, sitting on his knees to look at her. She had a soft, tired smile on her face. Everything was good...perfect. He brushed the stray blonde strands out of her eyes so he could see
her, cupping her cheek in his hand. She leaned her face into his touch. Daryl understood.

"I love you, Beth Dixon."
Chapter 52

Chapter Notes

~Author’s Note: Hey everyone, here is your new chapter. This following note really doesn’t have to do with this specific chapter but more so the story going forward. Now that we have the group in the mix, we are going to be seeing Daryl and Beth in their new life interacting with their family. Of course there are going to be good times, but there are also inherently going to be some difficulties and conflicts as with any group and family in addition to apocalypse related conflicts. I guess this is sort of a disclaimer that I write these characters as I interpret them in the context of this story and where it is going based upon my personal ideas, the traits I have seen from the characters in the show, and in some cases their actions and attitudes may be based on what I have gleaned from information I have heard about some of the characters and their storylines in the comic books. In addition, since this is Daryl and Beth’s story and told from their POVs, the storylines going forward will be written in a way that I think Daryl and Beth would react to certain events they face or have faced with TF based upon the fact that they are now one another’s top priorities. There my be some controversial moments or elements that not all readers may like, but I promise that I haven’t done anything arbitrarily without thought that doesn’t play into the larger storyline and stay within the parameters of what I believe to be in-character for the characters involved. Thank you as always for reading, and I hope you enjoy what is to come.~

"What...?" She could feel him watching her from the bed where she left him.

Turning around, her senses were affirmed, Daryl propped up on his elbows, just taking her in.

"What?" Beth asked again, smoothing her hair back, trying to figure out what was wrong.

Well, she knew what was wrong...she was a mess. They'd watched the sun come up. Yesterday...last night...it was a lot, and there had been no sleep on top of that. In the end, everything...she had to fight for it...but everything worked out. Beth hoped this was it, hoped Daryl would understand or at least accept that he was good enough, that they belonged together. Nothing could ever change that; she didn't want to fight him on it again. A lifetime of pushing people away or not having anyone to start with made Daryl hard and deadly accurate at hitting where it hurt. The things he'd said to her...they broke her heart, hurt her, scared her, even though she knew he didn't mean it...at least most of it...but he'd forced her to fight for him although that probably wasn't what he intended at all. She had to fight, be real, mature and strong, say things that were difficult for her to admit even if they were the truth. Beth didn't want to have to go there with him again...she would if she had to. He was worth fighting for, but she just wanted to be happy, to love him, enjoy him, have him enjoy her like they should be...there should be nothing stopping that...nothing.

Daryl shook his head, the only answer she was getting from him. He was just looking, and she was okay with that.

"Come here..."

This would lead to nothing good...well, good...just not at the right time. She went to him anyway, Daryl grabbing her wrist so she couldn't retreat. Beth didn't want to leave him, but it was full sunrise
and everyone else would be up soon. Chaos could ensue with all their friends and family being in a new place, and she'd worked hard making everything in their home right.

"Come here," he insisted more aggressively, pulling her onto the bed.

Palm pushed firm against his chest, stopping herself from being drawn even closer...

"I need to go..."

"You need to stay." Not even letting her speak.

"I need to go. Judith will be awake soon, and Rick will be looking for you." She finished on her second try, but the response she got was no different.

"You need to stay." He was unyielding.

Daryl sat up, her hand at the center of his chest doing nothing to keep the distance between them. He was too strong...Beth gave to him.

"Rick will find us..." She wasn’t just losing to his strength; she was losing her own resolve.

"Let him..." Daryl's voice low and raspy...breath warm so close to her lips. He meant what he said. He didn't care who found out. That was it for her.

Daryl was all encompassing, his lips needy on hers...his hand in her hair ruining all the work it took to smooth it out...to be presentable, his other spanning her lower back, pressing her closer on his lap. Beth found his neck with her lips, a newfound confidence driving her. Maybe it was the fact that she came so close to losing him, or the ring on her finger, or that she was forced to be so open and real with him about her fears, but somehow she knew, no matter what happened, it was all going to be perfect.

"I'll stay if you want me..." Beth whispered in his ear, pausing and teasing just the smallest bit, "...to."

She knew he wanted her. That was a given. And he wanted her to stay; there was no way he didn't. When they first came to this place, their new home, Daryl promised to stay in bed with her as long as she wanted once the house was in order...why not today? Everyone would survive without them for one more day. They seemed to have been surviving on their own since they were all separated. Beth pulled back, away from him, pushing to be let go.

"No..." Daryl growled in protest.

"I'm going to go lock the door," Beth assured him, laying her hand against his cheek with the promise she would be back.

But Daryl shook his head.

"No. There ain't no way people aren't gonna be knocking on that door all day long."

Just when Beth gave into fantasy, Daryl was waking up to reality...decided to become the voice of reason. At least one of them was able to think logically at any one point. He sighed, not letting her go, but letting go of the idea of her...at least for now.

"How do you wanna go 'bout telling everyone? I mean, do you wanna tell Maggie first, or...I don't know. I don't know how these things go..."
Beth thought about it for a second. Daryl sounded a little awkward in his question, but she figured it was probably because he was nervous and, like he said, didn't know how it should go. After last night's initial excitement at the reunion and wanting to tell everyone immediately, there was a part of Beth that wished they could hold on to it for a few days...keep it to themselves and enjoy. But Daryl...Daryl being broken because she didn't tell...she wouldn't do anything that would ever put a doubt in his mind again. They all needed to know. Today. She wanted them to know.

"No, they can all find out at the same time...unless you want...need to tell someone first. Rick...Carol..." If there had been something between Daryl and Carol, ever...she didn't know, didn't really think there was...they were just friends. Still, maybe he might want a chance to tell her first. And now she was being the self-conscious one...about everything.

Daryl narrowed his eyes at her like she was speaking a different language.

"I'm good. Do you want me to tell them? Maybe we can tell them together tonight?" He was trying to figure out the right way to do it. He needed everything to be done the right way, and she loved him for it.

"We'll do it tonight."

"And you'll come to me tonight?" Soft again...unassuming...innocent in his words, maybe even a little shy...

That question didn't even have to be asked, but Beth nodded anyway, blushing, before her lips asked to be kissed again.

*                      *                      *                      *                      *

Beth was barely away from the bedroom door, hair fixed as good as it was going to get, fingers gently caressing her swollen lips, smiling to herself, when Rick rounded the corner of the hallway with Judith in his arms.

"Mornin’, Beth," Rick offered cheerily, pausing just in front of her.

"Good Morning..." Beth felt a little warmth rising in her cheeks.

She realized just how close she was to being caught coming out of their bedroom. She had nothing to hide, nothing to be ashamed of, but still, it felt like an awkward moment that she might have had in the old world, her Daddy not just knowing that she was sleeping beside a man, but seeing her coming from their bed in the morning. It was new.

"You okay?"

"Yeah...everything's fine...just a little tired," trying to cover but realizing too late that what she said made it worse if that's what anyone was already thinking.

Thankfully Judith stole the spotlight, cooing and reaching for her. Rick handed her over.

"She was looking for you this morning, so we had to come and find you," Rick grinned, rubbing the back of Judith's head. "I swear, back at the prison, every morning when the alarm clock went off, she knew what it meant, knew you would be coming for her. There was no alarm today, but she let me
"It's funny how nothing changes even when everything changes." It wasn't sadness in her voice, just recognition and acceptance of what came before and being content and happy with what she had now.

"Where's Daryl? I thought he'd probably want to get an early start on the day."

"The door at the end of the hall, that's where...he sleeps." Beth almost said we, and Rick picked up on her hesitation but had the good grace not to say anything.

"Coming up the stairs, I half expected to find him camped out on the floor in the hallway after all that time he spent sleeping on the catwalk, no walls or anything, in the cellblock," Rick chuckled.

"Well, the room's pretty big. I think that makes the difference."

Beth knew the real reason—the bars, the confinement, the prison, the connotation. Even though the prison had been home to Daryl, the stereotypes that people placed on him, promises he'd no doubt made to himself about the kind of person he was going to be, the way judgment was passed...even the way he so harshly judged himself...he would never sleep in a cell.

"Is everyone awake downstairs?" She needed to change the subject before she gave away too much too soon.

"Michonne's up, prowling the kitchen. The rest of 'em, some of them are stirring, but I don't know if they're awake. Carl probably won't wake up 'til noon, or until he smells food. We've...the road's been a long one...hard. He needs some rest...they all do..."

Beth touched his arm softly in an attempt to comfort. Rick didn't need to feel defeated anymore. She didn't know all the details of everything that happened to them, she didn't need to, but they were all alive, so he shouldn't have felt defeated in the first place.

"We're safe Rick. You can rest a while. You'll see..."

* * * * *

There was a knock on the damned door. Just finished buttoning his shirt. Didn't take long for real life to kick in.

"Come on in."

It was Rick...thankfully. Daryl didn't know if he could handle anyone besides Beth or Rick this early, this soon.

"Morning," Rick offered.

"Pfft...Mornin'? We should still be sayin' 'night after the day we had." And the night I had."

"Yeah, well, that's life for you." Daryl watched Rick scanning and appraising the room. "I saw Beth outside. I told her I thought I'd find you sleeping in the hall after spending so long sleeping on the perch at the prison, but with this bed, I can see why you're here."


"It's pretty ridiculous, ain't it? And it's too soft, but..." Daryl had to stop himself before he fucked up and said Beth loves it. "And there's a princess bedroom. Judith will love it when she gets older." Save.

"So, you're planning on staying here for the long run...you think it's safe?"

"That's the plan. It's safer than anything I've seen for a good long time. We're stayin'." Daryl was speaking for Beth and himself. They were safe. He knew it. Had a plan. Beth and him, they had a future here. Didn't matter what anyone else thought.

"I trust you, Daryl."

Daryl wondered if he'd been too confrontational. It wasn't supposed to come out like that. And Rick trusted him. He knew that all along, but hearing it was different.

"Let me get my boots on, and I'll show you some of what's going on around here, what we've got to work with..." Daryl's words trailed off as he froze, watching Rick pick up the silver frame on the bedside table...the picture of him and Beth.

They'd decided to tell, but this...this caught him off guard. He wasn't prepared. And there was no way, seeing that picture, that Rick wouldn't know...wouldn't ask. Daryl felt anxiety building in his chest, standing very still, just waiting. Would Rick judge? Rick set the picture aside, casual, unfazed by any of it. That was when Daryl realized Rick already knew...how, he had no idea.

"Beautiful picture."

All Daryl could do was nod and wait for whatever came next.

"So, you and Beth?" He was unreadable, like Rick was waiting to measure his reaction.

Daryl nodded his head again until he realized it wasn't enough. There was no reason he shouldn't take ownership of his life, what he had with Beth. He'd fought...no, he and Beth had fought too damned hard.

"Yes." That one simple word meant everything.

Rick nodded, a knowing smile on his face.

"How did you know? You know...before the picture?"

"Hmmph...you don't have a monopoly on being observant. I was a cop. I might not notice as much as you do, but I'm not blind." Daryl listened, waiting to hear what the giveaway was. "Your new piece of hardware, mind you, I didn't notice it until we got here last night, but you're not just gonna pick up jewelry and start wearing rings."

Daryl's hand went instinctively to the silver wrapped around his finger, twisting it idly as Rick continued.

"And the way you couldn't keep your eyes off Beth, the way she kept looking at you...then I noticed she was wearing a ring too." God, Rick saw everything. "Is it new? The two of you?"

That was a really complicated question. He couldn't say exactly how long they'd been on the run, separated since the prison fell, somewhere close to two months? So, Rick knew, in the scope of things, they were only together for a short time. But in their world, time was always short. Now was all they really knew they had.
"Yes and no..." It was the only truthful answer he could give. The marriage was new, very new, but the feelings were deep and rooted. "I know you probably think it's stupid...don't approve, but..." He didn't feel self-conscious around Beth anymore, not after last night, but Rick...Rick was a different story.

"Daryl, you don't have to justify anything. No one's questioning you. I don't think anyone will. No one has the right to. And me not approving...far from that. I'm happy for you. Happy you found a piece of happiness."

"Thank you..." Daryl wasn't sure how he expected this conversation to turn out, but it wasn't like this.

"Just, is there some reason you and Beth didn't want to tell us?" Rick hesitated, like maybe he thought he was pushing too much.

"It was just all really overwhelming and unexpected. We haven't even really had time to...enjoy...it, and I don't know...yesterday, last night, it was all a lot." It was the truth minus his breakdown and their fight, and he sure in the hell wasn't gonna share that. "We wanna tell everyone tonight...when everything's settled down...together."

Daryl finally crossed the room closer to Rick, no reason to keep the distance.

"Fair enough." Rick offered Daryl his hand, pulling him into a brotherly embrace when he took it. "Congratulations, Daryl...to you and Beth. You're my brother, and now it looks like I have a new sister too."

When Rick released him, Daryl saw that his smile had broadened. Rick couldn't fake a smile like that.

"You won't say anything. Beth and I, we wanna be the ones..." Then Daryl realized that if Rick saw, others might already know. "Do you think anyone else noticed already?"

Maybe it wouldn't be much of a surprise at all.

"I think most everyone's just really focused on what happened yesterday, sleeping, and eating. Michonne noticed though. Brought it up to me this morning since we were the only ones awake. I wouldn't have said anything if she didn't bring it up first, but you don't have to worry about us saying anything. Judith, now that's a different story."

* * * * *

Beth sang softly to Judith, heading to the kitchen, not wanting to wake anyone up. She couldn't wipe the stupid smile off her face. She didn't have to though. She was happy. Rick said Michonne was prowling the kitchen, but she wasn't there anymore, so it was just her and Judith, and Beth continued her song.

"She hasn't had anyone to sing to her in a long time." Beth startled, turning to find Michonne in the doorway. She was almost as silent as Daryl. Almost. "There hasn't been much time or occasion to sing anyway though."

"I'm just happy she remembers me." Beth kissed the top of Judith's head, the soft wisps of Judith's
fine hair tickling her sensitive lips.

"Some things never change..." Michonne shared the same sentiment Beth had shared with Rick a few minutes before, "but some things do...people do. If they're lucky, they find happiness."

Beth realized in addition to smiling, she was blushing. Michonne's first statement had been so general, but that last part...it felt so much more personal, forcing Beth into an awkward place.

"They find a reason to keep smiling." Michonne was smiling now too. Her smiles were always genuine.

Beth turned away, setting herself to task before she gave anything away, finding something for Judith to eat, not knowing what to say to Michonne.

"I thought Daryl was going to shoot Abe between the eyes last night." Michonne was so talkative.

"Oh...I didn't notice."

"When he called you pretty. Good thing for Abe, Daryl didn't have his bow."

Beth went still and silent. She'd never really be guarded about anything in her life, but now that she had something she wanted to keep to herself, just for a little while longer...she was feeling the pressure.

"Why are you hiding from everyone?" It was a vague question that was looking for a very specific answer.

"Is it that obvious?" Beth turned back to Michonne, looking for honesty.

"Yeah, pretty obvious. At least to me. Maybe not to everyone, but I pay attention."

"Oh..."

Michonne was still smiling. She wasn't passing any judgment, not that Beth expected anyone to judge them.

"You walk away from your family in the middle of the night, family you've just found again, you're not walking away to sleep alone." The emphasis Michonne put on sleep had the underlying connotation of more than sleep.

She thought they were...well, of course she did. If she knew, it...them doing that...would be normal...natural. That didn't mean that Beth was comfortable with that topic, especially since she and Daryl hadn't...the blush rose higher in her cheeks.

"Rings were a dead give away too. But the way Daryl looks at you...he can't hide anything..." Beth knew that was the truth.

"Michonne..." Beth hadn't even noticed Rick and Daryl in the doorway until she heard Rick’s voice. "Daryl wants to show us some stuff."

Daryl gazed at her with tired, sparkling eyes...bedroom eyes. He looked like he was about to say something to her, but just gave her a small nod instead. Leaving, Michonne looked back over her shoulder, raising an eyebrow at Beth as if to say See...I know what I'm talking about.
Chapter 53

The aroma of coffee brewing seemed to ensure that Beth would no longer be alone in the kitchen. It could've literally been an old school Folgers commercial, her standing at the counter, Judith on her hip; the only thing missing was her husband coming in to kiss her and their baby good morning, grabbing his cup of coffee. Except their family wasn't conventional at all. It wasn't her baby, her husband carried a crossbow instead of a briefcase, the only thing that tied all of them except Beth, Daryl, Maggie, and Glenn together was the fact that they all lived and survived beside each other. Some commercial they would make. Abraham, the man in the fatigues, was the first person to wander into her kitchen.

"I would sell my sorry soul for a cup of that. Afraid my soul ain't worth much though." His manner and voice were gruff, but Beth didn't sense anything overtly dangerous about him. He had an aggressive nature, she could tell that, but he wasn't a threat to her.

Beth passed him a hot mug, smiling. There wasn't anything not to be happy about.

"Save your soul. You might need it some day."

"Sweet tea last night, coffee this morning. When's Southern Living coming over for the photo shoot? 'Southern Hospitality Lives While the World Dies', I can see the cover now."

She didn't know this man at all, but even though he was loud, he seemed good natured.

"Thanks, but really, it's just coffee."

"It's not just coffee, or tea, or even a pretty smile, darlin'. It's stability. A reminder of what we're fighting for. It's a shame we're going to be hitting the road again in a day or two, but we'll enjoy it while it lasts. As soon as we get Eugene to Washington D.C., it's the beginning of the end." Beth had no idea what he was talking about, but he sure seemed confident...and hopeful. "The beginning of the end for the dead who walk and a chance for the living to live again, for girls like you to find a good man and have one of these of your own some day."

He smiled at her and Judith, reaching out to Judith who took his finger in her tiny hand. Maybe he was one of those men who was more than met the eye. She wondered what his story was. They all had their own stories...their own losses that made them who they were. What Beth garnered from what he said was that the new people were planning to leave because they thought there was something in the capital...what used to be the capital...that could save them all. It seemed unlikely to her...but she could let him have his faith. She had faith too. It was what kept her alive, living...what brought her to Daryl, half of the equation Abraham was talking about...a good man.

The kitchen got crowded quickly after that, the smell of coffee and promise of food was too much for them to resist. Tyreese took Judith from her...an unlikely pair they made...so she could show everyone where they could find everything they might need. With this many people, breakfast...any meal was going to be a group effort, but they were more than willing to help. Maggie came to her, pulling her out of the center of the activity into the hallway, hugging her like there was no tomorrow. Beth hugged back, not wanting to let go. Her sister...there was so much she wanted to talk to her about, but she couldn't. Not yet.

"You look tired, Beth," Maggie observed, pulling away. "Are you okay?"

Nodding, a smile, not for Maggie, but a smile all the same. She'd never been more okay.
"Where'd you go last night?"

Beth thought for a second that maybe Maggie knew and she was just trying to pry information out of her. Michonne knew after all, and Maggie was her sister, but Maggie's face gave away nothing. She was simply asking where she'd been, but Beth's thoughts were interrupted before she could come up with or give a neutral answer.

"Maggie, Beth, have either of you seen Daryl?" It was Carol, no good morning, no thanks for the coffee; she just wanted to know where Daryl was. "He wasn't down here this morning, and we haven't had time to catch up."

We haven't had time to catch up...nobody had the time to catch up yet. What was so pressing that Carol needed to talk to Daryl about right now?

Beth just forced herself to shrug her shoulders, non-chalantly, like it was no matter to her. Not ready to tell yet...even if she wanted to just a little. She and Daryl promised to do it together.

"I'm sure he'll come around when the food's ready," Maggie offered.

Carol nodded, leaving, presumably to try to track down Daryl.

"So where'd you go..." Maggie's attention turned back to her. "You didn't leave because you were upset that I...I brought up Dad...did you?"

Beth had always been close to Maggie, able to read her even when she didn't want to be read, and it was weighing on her, Daddy's death.

"No...I miss him though...but we're alive, and he would never begrudge us that. He'd be happy we made it, happy we're alive." Beth had felt the same guilt Maggie was feeling, and it was Daryl who convinced her that Maggie and Daddy would want her to live and carry on...be happy...and she'd been doing that.

Maggie sniffled, wiping a tear away.

"We get to be happy now, and that's okay."

Maggie shook her head, maybe only half believing her, but half was better than nothing. Beth didn't have to answer the where did you go last night question since Maggie was distracted. All she really had to do though was put two and two together and she would've figured it out. Daryl left last night, so did Beth...the signs were all there...Michonne figured it out. And for Beth, knowing only one person knew...it felt like a delicious secret. But Maggie still looked sad, so she felt bad about enjoying what was just hers.

"Yesterday...when I saw Daryl...I felt like I'd lost all hope of you. Finding him...it was just one more miracle in a long line of miracles, reuniting with Daryl. I don't think any of us really thought he was dead, we just thought we would never see him again. And...part of me...I don't know...even though it seemed irrational...I hoped...thought maybe you were safe with him." Maggie was fighting the tears. "It broke my heart...everyone got back everything they lost...except me. I got Glenn back...but you..."

Beth went in for the hug. If she could heal Daryl, she could help Maggie.

"On the drive here...everyone was talking all excited about Daryl being alive, and I just wanted to scream or cry...I was falling apart...until I saw you on the porch..." Maggie’s words were wrought with sobs soaking Beth’s shoulder.
"I'm here now...everything's going to be okay."

Separating, Maggie brushed the stray strands of hair away from her face, Beth realizing that no matter what, today she was just going to look like a disaster. Even Maggie saw that.

"I just don't know why Daryl didn't tell us you were alive." Beth knew why. He wanted to hold on to just the two of them for a little while longer...like she was doing. "Maybe it was because he was riled up about what happened with Abe."

"What happened with Abe?" They hadn't gotten around to talking about anything other than themselves last night, but if Maggie thought it was significant...

"Oh...you know...first impressions. Abe just thought what a lot of people think when they first meet Daryl, so they had some words...just didn't get off to a great start." Maggie brushed it off like it was nothing, but it was personal now.

Beth knew just how much Daryl was affected by people judging him. That must have been what caused him to try to pull away from her last night...and if it had done that, it wasn't just two men having a few words...it was something that hit Daryl deeper, bringing back his past.

"Are you okay? Beth...?" Maggie’s voice sounded a little distant but the concern was unmistakable.

Beth realized she'd been lost in her own thoughts.

"I'm fine." It wasn't very convincing, but she wasn't worried about Maggie anymore.

Last night, during their fight, she should've realized there was something more, something wrong with Daryl from the very beginning. Beth tried to remember what she said to him...if she had been out of line...made it worse, but did it really matter? The end result had been more than reconciliation...it was complete understanding.

*                      *                      *                      *                      *

"Daryl..." He'd just left Rick and Michonne in the kitchen, Beth wasn't there, and he was off to find her. Now Carol. He tried to be pleasant. He had no reason not to be.

"Mornin' Carol."

"Breakfast is almost done...in the kitchen. You're heading the wrong way." She was cheery as hell. He would be too once he had Beth with him.

And he knew where the food was. It was his house.

"I know...we'll be there in a minute." Daryl's body still thought it was movin', but he was forcing it to stand still.

"I didn't see you this morning. I know you're an early riser, but if it was that early..."

"I slept in my bed," he cut her off. Why was she so worried where he slept? "I live here."

Sometimes it was still a strange concept to him, but it was the truth. This was his place. His home. Daryl was impatient, getting sharp with her, not entirely intentional, he just had his own priorities.
"It sounds like we all have some catching up to do." Either Carol wasn't reading his body language or she didn't care.

Thinking on it, Daryl wasn't so sure just how much catching up he and Carol had to do...if he even wanted to. The last time he'd seen her...well...it’d been before Rick left her outside the prison on her own after she killed Karen and David. How had he forgotten that? And now his house had five people he didn't know and couldn't trust. Abraham...threat number one and his two companions, the girl he knew and couldn't place, and Carol...the enemy within. He was fucked...

"Sorry, I ain't got time for this right now." Daryl left her standing. He didn't wait for a reply, and thankfully she didn't follow.

Finding Beth and Maggie talking in the hall, he knew it was wrong to interrupt them, but he couldn't wait a second longer to get Beth back.

"Lil' Bit..." Shit. He shouldn't have called her that in front of Maggie, not yet...maybe not ever...but Maggie didn't seem to notice. Beth smiled at him though. "Can I talk to you?"

Beth said something quietly to her sister, touching her on the shoulder, Maggie leaving them alone in the hall, glancing back at them as she walked away. Daryl made sure Maggie was outta sight before he took Beth by the arm guiding her into the first room off the corridor...which one, he didn't really know or care...just wanted some privacy.

"I showed Rick and Michonne the weapons and supplies downstairs. Gave ‘em both the extra keys...told ‘em I really didn't wanna share everything with the whole group yet." It didn't feel like the conversation they should be having, or that they should even be talking at all...but she needed to know, and he had to say something...anything...or he would do something...

"That's all very exciting..." Beth was teasing him...teasing him because she knew he couldn't do anything about it.

She was no more than an arm's length away, her body tense in anticipation of something that wasn't gonna happen.

"Rick knows...and Michonne. I couldn’t even talk to 'em without them lookin' at me like...I don't know...Then I couldn't focus on anything with them bein' like that, and me bein' like this..." Daryl was a mess.

A provocative little smile spread across Beth’s face...she was so forward until they came close, got down to the reality of it all.

"How did Rick know? Did you tell him?"

"No. He said he realized last night...saw the rings...it's Rick." He could barely get the words out...he couldn't even think.

Beth's fingers were running idly through her ponytail falling over her shoulder. He didn't know if she was doing it on purpose or not...to entice him, torture him...but it didn't matter.

Did she have any idea what in the fuck she was doin' to him?

"He said he was happy for us..." Daryl was really just trying to hold it together.

Beth nodded...something else seemed like it crossed her mind.
"Carol was looking for you. She said the two of you had catching up to do..." Her sweet voice shifted to soft and self-conscious.

What was it with all the talk of Carol from Beth...last night...he thought Beth mentioning her was just a random barb thrown during their fight. But then this morning she'd asked if he needed to talk to Carol first, before they told everyone about them when there was no reason. And now this...it wasn't concerning because Carol was looking for him, but that it apparently made Beth question herself. It was enough to pull Daryl into a more serious place.

"She found me, but I needed to find you." He hoped he wasn't gonna have to go into anything about Carol to put Beth's mind at ease because there was nothing to make a deal of, except his mistrust, so he went there. "I know you're happy to have everyone back, but be careful. Be careful around the new ones," he should've told her that last night...this morning...but he'd been too distracted, "and be careful around Carol."

Beth nodded her understanding after he said the new ones, but her eyes questioned him when he mentioned Carol.

"I'm serious." And he was...just didn't wanna tell her why, at least not right now.

"Okay..." She didn't question him any further.

But the seriousness didn't last for very long...not that kind of seriousness.

Beth's eyes, so big and blue...they were often childlike and innocent, but not now...they had seductive down to an art. Her teeth raking across her lower lip...Daryl let out a deep breath watching her pull the tie outta her hair, freeing it to tumble down, loose around her face. She definitely knew what she was doing to him...she knew. Beth stepped closer, then closer again until they were...together. He kept his hands at his sides, forcing himself not to touch her. If he did, it would be too late. He would be too far gone. What in the hell did she want from him? What did Beth expect him to do? Their family was only a room away...and that made everything all the more dangerous. He could kiss her...touch her at least...

Daryl stepped into Beth, forcing her to give into him, to step back until he pressed her up against the wall. Leaning into her, his arm blocked her escape...but she didn't wanna get away.

"Tonight's gonna come. Dark will be here before you know it." Daryl warned her, doing some teasing of his own.

"Then what, Daryl Dixon?" Beth challenged.

His free hand tangled in the hair at the back of her neck, pulling, forcing her to tilt her head up and look him in the eye. Beth gasped, caught off guard. It was forward, maybe aggressive, but she could tease and play...he could be forward this way with her now because they weren't in bed together where everything would be different. Daryl was going to have her lips though, the only answer she was gonna get...the only answer he was capable of giving...

"Get your fucking hands off the girl!"

*What the fuck?*

Daryl let go of Beth, looking over his shoulder. The commando, Abe, was in the doorway, poised to attack.

"How 'bout you mind your own fucking business."
"You wanna keep breathing, you let her go."

Was he fucking serious...thinking he was hurtin' Beth?

"No...it's okay...we're..." Daryl barely heard Beth over his heart pounding...the adrenaline rushing.

And Abraham didn't hear her at all. Daryl wasn't prepared. He wasn't ready for Abe to be so quick, jerking him away from Beth, but as soon as his hands were on him, Daryl knew it was gonna be a throw down. Abe might have military training, but Daryl's schooling had come from surviving life...fighting just to live, and he made first contact, drew first blood from a split lip.

"You son of a dick!" Abraham barreled into him, body massive like a bull driven by brute strength.

"No...Stop!" Daryl heard Beth cry as he was smashed into the floor length mirror anchored to wall.

He didn't think nothin' of it, didn't feel nothin', didn't know he was hurt until there was blood dripping down his forehead into his eye. He couldn’t feel anything but rage.

"Leave him alone!" Beth pleaded...desperate...moving in, trying to stop Abe...then Beth hit the floor.

Daryl didn't see Abraham anymore, just a dead man who hadn't realized it yet. It was just him and his knife, a slice to the arm pinning him, a cut to the side forcing Abe back far enough so Daryl could finish the job...but then chaos broke loose.

"What in the hell?" He didn't know who that came from, but Daryl wasn't backing down...didn't care if he had an audience. Abe wasn't backing down neither.

"Beth..." that was Maggie. At least someone besides him cared about her.

Both he and Abe went in for the final assault, but they didn't make contact. Daryl couldn't see who had Abraham, but Rick caught him from behind. Didn't mean he was gonna stop. This fight...this fight was far from over. Abe touched Beth, sent her to the ground...he was gonna die.

"Glenn..." Rick called for help, trying to hold him back. "Watch the knife."

"Fucking let me go..." Daryl fought. If Rick didn't let go...he didn't wanna hurt Rick, but this was about Beth.

"Drop your knife, Daryl."

Rick was his friend, but he couldn't...he almost broke away until Rick and Glenn took him down to the floor. He couldn't breathe...they had no right...

"What in the hell is going on here?" Rick sounded like he thought he had a handle on the situation now that Daryl was on the ground, but as soon as he let his guard down, Daryl was gonna be ready to finish it.

"He put his fucking hands on Beth...slammed her to the floor...he's done..." Daryl spat, Rick and Glenn beginning to loosen their hold on him as they listened to the story.

"I didn't mean to push the girl. Wouldn't touch a woman like that. I was just trying to get her out of the way so she didn't get hurt..."

"Don't matter...you touched her..." Daryl was able to lift his head enough to see Beth was on her feet again, Sasha and Maggie beside her, Maggie's arms wrapped protectively around her. Beth was visibly shaken.
"I was trying to protect her..." Abe was holding his side, blood dripping from there and his arm where Daryl's blade met flesh, Tyreese restraining him. "That son of a dick had Beth pinned against the wall. He was gonna..."

*Rape her? Is that what the mother fucker was gonna say next? What was happening between him and Beth when he walked in...it was just a stupid, innocent game...there was no way anyone could've seen that as him trying to rape her...force her against her will...to do anything. Daryl started to struggle to free himself again, Rick's pressure on him increased, pushing him harder against the floor. It hurt more than it should've. He would never...

"Daryl...calm down..." Rick intoned.

Rick knew...but nobody else understood.

"She's my wife!" Daryl's voice was so forced and distorted by rage, anger...every aggressive emotion imaginable that even though he knew what he was saying, no one else would be able to understand.

Daryl forced himself to a calmer place...as calm as he could be...taking a few steady breaths.

"Beth’s my wife."

Rick and Glenn let him go so he could push himself up from the floor, but Rick's booted foot quickly covered his knife before Daryl had a chance to recover it. His group...his family and friends were looking at each other not quite sure what they heard...all except Rick and Michonne. Daryl looked to Beth who seemed to be steady as she stepped forward, all eyes turning to her.

"We're married. Daryl and I are married."
"We're married. Daryl and I are married."

Beth's pronouncement was much more clear and steady...but it was driven by anger. This wasn't how it was supposed to be...how it was supposed to go. Everything was ruined. He should've never went on that fucking run...should've just stayed in his world with Beth...gone to bed with her when she begged him not to go. Rick and the rest of their group would've done just fine without them. Daryl made it fully to his feet. The least he could do was go stand beside Beth...take her hand, show their family what they were to each other even though the happiness of the moment was gone. But they were all staring at him...judging him...each and every one of 'em. It was like the very beginning, when he brought them food, helped them protect the group, bled for them, but they didn't trust him...didn't like him or want him around but needed him...and he wasn't gonna take it. He was good enough.

"Where were you all when the prison fell...when Hershel died? I know where I was. I was with Beth, protecting her, tryin' to keep her safe, trying to comfort her, and she did the same for me. None of you can say that. You all know me, but you're standin' there judging me. I don't take advantage...never have...I haven't even..." Daryl stopped himself. He almost spit out something far too private that no one had a right to know...so upset there was a sharp pain radiating up his side. "I love her, and if she don't love me, she's free to go, but 'til then, y'all mind your own damned business. I gave Beth a ring...my promise, my promise before God. You hear me? Before God! I protect my family, and she's my family...she's mine..."

Daryl was feeling short of breath by the time he got done. He confessed things he'd never thought he'd say in front of anyone in his entire life. But they were still looking at him, judging...and Beth was too...so that couldn't be it...

"Daryl..." The look on Beth's face, the fear in her voice...he didn't understand. She slowly approached him with her hand raised to calm him...to still him...but why?

Beth looked down, Daryl following her eyes...and that's when he felt it, the jagged piece of shattered mirror protruding from his side, the blood dripping down his pants. His hand went instinctively to pull it out, but she caught it before he had the chance. Bob and Rick threw themselves into the mix, but everyone else faded away for him.

"We need to get him to his bed." Bob took charge.

"Upstairs...Rick knows where..." Beth sounded like she was tryin' to keep it together, but it was a war she was losing.

"You got any medical supplies...suture kits, saline, hemostats if you have them, bandages...get what you got. I'll need them. Hot water...towels."

"I'll get what we have..."

Bob and Rick were supporting him...half dragging him towards the stairs, but he didn't wanna leave her...not after what happened. These people...the new people...they were unpredictable.

"Out. I want them out of my house now!" Little Beth was fierce.

"Beth, they're with us. Abe didn't know. No one knew, he was just trying to protect you," Glenn was trying to reason. "Where are they supposed to go?"
"I don't care. I want them out. Daryl's your brother now; he's been part of your family since before I knew you. How about you try thinking about him and convincing me about them later?"

That was the last Daryl was able to hear of Beth...Beth defending him to her family...fighting for him...

*D* * * * * * *

Daryl...he...he was hurt. She was trying to hold it together and keep the tears at bay. She needed to be with him, with Rick and Bob taking him to bed...but they had it handled, and she had a job to do. Beth had already wasted too much time banishing Abraham and arguing with Glenn about it. She had to focus now. When Beth got to their room after gathering what was needed, their whole world...everyone had converged on that spot. So much for privacy. Beth couldn't even make it to the bed, putting the medical supplies on the table by the door. At least someone had been kind enough to get hot water from the bathroom.

"Bob..." Beth called.

She couldn't even see him from where she stood until he came to assess what they had to work with. Beth could hear Daryl growling and complaining from the bed. She wanted to go to him...be by him, but Bob might need her. Beth had a job to do...kept repeating that in her head...and she was afraid to see how bad it was.

"Suture kits...good...silk...we can use that. Absorbable sutures...good. Here are some..." Bob was talking to himself over the inventory.

"Bob?"

"Hmm..." Was he even paying attention?

"Is he going to..." It might have been dramatic, but she was so afraid to lose Daryl...she wouldn't survive.

Bob stopped rummaging through the pile to look at her a little cross-eyed.

"He's going to be fine. The biggest complication we're going to have is keeping him in bed...to rest."

Beth could breathe again. Focus.

"Okay, we're going to need the room now. Everybody out." Bob declared.

Everyone listened...well most everyone. Rick was beside Daryl. They would need his help, and Beth wanted him there for support either way. But Carol was hovering by the bedside too. She knew Carol was Daryl’s friend, but she didn’t need to be here now. It wasn't her place. And something that Daryl told her...to be careful around Carol...she didn't know why or even what that meant, but it wasn't a time to question. It was a time to listen.

"Carol, it's time to go..." Bob got there before Beth had the chance, but Carol stood her ground.

"Hershel taught me some things. I can help you," Carol asserted.

"He was my Daddy. He taught me." It made Beth sore that Carol brought up Daddy and the fact that
he'd showed her a little. Beth had spent a lifetime loving him and learning from him. "Daryl...he's my husband." It was the first time Beth said that out loud...the words felt so sweet on her tongue. "This is my place."

She didn't have time to wait and see if Carol left, but she heard the door close.

"Rick, make sure he keeps pressure on the laceration over his eye."

Beth zoned back in to what was going on with Daryl...where her attention needed to be. Daryl was laid out on the bed, Rick kneeling on the other side of him, Bob examining the shard of mirror embedded below his ribs. Daryl wasn't saying anything now; he wasn’t making any noise or showing any pain. Either the adrenaline was overriding it or Daryl was putting on a brave face for Bob and Rick or her. One of his hands pressed the bloody towel to his forehead, but the other hand, the hand closest to her...she saw it digging in...gripping the side of the mattress. He was hurting.

Beth moved in close beside Bob, not drawing attention to herself, but sliding her hand into Daryl's. He laced his fingers between hers, clenching her hand tight. Beth knew Daryl probably wouldn't have a problem with Bob or Rick seeing him holding her hand, but he wouldn't want them to know that he was holding it because of the pain. She would give him that. Bob pulled the glass out without warning, replacing it with a towel and firm pressure to staunch the bleeding. Daryl winced at that, squeezing her hand until it ached. Beth wished she could take his pain away, but if clenching her hand tight helped to transfer some of that pain, it was the least she could do. She watched as Bob pulled the towel away, the bleeding slowed, but Beth noticed there was a lot of blood in their bed. As Bob's fingers were probing the open wound, glancing sideways, she could see Daryl's jaw tightening.

"It doesn't seem to have hit anything major, but it's deep. We'll need an interior layer of sutures before we close the wound." Bob was using a lot of we in his discussion. "You didn't find any hemostats, suture forceps, needle grippers...?"

He looked directly at her, placing the bloody towel against Daryl's wound again. Beth shook her head, afraid of what was coming next.

"Hershel taught you how to stitch." Bob wasn't asking a question, just making an observation. He knew. "You're going to do it. You have small hands and little fingers for the interior layer. You can do the best job with the least amount of damage."

Beth froze. Daddy taught her...but this was different. She would be hurting Daryl. Causing him pain. Her job right now was holding his hand despite the brave show she'd made in front of Carol. Maybe she shouldn't have made Carol leave...she just didn't think Bob would need her to do this.

"I...I can't..." Beth got out.

Daryl let her hand go.

"Go on, Lil' Bit...you got this..." Daryl had faith in her. How could she say no?

Bob flushed the wound with saline, passing her the small curved needle.

"You know how to tie a surgeon's knot?"

Nodding, her Daddy had been a good teacher.

Beth looked up after tying off every stitch to see Daryl, apologizing with her eyes for hurting him, but he was remarkably still, focused. Beth could feel his muscles contract every time the needle
passed through the sliced flesh, when she tied the knots to make two pieces one, but his eyes were on
her...watching her. Beth finished the interior layer under Bob's close supervision, trying to pass him
the needle so he could close the wound.

"No, you're doing just fine. You've got a woman's touch, and the patient isn't complaining," Bob
refused her. "But let's keep the sutures in the closure interrupted. There's no way Daryl's going to
make it through his recovery without busting at least one of those stitches, and if they aren't
interrupted, it'll just be like the perforated edge of paper...an open wound all over again."

Bob was right. Everyone in the room knew that. Back on the farm, when Daryl shot himself with his
crossbow, been shot in the head with a deer rifle on top of that, he'd been back out, trying to find that
little girl just a few days later. She hadn't known him then...but that characteristic was persistent
within Daryl.

Beth closed. Bob supervised her suturing Daryl's forehead as well. She wasn't sure exactly why Bob
wanted her to finish. Maybe it was because he wanted someone else to have some experience, or
because Daryl was handling her so well, or maybe because he knew she was the one person there
was no chance of Daryl going off on for inflicting pain.

After all the wounds were closed, Beth was sitting on the bed beside Daryl, Rick, arms crossed over
his chest looking on as Bob laid out his final instructions.

"You can clean him up when we leave, but after that, give him these." Bob set three pills from the
multitude of prescription bottles Beth had brought up with her from their medical supplies. "One's for
the pain, one's to make him sleep, and one's an antibiotic."

"I don't need to sleep. Don't need nothin' for the pain neither," Daryl protested, but he got the stare
down from all three of them.

"When you're done with him, give him these," Bob reiterated. "I want you to stay in bed, let's
say...three days..."

"That ain't happening," Daryl barked.

"Daryl..." Rick warned, giving Bob a chance to finish.

"No strenuous activity, and especially no..." Bob looked back and forth between Beth and Daryl,
waiting for them to grasp what he didn't say.

Beth had no idea, and looking to Daryl, he looked equally confused.

"Hmmph," Rick laughed, clearly amused by the situation they weren't understanding. They both

Beth was mortified, and Daryl looked just as dumbstruck, not having any quick comeback...and he
had absolutely no objection like he did most of the time, just for the sake of protest.

"Don't look at me like that. That's what Bob's saying," Rick ended matter-of-factly.

"No strenuous activity," Bob repeated. "Especially no sex, vigorous or otherwise, until I see signs of
healing."

Beth was dying on the inside, and on the outside, she knew she wasn't blushing prettily...she was red
with embarrassment. Rick was clearly amused with himself. Bob was fighting a smile, looking like
he was trying to be all medical and professional...and Daryl...Daryl looked like he was going to kill
Daryl was glad it was Beth. The fact she was sewing him made the pain more tolerable. Even though she protested...didn't wanna do it...her hands didn't shake. The worst part was over...his side repaired and closed...still stung like a bitch, but it was done. He was sitting up now, against the pillows and headboard so Beth could close his forehead. The pull of the stitches in his side from being bent didn't help the stinging any, but it meant that he was closed up nice and tight. Beth did a good job. She'd crossed his lap, sitting on his knees to reach his head...he sure wouldn't have been okay with Bob or Rick doin' that. He tried to forget that Bob and Rick were even there, tried to forget everything happened...Abe, the pain...just focusing on Beth. That's what got him through the last...just Beth.

"Silk..." Beth told him about the sutures. "It will help stop a scar if I keep the stitches small."

Silk. Daryl thought about the last piece...only piece of silk he'd ever felt...the now discarded white gown Beth found to wear for him on their wedding night...a night that didn't happen. He opened his eyes to look at her. She was so close, her expression so intent.

"Keep your eyes closed." Beth paused her work, setting a hand on his shoulder to steady herself, take a breather from her delicate task. "I can't do this with you watching me..."

Daryl listened the best he could. His cheek twitched when the needle pierced the deeper, more tender portions of the cut, but other than that, he forced himself to be the ideal patient, keeping his eyes closed and his hands to himself.

He'd thought that the stitching was the bad part. Adrenaline had made getting the wound unnoticeable, stitching-Beth had eased that pain, but Bob's bed rest orders...

"I want you to stay in bed, let's say...three days..."

"That ain't happening..." Daryl didn't even give Bob time to finish his thought. His house was full. There was a lot of shit that had to be done, people he knew now that he couldn't trust, and he wasn't gonna leave all that to Beth.

"Daryl..." Rick cautioned. He respected Rick enough to hear Bob out, so he closed his mouth.

"No strenuous activity, and especially no..." Bob looked at both him and Beth in turn, eyebrow slightly raised.

He didn't get what Bob was trying to get at or why he wouldn't just spit it out already. Daryl looked at Beth, brow furrowed, and shit could he feel it, but she didn't get it either. There was a quiet laugh, his attention drawn to Rick, standing at the foot of the bed, arms crossed, his stance serious but his face gave away his amusement.

"That means no sex, kids."

Well, Rick clearly felt comfortable enough with them not to have to beat around the bush. Daryl's face went warm...Beth's face was red too...maybe even more than his. They were both so innocent in their own fucking ways that neither of them were able to get the simple insinuation. He should've known.
"Don't look at me like that. That's what Bob's saying." Rick's defense was lackluster, like he knew he didn't need to but did for the sake of saying something because of Daryl and Beth's reactions.

"No strenuous activity. Especially no sex, vigorous or otherwise, until I see signs of healing," Bob repeated.

It was even worse when Bob said everything. And the shitty expression on his face, the smile he was fightin'...Daryl wanted to punch his teeth out...Rick thought it was funny too...he could kill 'em both. But...he and Beth...they were newlyweds...and Rick and Bob, they were friends...family. They were okay enough with him and Beth being together that they were trying to share in their happiness, despite the fact that Daryl had been bleeding in their bed a few minutes before...but their world made for strange moments. As newlyweds, it seemed like they should expect a certain amount of teasing and torture from their friends and family. That sounded like something normal from the way the world used to be, just not the world he came from. But just because he had to accept it, didn't mean it wasn't more painful than Bob yanking the mirror outta his side. In the end though, he couldn't help it, couldn't keep the little smile from his lips.

"Just give me a handful of those pills so I can knock myself out. Better yet, give me a bullet so I can put myself outta my misery..."

* * * * *

After Rick and Bob made sure he got back into bed once Beth changed the bloody blankets and sheets, they were gone. Everything was quiet. Beth was gently wiping the blood from his forehead with a warm wet rag. Daryl rested his hand on her hip just to feel her. He was feeling sleepy, but he knew it wasn't even noon yet.

"I'm sorry..."

"For what?" Daryl was confused...but today, it didn't seem like it took much to confuse him.

"For hurting you." Beth let her hand fall away from his face, looking down.

"Nothin' you could've done about it. I'm glad it was you."

Beth nodded her head, but it was bothering her.

"Hey...come here..." Daryl didn't know how much more here Beth could get, but he just wanted her a little closer.

She shook her head no. "You heard what Bob said."

Well, for one thing, what Bob said was the last thing that was on his mind...no, he remembered it in all its horrifying glory, but he just wasn't too keen on listening to the doctor's orders. Second, he wasn't just gonna ravage her right then and there. Hands on her hips, he didn't bother to ask her anything again. Daryl just pulled her to where he wanted her to be, as close as she could get. It hurt, but it was worth it.

"Pain's part of being alive. I accepted that a long time ago. If we're lucky, there will be enough to outweigh the pain, and I've got that."
Daryl closed his eyes, breathing Beth in. He could still smell his blood around them, but then, there was Beth. Sometimes she smelled like the cupcake lotion she'd found what seemed like a lifetime ago...if measured in events, it was a lifetime...but no matter what, she always smelled so good. He could be covered in dirt, blood, and sweat, but Beth...she always smelled like spring, sunshine...hope, if that was even possible.

There were so many things Daryl wanted to say to Beth, but he couldn't find the words; the adrenaline had worn off, he was feeling the pain, and exhaustion was starting to set in. The quiet was nice. He wrapped his arms around Beth, and she gave into him, against his chest, resting her head on his shoulder. There was pain, and pressure, but his overwhelming need to be close to her drowned out everything else. When it was just him and her, everything worked, but today really showed their new reality. They were gonna have to work to make it work...but what if it didn't...couldn't? He wasn't doubting himself anymore or Beth, but what about the rest? There were so many other complications.

"Beth..."

"Hmmm..."

"What if I can't make it work...living like this again...the group...the new people?"

Beth pulled away from him. Daryl let her, needing to see her face.

"What do you mean?" She wasn't panicking yet. That was good. She was willing to hear him out.

"I can't live like...being worried 'bout a stranger trying to take me out for touching you...worry 'bout people in our home hurting you." Was he even making any sense?

"That's not going to happen again...I made them leave. I think they're down in the guest house." Beth had been solid when she made them go. He heard that.

It seemed like a safe distance for now, but they weren't the only threats. People changed. Sometimes you never really knew the people around you. Carol...she'd killed members of their group and hid it. Who would've thought?

"It's just been us for so long. Before, it was all of us. Now, it's us and them..." Daryl really didn't know where he was going with it or what he needed from Beth. Maybe just someone to listen. "I've told you before...you'll always come first for me..." He'd known that all along, he just never thought they'd find everyone again, never thought there was a chance in hell.

Beth nodded when he finished.

"It's about us, not them. There will never be a choice. You're going to rest and heal. When you're better, we'll go." Her big blue eyes were locked on his. She was serious, but that wasn't what he was asking for.

"Beth, I wouldn't ask you to..."

"You don't have to ask. There's no question. If that's what we need to do, we'll do it," she cut him off. "Do you remember when we first got here and you asked me what I prayed for back at the church?"

"You said you prayed for us." He remembered.

"I should've been praying for forgiveness for the life I took..." she hesitated and Daryl was trying to
think of something comforting to say to her, but Beth went on. "It was a selfish prayer...but I made a deal with God. I told him if I could have you...keep you, I would be willing to never see my family or friends again...just you. I'm not ashamed. And that goes for now too..."

Daryl hadn't thought it was possible to love her any more. He reached out, brushing his fingers down her cheek as she watched him. They'd grown so much together...become together.

"Why?" He didn't need to say more. Beth knew what he was asking. Why did she pick him? Why did she love him? Why was she willing to give up for him? Beth smiled like she was thinking about the most beautiful moment she'd ever experienced. It made his heart warm.

"After we burned the cabin...the second cabin...and I stopped in the woods to look back, you told me to follow you, that you wouldn't lead me astray. When you turned away, all I could see were the wings on your back. I knew in that moment...I didn't really know why yet, but I realized I would follow you anywhere...I was taking it on faith. I would follow you into the dark..."

It was the most staggering thing Daryl had ever heard. He kept his mouth closed, knowing if he opened it, he wouldn't be able to construct a coherent stream of words. He would ruin it. Instead, he took Beth's hand in his, examining her ring, the wings that protected her finger, representing all the promises he could make to her, buying himself time to pull it together. Daryl realized that today Beth may have sewn his wounds closed, but it wasn't the first time she'd put the broken pieces of him back together.

For Daryl, somehow everything in life had fallen into place. "Maybe now...maybe now it's my turn to take it on faith...maybe I will follow you into the light..."
Chapter 55

Chapter Notes

~Author's Note: Just a little warning...there is very little interaction between Beth and Daryl in this chapter. It is more about each of them with some of the people who have recently re-entered their lives. I really love writing moments where Beth and Daryl get to think about who they are with and because of each other, even if they are facing some adversity or confusion from these people who suddenly found out that they have fallen in love and chosen to make a life together. They are truly different people together than they were when they were with the group, at least in my opinion. As I said in one of my prior notes, I write these characters as I interpret them in the context of this story and where it is going based upon my personal ideas, the traits I have seen from the characters in the show, and in some cases their actions and attitudes may be based on what I have gleaned from information I have heard about some of the characters and their storylines in the comic books. There may be some controversial moments or elements going forward that not everyone may like, but I promise that I haven't done anything arbitrarily without thought that doesn't play into the larger storyline and stay within the parameters of what I believe to be in-character for the characters involved. Thank you so much for reading, and I hope you enjoy!~

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Beth nibbled on a small piece of cold chicken from the plate beside her. Sitting on the floor, back against the bed, knees drawn up, it felt like the first time she'd had a chance to breathe. Maggie brought her the food, and now she was standing beside the bed watching Daryl sleep. Maggie was here, and Maggie knew. Beth didn't have to hide anymore...she could actually talk to her sister about anything...everything.

"He looks like a kid when he's sleeping..." Maggie observed, whispering.

Beth smiled to herself.

"Hmmm...you never noticed that?"

"Never got close enough. I didn't want to wake him up...can you imagine waking Daryl up?" Beth looked up at Maggie's absurd statement, her sister glancing down at her. "Well, yeah...I guess you can. And I guess I know why you looked so tired this morning."

Maggie sank down on the floor beside her, wrapping her arms around her knees.

"Why are you on the floor?" She was still whispering.

"You don't have to whisper. Bob had me give him something for the pain and something to make him sleep. He's out." Beth used a quiet tone, but there wasn't any need for whispers.

"Why are you on the floor?"

She had to think about it for a second. It was probably really irrational. Beth knew that right now she couldn't wake Daryl up or hurt him just by sitting on the bed beside him, but she didn't want to take
the chance. Still, she wanted to be as close to him as possible.

"Do you remember the big Weeping Willow back home?" Beth asked thoughtfully.

"Uh, yeah, of course. The one where Dad could never find us."

Beth nodded, thinking about her dream...Daryl, the children, the place where she'd grown up. That was a night they shouldn't have survived, but they did. They beat the odds.

"Dad...you remember...he used to crawl on his hands and knees when he finally found us? I don't know how he did it. He was old even when we were young." Maggie's voice filled with nostalgia.

The good memories, even though they made your heart sore, they were what kept you going...and what kept the departed alive.

"We used to talk under that willow. Even after you were too old and left, I used to go under there and write in my journal or just think. Maybe I just needed a moment like that," Beth explained, taking a bite from half a biscuit. She wasn't hungry, but she knew she had to eat.

Maggie took her hand unexpectedly.

"I missed you, Beth."

"I'm here now..." Beth couldn't help thinking that her sister might miss her again.

No one knew where life was going to lead, but one certainty was she was going with Daryl, whenever, wherever he went.

"So...how'd it happen...so quick...you and Daryl?" Maggie hesitated in asking.

Maggie never hesitated about asking her anything. Maybe it was because of all the tension that surrounded everyone finding out about them.

"I don't know...it just happened..." Maggie was tracing the wings of her wedding ring that Daryl slipped on her finger, still holding her hand. Beth felt proud of it and what it meant. "How did it happen for you and Glenn?" Beth knew how that played out. She wasn't stupid or totally naive, and that had been extremely quick.

"I sure hope that's not how it happened...my baby sister..." Maggie's smile was a little sad, but her eyes sparkled.

Even though she knew, Beth felt a little embarrassed thinking of how Maggie and Glenn got together...and Maggie even thinking that was how she and Daryl started...if only she knew just how innocent their relationship really was.

"When we ran...I don't know...I'm not really sure when I started to feel...feel with a possibility of it being something real for both of us. I know that he saved me...I know when he first kissed me...when..." Getting all flustered, Beth couldn't get her words out. She sounded like an idiot.

Maggie got her serious face on.

"Was it before...before we lost the prison?"

Why would Maggie even ask her that? But Beth had to think...and there was something...something small...
"I don't know, maybe...I..." She stopped, trying to pull it together. This was her sister. Why was it so damned hard? *Breathe.* "The night Zack died, Daryl came to tell me..."

"I know. I remember. Glenn told me that Daryl was going to you."

"He was sad. I hugged him, and he didn't pull away. He kinda hugged back, and I was the one who let go. Maybe I felt something...maybe I felt him..."

Maggie raised an eyebrow, Beth realizing what she'd said.

"Stop...I mean...maybe I felt something different about him." Why was everyone so interested in her sex life? "But after that, there was never time to think about it again. Even when we ran, things between us...they were rough...bad...until they weren't."

"So, what's Daryl like? I've always wondered...I mean, how could you not?"

"Maggie!" Beth knew she was rosy red now. She prayed Daryl didn't wake up to this conversation.

"What? I'm your sister. I've earned the right to ask." There was no shame in her voice. "And I'm sure he's not like Zack...not at all."

Maggie was her sister. She could talk to Maggie. She hadn't been ready to talk to her...seek out sisterly advice before the turn, but now she was here, and Beth could use some.

"I didn't sleep with Zack...I didn't know him that long...long enough to..."

"Oh...I must've been living in another world. I just assumed."

"It's okay. We all had our own lives. My relationships weren't your top priority, even before the turn. To be truthful, he wasn't even my priority, and Zack deserved better than that." Beth was a different person then, had a totally different outlook on life and loss...and she hadn't been in love.

"I'm sorry...I didn't mean to bring up Zack...upset you."

"No...it's not that..."

"You didn't sleep with Jimmy though?" Maggie didn't give her time to explain what she needed to. Maybe Maggie was working it out in her mind. It sounded like she just realized.

Beth shook her head.

"So...Daryl...he was your first?" Maggie was tentative in asking, sounded concerned. Why concerned?

"We haven't yet...we haven't had the chance...we'll, we've had the chance...but not the right chance." Did that even make sense?

"You're still a virgin?" Maggie confirmed.

"Yeah."

"Well, good luck with Daryl." She rubbed her face with her palm, going all cynical.

"What does that even mean?" Beth didn't understand the shift in Maggie's mood.

"It's Daryl..."
Beth was starting to feel defensive...protective of Daryl. Why was Maggie so pessimistic? And that was a cop out. It's Daryl. She'd heard that so many times, and now she realized it was nothing more than a judgment...a very stereotypical judgment.

"It's Daryl?" Challenging defensively, she waited for Maggie to explain beyond the stereotype.

"Yeah...it's just that, he's...a survivor...his life's violent, he's aggressive...and his life was like that even before everything fell apart." Maggie seemed like she was trying to tread carefully since Beth was so up in arms. "It kinda seems like he'd be rough in bed. The first time is...well, that isn't something that would make it easier...not what you want."

Well, this wasn't going how she hoped.

"Maggie...I'm kinda scared...and..."

"I'd be scared too. Do you really know what you're getting into?" Maggie was dead serious...didn't even give her a chance to finish.

Beth realized at this point she was better off going it alone, going in blind. A sister's advice wasn't any good if Maggie was just going to judge Daryl and not even listen to what she needed, making her more scared than she already was. Daryl had been right. People in their group did judge him.

"Maybe if you'd been with someone else first, I'd say go for it...but as it is...you're my baby sister; I don't want you hurt..." Maggie was being softer in this approach, but it still broke Beth's heart. Maggie clearly didn't understand...didn't understand that they'd decided to be together, decided to get married...what feelings had to be there for those things to happen.

"Never mind..." Beth started to push herself off the floor. "I just thought I could talk to you...needed to talk to my sister..."

Feeling a little bit emotional...even though her sister was there, she still really wasn't. But Maggie caught her arm before she could get off the floor.

"Wait...Beth, you can talk to me..."

Sliding back down beside her, Beth hoped this round would go better. If not, she was done. It wasn't worth it.

"I'm not scared because I'm scared of Daryl. I'm just scared of it..." Beth was a little bit scared of Daryl, but she wasn't going to let Maggie know that. It wasn't that she didn't think Daryl was going to try to be gentle with her...but what if he couldn't?

There were a few moments of silence. Beth watched Maggie contemplating...thinking.

"Okay. How far have you gone?"

This was where it got awkward.

"We've touched..." And she was feeling flushed already...pausing...hesitating.

"God, Beth, I'm gonna need more details than that."

Why?

"Daryl and I...we've been naked...touched...we both..."
Maggie was smiling now, shaking her head, taking a certain amount of pleasure in her embarrassment.

"Well, that was a good start, if you both..."

"Maggie, stop...you're just being mean now..."

"Innocent little Beth," Maggie reached out, hugging her. "My sweet baby sister. I wasn't being mean, just truthful. I meant that it was good that you..." she paused, and Beth knew she was trying to find a way to say it without embarrassing her, "...enjoyed the experience." Beth was feeling better knowing that Maggie wasn't teasing her. "Is that as far as you've gone?"

"Yeah...well, he offered to...no...he tried to..." She just needed to buck up, be real, and say it. "Daryl tried to go down on me." The words flew out quickly; once they were out, Beth felt better.

"And?"

"I said no."

Maggie’s eyes narrowed on her, dumbfounded. "Why?"

"I don’t know...it’s just not what I wanted with him." The only thing Beth could do was be truthful. Her sister accepted that truth, nodding.

"So, what was he like?"

It was the second time Maggie was asking this, but now there was actual context...Maggie was trying to help her, not just asserting her rights as her older sister to torture her.

"I don’t have anything to compare him to...but, it was good..." It was getting easier to open up.

"No, I mean, how was he with you? How did he treat you?" Maggie wanted details.

"He was slow...gentle...really hesitant..." Beth was remembering the moments...they were so vivid, still feeling his touch lingering on her skin, tasting his lips...which was not really helping her situation.

"Really?" Why did Maggie sound so skeptical? Maybe Beth should be worried.

But that wasn’t Daryl...he’d never hurt her on purpose; Maggie didn’t know that though. She hadn’t been through what they had been through together...or shared the sweetness they shared.

"Maggie...I just don’t know what to do...you know...actually what I should do when..." Beth just needed something.

"Do you love him?" Maggie was watching her intently, waiting to assess her answer.

"More than anything."

"I never thought I’d hear Daryl say he loved anyone, and...well, he kinda told us in a big way today, so I’ll give him credit for that." Beth wasn’t really sure at this point if Maggie had something against Daryl or if she was just being protective.

"He doesn’t need you to give him credit. I love him...he’s different with me."
"Okay, Beth." She gave in. "About what to do, Daryl's got that handled. I'm sure he's got a lot of experience under his belt, been there done that, and that's good."

Beth was still waiting for something more concrete. Maggie saw that.

"Don't rush. A lot of it comes natural...you can't really do anything wrong. Don't be afraid to tell him to slow down or be gentler. Guys tend to have different ideas about what slow and gentle are. And guys like Daryl..." Maggie stopped there. Whatever she was going to say, she thought better of, and it was lost. Beth should probably be grateful.

Maggie paused for a minute, reaching out, brushing the hair out of Beth's eyes, and touching her cheek gently. Beth had forgotten what it was like to have a sister.

"Remember, this isn't some hookup in the backseat of a car. If you love him, and he loves you, you share everything that you're feeling...pain, pleasure...that's what a relationship...what love is all about...being together." Maggie finally said something that made sense. Something that was beautiful and good.

"And it's going to hurt...a lot...?" Beth knew she would just feel better going in prepared.

"Maybe...I don't know...I can't really say. It's different for everybody. It depends on a lot."

Once again, not helping, and Maggie read that fear on her face.

"You'll be sore, but after the first few times, it won't hurt anymore. Daryl knows that. He's not going to do anything to hurt you on purpose." Maggie reassured her with the truth she needed, putting a comforting arm around her, pulling her close. "He loves you, Beth. You'll be fine. You already gave him your heart, now give him your faith."

Beth didn't really know if Maggie believed that last part, but she did...she loved him and trusted him. Somehow, that made everything better. That was all Beth needed to hear.

* * * * *

His head was pounding the beat of a war drum before he even attempted to open his eyes. Daryl forced 'em open, not really sure where the pain was coming from or what the hell was going on. The curtains were drawn tight over the windows and the lights were out, only a little bit of the fading sun from the outside was peeking through the edges of the heavy drapes. Why was he awake if there was so much pain...his body wanted him to sleep. He reached out for Beth beside him, but she wasn't there. This was the second time in the short span since everyone was reunited that he'd been in bed without Beth. This shit wasn't gonna fly...they just couldn't have her whenever they wanted her. She had her own life; she belonged beside him.

That was when Daryl realized just how possessive he was starting to get and the reason he was in so much pain...other people...their group, their family...others. And why he was awake...someone pounding...well, it was just knocking, but it felt like pounding in his head...on the door. It sure in the hell wasn't Beth. She would just come in. Anyone else...he wanted them to go away. But they didn't; they just opened the door.

"Let's get some light in here."
The lights flipped on, instinct drove him to sit up...quickly...too quickly for the wound in his side.

"Son of a bitch..." Daryl put pressure against the bandage, laying back down. "What the fuck?"

"Take it easy there." Carol was cheery as hell. He didn't have the patience to care, laying still, waitin’ for the pain to subside. "I've never seen you waking up so angry. You were always such a morning person."

Daryl thought on it, trying to figure out when Carol saw him wake up. She'd been around him in the group in the mornings, even at the prison, but never when he was waking up. He was always up before most everyone else.

_Hurt like hell_, he thought it, but there was no way he was sayin' it to her.

"Wake up, Beth's gone, ain't gonna be happy 'bout that. Ain't morning neither..." Daryl looked back towards the window, trying to gauge what time it was. He didn't even know what day it was...when the fight happened.

"Well, you're in luck. I've got some nice chicken noodle soup here for you. Straight from the can, just like mom used to make." She set the tray on the bedside table, Daryl drawing the covers closer.

"Just like mom," he grumbled bitterly.

Carol perched herself on the side of be bed, grabbing the bowl and spoon.

"What in the hell are you doin'?" Daryl inched further away, wincing.

"Making sure you eat."

"I ain't hungry."

"You need food to heal," Carol insisted.

"You ain't my mom."

"I should hope not."

This tit for tat with her wasn't helping his head none. Carol's eyes were on him, watching him. She caught him when his hand went to his side as he tried to straighten.

"You want me to take a look at that?" She offered, setting the bowl aside.

"Nah, I'm fine. Stitches are just good and tight," Daryl turned her down gently. There was no reason to bark at her. She was just tryin' to be nice.

"You need to let me look." Carol reached out for his blanket.

"No." Apparently the civil approach wasn't working.

Carol let it be, but there was something else on her mind.

"I thought we could talk too. You haven't had any time..." So, she didn't just come to play nurse. She wanted to trap him and make him listen whether he wanted to or not.

"Still don't," Daryl cut her off.
Whatever catching up Carol wanted to do, well, he just wasn't in the mood, but she was gonna get it out no matter what.

"I thought you should know, hear it from me before anyone else mentioned it...I killed Karen and David back at the prison."

Daryl didn't have a big reaction to the confession because he already knew...had known for a long time...long enough that he'd formed his opinion but stopped worrying about it because it had just been him and Beth. Once Carol showed back up on scene, he knew he had to be more guarded though. The thing was, Carol...she didn't seem at all affected by what she'd done, even in the way she just said it...all matter-o-factly. Most of the time, when you did something you regretted, you had to bury it deep inside to get on with your life...but when you had to talk about it...that's when people knew how you really felt. Carol didn't feel.

"I know." Maybe that would stop the conversation.

"Rick...I knew he told you...after I saw you coming back from the basement and you brushed me off when I tried to talk to you before all this happened," Carol gestured to his side and head. "I didn't want it to be between us without you hearing my side of the story."

"There ain't two sides. You killed 'em. You said it yourself." Cold, hard reality. She'd killed...no matter how she tried to justify it, it had been wrong.

"I wanted to come back...get the girls..." She broke off after mentioning Lizzie and Mika. They weren't with the group, so he knew they didn't make it. Maybe she still felt somethin'. "And I was at least going to say goodbye to you."

"Rick told me he promised you we were gonna take care of the girls at the prison. We were gettin' ready to go tell Tyreese the truth when the Governor rolled up and the shit hit the fan." Daryl couldn't say why he said so much, but Carol needed to know that he knew the truth all along...he hadn't just heard it.

"You knew at the prison?" Carol seemed a bit thrown.

"Yup."

"You agreed with Rick's call?"

"I didn't have to agree with it. It was Rick's call. Glad it wasn't mine. Don't know what I would've done." And Daryl wasn't sure, honest to God truth.

Carol didn't just kill, she covered and lied...lied to everyone...even him. That lie changed things. He'd also made a certain promise to Tyreese about putting a bolt in the killers once they found 'em. He wouldn't have killed Carol, but he couldn't have said he would've made a different choice than Rick, but since he'd been Carol's friend, the cut would've been all the deeper for her.

"What happened...you know, I had to. Somebody had to do something or everybody was going to die." Is that what she had to tell herself so she could sleep at night, or did she really believe it?

"Yeah, well, I did somethin'. Got the meds, and people lived. Didn't have to kill no one." Daryl did the right thing. Carol did the easy thing. The right things were never easy.

"I did what I thought was right, what I thought would save the group," Carol pleaded her case. "You've done things to save us...Rick has too." Was that where she was coming from, thought he and Rick would've done the same thing?
Daryl didn't have a response for that. Carol looked away from him, staring straight ahead, face void of emotion.

"Rick forgave me. Tyreese forgave me. That means you need to forgive me too."

Was she tryin' to tell him what to do...what to think? She'd done that before, he hated it...

"It ain't about forgiving. Ain't my place to forgive. It's about trust. And I got Beth now..." Daryl had Beth. He loved Beth, and he couldn't trust Carol. It was their new reality. "Where's Beth?"

He was distracted in that moment...thinking about her. Why hadn't Beth brought him his food? Why Carol?

"Poor thing. She fell asleep on the couch exhausted. Beth...she's so young...she could be my daughter. She's probably not old enough...not ready to handle everything she's facing...everything she has to do..." Daryl didn't like where this was goin'.

"Beth's tough. Are any of us really ready to handle the world?" He wasn't gonna put up with anyone doubting.

"That's not what I meant...but you must be relieved. The group's back together so you don't have to bear the burden of protecting her."

Did Carol not hear anything he said about being with Beth, what he told the whole group?

"That ain't it. We're together. She's not a burden. Truth is, she saved me."

Carol's head moved up and down. It was kinda a nod, but the wheels in her head were still turning.

"Is Beth pregnant?" Her voice spoke with sympathy...sympathy was the wrong sentiment if that had been the case.

"Pfft...no." It wasn't any of her damned business, but he didn't need anyone thinkin' that, questioning his motives, or the sincerity of his feelings for Beth...thinking he was just with her 'cause she was knocked up.

"Then why say you're married? What does it matter? You don't have to do that to protect her anymore?"

Daryl wasn't understanding what was happening; why all the questions, all the doubts from her? He'd worried about meeting some resistance in the group, being judged, questioned, but not from Carol. They were apparently living in two very different worlds.

"Because we are. I love her, and for once in my life I wanted to do something the right way, not just for her, but for me." Despite the pain, the splitting headache, and Beth not being near him, he felt a smile creep across his lips, and he was warm inside. He loved her. He married her. They were together. They belonged to each other.

"Things are probably going to change now since the group's back together. I know that we all went through a lot, and sometimes we bond with people we go through tragedies with...look what happened to us...with Sophia...but that doesn't mean it's love...it doesn't mean it's forever..."

"Carol..." It needed to stop.

"No, you need to be realistic. You were there for each other when you both needed someone. Now
someone's going to get hurt, and I don't want that to happen."

"That's not how it is...never was..."

"This isn't you, Daryl." Her eyes were on him now, like she thought she could see into his soul...but she knew nothing. The only person who could do that was Beth.

Daryl almost snapped. He was done, but then there was Beth standing in the doorway. She was a sight. Hair mussed, sleepy eyes...so pretty. Daryl just wished Beth looked like that 'cause of him. Well, to be fair, she probably was tired because of him, but not for the right reasons. But with Beth standing in that door...nothing else mattered. His anger melted away...he couldn't take his eyes off her.

"For the first time in my life, I know who I am...when I'm with her." He didn't say it for Beth's benefit; he said it 'cause it was true.

That was when Carol realized he was looking right through her...it wasn't their conversation anymore. When she glanced back and saw Beth, she jumped up from where she sat at the edge of the bed like she was guilty of something...and she was...killing, prying, meddling, doubting. She was guilty of plenty. If Beth had a jealous bone in her body, she didn't show it. She was so full of grace, stepping aside, letting Carol retreat out the door.

Beth...

Finally something good. Something he wanted. He tried to sit up. He was going to get up and go to her...but he needed to remember to go slow. Daryl's forehead scrunched in pain, then the fucking cut in his forehead hurt from scrunching it.

_Damned if you do, damned if you don't._

"Daryl, lay down." Her words were firm.

He did what she said, not just because she said it, but because he needed to.

"I ain't used to people tellin' me what to do." It came out crankier than he thought it would, but she didn't seem fazed by it.

"Well, maybe you should get used to it until you get better. You should be sleeping," Beth told him how it was, drawing the covers back.

"I was tryin'. Didn't wake up 'cause I wanted to." Daryl's head was throbbing a little less, his adrenaline was up some from the exchange with Carol, but his body was still telling him it wanted to sleep.

"You're bleeding again..." Beth's stern tone turned to one of concern. "Let me look..."

She gently pulled back the gauzy bandage, _looking_ with her fingers.

"Oww..."

"Yeah 'oww'. You didn't bust any, you just pulled them. The swelling hasn't had time to go down; that's why the stitches are so tight." She replaced the bandage with care, pulling the covers back up and tucking them around him all snug.

That's when Daryl realized what Beth said. _The swelling hasn't had time to go down._
"How long was I sleeping?" He was kinda afraid of the answer.

"The sun's getting low now, so I don't know...maybe seven hours."

"Same day?"

Beth nodded.

Fuck me... That's why he felt like shit. The wound combined with the pain killers and sleeping meds plus his state of exhaustion should've kept him out a lot longer to start healing.

_Dammit Carol._

That meant he was still facing at least two more days in bed if Bob counted today as a day, which he probably didn't. Daryl hadn't planned on listening to Bob...but if he still felt this shitty, he might have to.

"Phhh..." his sigh did nothing to help the sting. Whoever said deep breathing took focus from the pain was a fucking idiot. Focus on Beth though, that was a different story. "Where'd you go, Beth?"

"I just went downstairs for a minute with Maggie to make sure everything down there was okay. I was tired...just laid on the couch for a second because I didn't want to bother you, and I fell asleep."

She was tired...needed sleep just as much as he did, but he'd left her alone to deal with their entire group in their new house. They hadn't even had time to fully adjust yet.

"I want you to sleep up here from now on, okay? With me or without me, if you're sleeping, I want it to be in our bed where I know I can find you." He didn't wanna make her think he was possessive. The new situation just made him feel as protective as he was of her when they were out in the open. "Beth, you hear me?"

She finally nodded. "I probably need to be here to watch out for you. You said for me to watch out for Carol, but I think she has her eyes set on you."

Beth...he couldn't really read her now. She said it like she was teasing him, but there were implied questions there...why he'd told her to watch out for Carol, what Carol wanted to talk to him about...questions that he wasn't ready to answer, but she needed to take seriously...Karen and David...At least she remembered what he said to her before all the shit went down this morning.

"Stop," he teased back.

Beth smiled before she leaned down to kiss him. Daryl caught her, hand behind the back of her neck, trying to draw her in closer.

"No." She pulled away.

Daryl wasn't hurt by it...it wasn't something they should be doin' anyway if Bob and Rick had a say.

"Some honeymoon this is," Daryl complained, nine parts teasing, one part bitter.

"You need to get well, Daryl Dixon. I wanna be with you..." Beth's words were barely a whisper, but he heard every single one of them.

And that innocence, the way she looked away shyly when he wouldn't take his eyes off her...it killed him. He reached out for her again, but Beth pulled away, just out of his reach, slowly shaking her head _no_. Her smile was sweet, but to him it was pure seduction...her teeth raking over her bottom lip,
something Daryl wondered if she even noticed that she did when she was around him. Beth was teasing him...challenging him...challenging him to heal.

Beth was all the incentive he needed.

Chapter End Notes

~End Note: I just wanted to say that I really enjoyed writing the moments between Beth and Maggie. Honestly, I have had some difficulty with liking Maggie’s character since season 4 and 5 where I could never understand how she was never concerned about Beth after the prison...and then just left with Abraham and Co with Glenn even after Daryl told her that Beth was still alive in season 5. While I guess part of me always took this as the show trying to focus on Beth being Daryl’s storyline, not Maggie’s, I just never understood the direction they went with Maggie, and TPTB even said that we would understand as the story went on why Maggie did what she did, but that never played out to my knowledge. Anyway, I am going off on a tangent here, but the point is, even though I have had problems with the way that Maggie was played in the series in regards to Beth, I really am trying to be fair with her in my fic. I really do think that she would be somewhat confused about Daryl and Beth being together. I think that she definitely knows that Daryl is inherently a good person, but then again, Beth is her baby sister whom she wants to protect. Maggie is caught somewhere between trying to be cool about it when she comes in to talk to Beth, but at the same time, she’s freaked out that her little sister is grown up. But I was so happy to have the sisters be able to have an awkward but eventually helpful girls conversation, and again another moment for Beth to be strong, assert that she knows what she wants, and demanding the respect for her relationship that it deserves. ~
What the hell's goin' on out there?" Daryl waited for an answer after Rick ducked into the room, pulling the door shut behind him to drown out the chaos. It sounded like everyone he ever knew was out in that hallway.

"Beth's trying to get sleeping arrangements worked out. Speaking of, shouldn't you be sleeping?"

Well, that was the end of their place of solitude. Their floor had been invaded. But it was their family...he just wished they had a little more time and a lot more space.

"Pfft...I ain't been doin' nothing but sleeping and layin' here these past two days. Bob poking at me, not givin' a shit what it feels like. Beth sleepin' so far on the other side of the bed 'cause she doesn't wanna hurt me that I couldn't reach her if I tried." Everything was just so fucked up.

But Rick was smiling and nodding. The more Daryl thought on it, the worse he realized it could be. Beth made everything better. Rick settled himself in the antique armchair close to the bed looking tired.

"It's anarchy out there," Rick confided. "Having stuff...having time to think...it's exhausting."

Daryl understood. When your survival depended on what you did in that moment, you acted out of necessity. When survival mode was off, that's when everything hit you, all the choices, all the complications. That's when Daryl realized Rick probably didn't just drop in to check on him; he came because Daryl was a friend, and he could just hide from everyone and everything for a minute.

"Beth got everything handled, finding everybody a spot?"

"Poor Beth...I didn't know anyone could look so pretty when they blushed," Rick was grinning ear to ear.

But it was a nice compliment. He was okay with Rick calling Beth pretty...his brother admiring his wife. Anyone else...no...until he realized what Rick said. If Beth was blushing, that meant someone embarrassed her.

"What happened?" He almost went defensive, but Rick was still smiling.

"No one wanted the room next to the newlyweds. Made Beth aware. Tyreese made it abundantly clear he wasn't sleeping next to you two. Said he'd rather sleep in the princess room." Daryl couldn't muster a response, but his face felt warm. "So, it looks like you're stuck with me as your neighbor. Let's keep that in mind when it's time to turn in." Rick's stupid grin wouldn't go away.
"You ain't gotta worry 'bout that." He was sore and starting to feel a bit cynical about him and Beth. It seemed like everything was working against them.

"You're going to be healed up before you know it."

Daryl realized he'd already shared too much, but that wasn't helping him keep his damned mouth closed.

"It's not that...it's..."

Rick leaned forward in his chair, serious. "Then what is it?"

He really didn't know what he was gettin' himself in to. Daryl didn't know either. He should just quit while he was ahead. But if there was anyone he would try to have this painful conversation with, it was Rick. What in the fuck was he doin' to himself?

"Phhh..." Daryl let out an audible sigh, thinking about whether or not he really wanted to go down this road. "Beth and me...we...I haven't...slept with Beth."

It felt better once it was out. Rick shifted his seat. Daryl couldn't tell if he was uncomfortable or just tryin' to figure out where to go from there.

"Why?" Rick was smart enough to proceed with caution.

"Lots of reasons." He wasn't giving Rick much to work with. "I guess...I just...I need some advice."

Asking for help had always been painful, but this was fucking excruciating. He closed his eyes for a second, reminding himself that it was for Beth. Rick rubbed his furrowed brow...yeah, he was uncomfortable.

"I...Daryl, I'm sure you've got more experience...mine's pretty much limited to Lori, so..."

"But...I...that's not the kind of...never mind..." Daryl couldn't do it. It was a bad idea to start with.

"What do you want to know?" Rick was proving to be the bigger man, but he still had an oh shit look on his face.

"I've never...I don't know how..." Screw trying to put it delicately, pussyfooting around the issue. Rick was a guy. He could handle the truth. Daryl just needed to be real. "All I've ever done is fuck, and that's not how I want it to be with Beth. I don't know anything different though."

Rick nodded. He was responding better to the plain truth.

"You love her..." it wasn't a question, "...and worrying about how you're going to be with her...caring...I imagine that's half the battle. And if you want to be different with Beth, why would you think you couldn't?"

Daryl thought about how easy it was...how he almost lost control of himself around Beth.

"My self-control ain't all that great to start with, you know that...and my instincts for this...they're all fucked up. I can be all soft and nice with Beth, but I'm fightin' myself...what I wanna do..." the words were comin' out so easy now.

"You're fighting. That's all that matters. And if you go over the edge a little, I think Beth will understand the...passion...of the moment." There was a bit of an awkward smile at the corners of Rick's mouth.
Daryl wished that was the case for both of them, but it wasn't. Passion of the moment. He didn't even know what that was, but he knew what Rick meant...lose control.

"Beth wouldn't understand. She couldn't."

Rick cocked his head, not putting two and two together. Well, maybe Daryl hadn't given him two and two to work with.

"Beth's never...and I've never had someone...I've never been with a virgin. Never wanted to. Had rules 'bout that, not that anyone offered..." Daryl was telling far too much...needed to shut his mouth.

"There's a first time for everything."

That was the extent of Rick's advice? All he had to offer?

"Yeah...well, I don't wanna fuck it up for her, so you get where I'm comin' from?"

"Daryl, just be patient with her. Be slow. Go easy on her. Beth's young..."

That was the second time he'd heard that...someone in their group made that comment...young...and he wasn't putting up with that from no one, not even Rick.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It just means that Beth's young and doesn't have experience, but she's not stupid. She doesn't have expectations, but she does know what to expect. She's not going to hate you or blame for anything that happens."

Rick talked circles around the issue, but Daryl knew what he meant. Didn't like it one bit. He might hurt Beth, she knew that and was okay with it. He was the one who had to deal. Beth told him as much when she confessed her fears.

"Instinct says that we should do whatever it takes to survive. You've lived in that place, even before it all fell apart." Rick wasn't tellin' him nothin' he didn't know.

"So?"

"I've seen you put yourself in the line of fire to do what you know is right more times than I can count, even knowing you might not survive. If you can do that, you got this."

Daryl just thought about what Rick said. Couldn't imagine havin' this conversation with Merle...his brother...the one who proclaimed he taught him all he needed to know about women and the world. Maybe he just needed to have a little faith in himself.

"So, what did Bob say, about how it's looking?"

Well, that wasn't much more of a pleasant conversation. Probably easier for Rick though.

"Hmmph...tacked another day on my sentence. I pulled some of the stitches yesterday."

"I've gotta say, I'm surprised you're listening."

He wasn't the only one. Daryl surprised himself, but he had a reason to want to heal up right. And being hurt...it wasn't that serious or nothin'...but it was a wake up call, a reminder of the mortality he'd been feeling lately. It was reality. He could die even when he thought he was safe.
"It's different now. I'm not just part of the group. I got someone. And me...with Beth, I'd like to see what livin' feels like...with her."

"It's beautiful, isn't it? Life..." There was sadness mixed in Rick's voice...bittersweet.

Rick loved his children, but he'd lost Lori. That really hammered home the cruel nature of their world.

"World's always been an ugly place. Always knew that. Beth sees the hope and goodness even through all the shit. She makes my life beautiful, gives me hope, and I try to keep her from all the darkness. Haven't been so great at it though." Some memories...his failures...Beth's kill, they would haunt him forever.

"Seems like you've been doing a pretty good job..."

"Rick, if I die..." Rick didn't give him a chance to finish.

"You don't even have to ask. I'll take care of Beth."

"You always take care of the group, and you've got Carl and Judith who come first...I ain't stupid..."

"Daryl, I'll take care of her like she's mine." Daryl accepted it. Rick was a man of his word. "Now, why don't you focus on living some of that life."

* * * * *

"You look..." Daryl couldn't find the right word to describe her, wondered if he even had a word in his vocabulary to fit her, so he settled with pretty. "...so pretty."

He'd never seen Beth dressed like this, but he imagined this must've been what she looked like in her life before on special days. A simple light blue dress the color of her eyes skimming her knees, a bright white sweater, her hair pulled to the side in a loose knot.

"Really?" Beth sounded so unsure. "You think?"

"I know." There was no question.

Daryl finished buttoning the crisp black shirt. It wasn't his shirt...well, it was now...everything in the abandoned closet was his; at least it was very close to something he would wear, just a lot stiffer and probably a lot more expensive. He was so fucking nervous, his fingers fumbling with the last buttons. Beth had said that she wanted to celebrate life...said it the morning they were married before everyone else came back into the picture, and he wanted to do that with her more than anything, have what he'd never had. And Rick, his idea, it had been...perfect. Thanksgiving...it was the right time of year...celebrating everyone coming back together, and a reception for him and Beth...but what if he fucked up?

The damned buttons on the cuffs...he couldn't get them for nothin'.

"Let me..." Beth stepped in close.

"I got it...I can do it..."
Thanksgiving. He'd never had one of those. A wedding...a reception about him and Beth...somewhere deep inside he'd thought maybe, somewhere along the way, he'd be invited to Thanksgiving dinner, but sharing his life with a woman...this woman...and having friends and family who wanted to celebrate them, that was beyond any expectation or wish he'd ever had.

And the stupid fucking buttons...

"I know you can, but you don't have to."

He let her. How was she so calm and steady? Beth said he was made for their world, and he knew that. But this...this was what she was made for, her moment to shine. He turned his wrists over so she could work her magic.

Beth left his side, coming back with an open palm and a glass of water, offering him a pain pill.

"No, I'm good."

"Daryl, you're still hurt. Bob said..." She tried to insist.

"I'm fine. It's our night...our party. I wanna feel it." Daryl was gonna have all his senses about him for this celebration...his life.

Beth set them aside, moving in closer.

"I want to feel too..."

The softness of her voice, the hesitation at the end, the way she looked away...Beth wasn't talking about the party...and he wanted to feel that as well. His hand on the small of her back drew her up, but she resisted, planting a palm firmly at the center of his chest.

"Bob said no..." She didn't sound all that convincing.

"Fuck Bob." It just came out. Daryl hadn't actually meant to say it.

"Daryl!"

"Sorry..." well, he was sorry for the word, but not what he meant. "He didn't say I couldn't kiss you."

And he did, without giving her another chance to stop him, fingers finding their way into her hair, destroying all the work she'd done. Her lips were so sweet...

Then the fucking knock on the door. He knew it now...the fucking world was conspiring against them. Daryl wasn't gonna answer, but he knew they wouldn't go away. He kept Beth close, didn't take his hands...eyes off her. She was flushed and beautiful, breathing heavy. Fucking knock on the door...

"Yeah..." He just needed whoever was there to say what they had to say then go away.

Just a few more minutes alone with Beth. They really just needed some time alone, even if it wasn't to...but just to be together and not have to think about anything or anyone else. But then the door opened.

Yeah meant What do you want? not Come on in. Beth was frozen in his arms. Daryl was still and furious.
"Shit...sorry...God...I didn't mean..." Glenn stood just inside their doorway, shocked enough that he couldn't form a sentence but not shocked enough to look away.

Daryl let Beth go, and she took a step back, hands going up to her hair self-consciously. He stared Glenn down, narrowing his eyes at the intruder.

"Speak." Knew he could only get one word out without snapping.

"Dinner's ready," Glenn found his tongue.

And that was the only reason he'd made the long trek up the stairs, invading their sanctuary? Dinner's ready. Daryl knew that. He wasn't an idiot.

"Fine." The one word communication system was barely working for him, and he was waiting for Beth to chastise him, but she didn't.

Glenn...he didn't go away. Apparently didn't know what was good for him. Then there was the cocky smile spreading across his face.

"Are you comin'?"

"What?" Daryl was very close to the edge.

"I said, are you comin'?"

Daryl let out a deep breath. It was all fun. Just. In. Good. Fun.

Beth glanced at him, not understanding. Of course she didn't understand. She hadn't been the one outside that guard tower torturing Glenn when he'd been up there with Maggie.

"We'll be right down." Daryl calmed himself, not wanting to ruin anything for Beth.

Glenn was still smiling like a fucking jack o' lantern when he walked out the door. If it had been anyone else but Glenn...Glenn, his brother-in-law...and Daryl, well, he'd started it. Karma was a bitch.

"Daryl, are you okay?"

He was okay. How could he not be? He couldn't even hate Glenn all that much, not if he really thought about it. It was a happy day, a moment of joy, and everything was just so new to him that he didn't want it to be all out in the open. It was private. Glenn hadn't even caught them kissing. He'd just been holding her.

"I'm perfect."

"What made you so mad?"

Daryl wasn't ready to answer her on that one, so he just ignored it. He reached out, touching the strands of her hair that had fallen loose around her face because of him.

"Is it messed up? Should I try to fix it?" Her hand went up to brush the hair back, but he caught it, stopping her.

"No, don't. It looks even prettier." And he wasn't lying.
There'd been posed pictures...actual pictures where they told him and Beth how to stand, sit, how to look at each other...touch each other. The looking and the touching came naturally to both of them now, just not with an audience. But this posed shit hadn't happened to him since school...the pictures that no one in his family ever wanted to buy, until he just started skipping picture day. Beth brushed his hair down over the stitches in his forehead, smiling. He'd never much cared how he looked, but if they were taking portraits, if there was a chance in hell that other people, anyone there might be in their future would see them...well, he didn't want them to think he was just a brawler.

Now, standing behind the chair at the head of the table, Daryl felt like he was being put on display. Everyone was busy fawning over Beth, and they should be, tonight of all nights. He let them have her for the moment because at the end of the day, she was his. Again, Daryl contemplated his insecurity...the head of the table. It wasn't new. He'd been there before, with Beth, but then it had been just the two of them. Now it was everyone he knew that was still alive. Shouldn't Rick take that seat? And there was so much food...every kind he could imagine. Were they supposed to eat all of it? He glared down at the very end of the massive dining room table where a folding card table had been added so there were enough spaces for everyone. That's where Tara, Rosita, Eugene...and Abe were sitting, waiting for everyone else to join them. Daryl was far from happy. Didn't know who'd invited them or why, why they were there, but he curbed his anger...for Beth. He was glad though that he'd tucked his gun under his shirt before they came downstairs when Beth wasn't looking.

"Here..." Daryl was caught off guard by Michonne at his side, snapping his attention away from Abraham who'd been more than aware that Daryl had his eye on him. "Move your chair over," Michonne instructed.

He had no idea what was going on, but he moved the chair. Michonne shifted his plate and silverware over, putting another setting right beside it, making sure the fork, spoon, knife, and glasses were all in some precise pattern, pausing a second, examining everything, before she reached out again and shifted one of the glasses a millimeter to the right.

Daryl knew everyone had a back story...a place they came from that no longer existed, but he never imagined Michonne as Suzie Homemaker. Actually, he had no clue what Michonne was before the shit hit the fan, but this sure in the hell wasn't what he thought. All the time that they spent together looking for the Governor, neither of them had really opened up, told anything deep. They'd been content in their shared hatred and mutual silence. Michonne pulled another chair to the head of the table, flashing him a smile.

"There. We're celebrating a wedding. Beth should be sitting beside you."

Daryl appreciated it. He didn't know if Michonne saw that he was uneasy...trying to fix the problem...or if she was just trying to do the right thing for a wedding party. Either way, it felt better.

"Were you married?" It popped out before Daryl could stop it. You didn't ask questions like that anymore...about life before.

"No. Just been to enough weddings to know what things look like. Haven't you?"

"Nope."

"Never?"
That shocked her?

"Most weddings where I came from involved a pissed father-of-the-bride, a shotgun, and a man with
the choice of a wife or a gut full of buckshot. Not really something they send out invitations for." But
Daryl remembered the snowy morning a few days ago. "Just my own."

"You did good, Daryl," she assured him.

"I did." That was one thing he was sure of. He could see it in Beth and the way she smiled...told him
she loved him.


"Rick...Beth's not old enough..." Everyone kinda went silent, lookin' at Maggie after her ridiculous
outburst.

"By the time Beth turns twenty-one, who knows if there'll be any wine left." Rick poured, filling
Beth's glass half full. "And she's married, Maggie. Time to let go. If she can handle Daryl, I think she
can handle a glass of wine."

Rick filled Daryl's glass too. Both men looked at each other after Rick's joke. Daryl could take it
'cause Rick knew the truth, but Beth was blushing. With her creamy pale complexion, there was no
hiding it.

"Maybe Beth needs a glass of wine because she has to deal with Daryl," Tyreese interjected.

Their group seemed hesitant to laugh, enjoy, until they saw Daryl shake his head at the comment.
Then it seemed like all the hesitation was gone. He couldn't help looking at Beth, thinking about the
moonshine...and her face, it said she was remembering the same moment too, without even having to
say anything. How could they not...remember that?

"Look at them. There's a story there," Sasha pointed out.

"Nope." Daryl was quick to shut it down. It held too much meaning to share.

"Come on, Beth. Beth will tell," Maggie tried, but her sister's lips were sealed. She just shook her
head prettily.

It was their beginning...where they really started, wasn't it? Beth's insistence on finding a stupid
drink...he'd hated her for that then...until he realized that it hadn't been about booze; it had been about
a reason to move forward, a reason to keep going. When she cried over that bottle of damned peach
schnapps, that broke him out of his angry place...the place where he'd cut out any concern for her
except keeping her alive...finally realizing she needed someone and he needed a reason to keep
going too. After that...that was when the spark that had been there ignited. It took awhile for him to
act on it, but they made it. No one else was speaking, but they were watching him and Beth,
expecting something...like it was owed to them. He wasn't willing to give them much...nothing
emotional or significant, not the reason it brought them together...the reason it made them look at
each other just now.

"Michonne, you remember that still we found out in the woods?" She nodded, recalling as everyone
else waited. "Well, let's just keep the matches away from Beth if she's drinking 'cause she burned that
sucker down."

There were *aww*s, laughter, questions he couldn't hear, but his eyes were fixed on Beth now, finding her hand under the table and taking it in his. No one else existed. He leaned in, lips close to her ear...

*                      *                      *                      *                      *

She was surprised when his hand caught hers under the table. Beth had been lost in the past...that day, that night, the moonshine, the fire...Daryl taking her hand now, it was so unexpected. No one could see, but they were in public. Beth knew that made him uneasy, but he took it and kept it, his thumb caressing the top of her hand.

"I'll never forget...you helped me burn away my past...became my future." A whisper just for her.

She turned her face towards him...so close all he had to do was lean in a little more...kiss her. It seemed like that was just what he was going to do when a clinking glass broke their moment, and they both retreated. If everyone had just given them a second more, they would've gotten what they wanted, but now it was never going to happen. Beth didn't know who made the gesture, but it was Rick who leaned in from where he sat at Daryl's left.

"That means you're supposed to kiss her." Rick was grinning from ear to ear. Beth couldn't tell if Daryl was shocked, angry, confused...his grip on her hand tightened.

How did Daryl not know this?

"That's not gonna happen. Ain't none of their business." Daryl told Rick how it was, and everyone was listening.

"You have to kiss her. We didn't get to see the wedding," Rick reasoned.

If it had been anyone else, Beth knew he wouldn't have been moved, but Daryl turned to her again, facing her, and that's when the shyness hit. She couldn't keep his gaze. Daryl released her hand that he'd been holding so tight, his fingers now slowly raising her chin so that she was looking at him again.

"Just you and me, Beth." He was the calm one now...the calm one for her.

She'd kissed boys in front of other people...boys...but this was different. He was a man, Daryl, kissing her in front of their family...all eyes on them. This was real...he mattered. *Just you and me, Beth.* She allowed his soothing words to run through her head again.

His hand was on her neck, Beth's resting over his heart as she started to feel just how far out of her depth she was. When he kissed her, it wasn't inappropriate, it was just much more than she expected from Daryl...in public...in front of everyone...

With his lips on hers, she felt every bit as inexperienced as she was. It was a wedding kiss...yes...but Beth expected it to be a quick kiss...shy. It was innocent, but long, consuming...this kiss...it felt like a bedroom kiss. The seconds ticked away slowly, and she let herself go, enjoying the fact that time slowed for them. When Daryl released her, she couldn't breathe, and her face was burning. His eyes were on her, boring into her soul. And then, reality hit, time went back to normal. There were some
comments she couldn't understand, still feeling a little blurry, some laughs, a whistle. Beth covered her face with her hand, but felt Daryl's arm wrap around her protectively. Everything was okay. She let herself look at Daryl and smile.

The voice was unfamiliar and broke her attention from her husband. "You are aware that during the Medieval period in Europe, it was customary for wedding celebrations to include a bedding ceremony."

Everyone's eyes went to Eugene sitting at the far end of the table. Beth knew absolutely nothing about him...them...that entire group, except that Abraham had attacked Daryl, and that despite that, Maggie and Glenn took it upon themselves, in the name of Thanksgiving and unity, to invite them up to the main house for dinner without asking her. Once Beth noticed them, it had been too late to fix the problem without making a scene, and she didn't want to ruin Daryl's first Thanksgiving. No one really seemed to get the point of what Eugene was saying though, so they all just waited for whatever came next...but for some reason, Beth didn't like it...knew she wasn't going to like whatever followed.

"That is, the friends and family...the guests, were allowed to supervise the bride and groom to make sure the marriage was properly consummated."

A shocked gasp escaped her mouth. Beth hoped it was just an informative comment, but it sounded like a suggestion...a desire to watch...

Looking to Daryl, he'd gone deadly still. Rick reached out, laying a hand on his upper arm.

"Daryl..."

Daryl's hands gripped the edge of the table tight, looking like he was about ready to flip it and attack despite Rick.

"Keep your fucking mouth shut." That was from Abraham.

"Man...no...you wanna die?" Tyreese warned.

"I was just adding some historically accurate yet entertaining commentary to this shindig. Nobody ever appreciates my attempts at levity and natural mirth." Maybe it was just his tone, the lack of inflection in his voice, but Beth still wasn't so sure that it was a joke.

"Enough." Abe, very serious and very final, understood the possibly precarious nature of their situation.

Luckily, Eugene closed his mouth before Daryl closed it for him.

"I don't think we have to worry about them not doing it...not consummating their marriage. Not after how I caught them upstairs," Glenn's voice was light and happy, like he was trying to do some damage control, but Beth wasn't really sure this was the right way of going about it.

"You didn't see nothin'," Daryl snapped back at Glenn.

"There better not have been any consummating going on up there before dinner. I don't even think Daryl should be out of bed. He's definitely still out of commission in the consummation department," Bob informed, putting extra emphasis on consummation.

Beth was red. Bright red, she knew it, and she was feeling a little faint. She had nowhere to hide. Almost everyone was laughing now, even Carl. The situation had been diffused at her and Daryl's
expense, and they were just done. What could they do except let everyone enjoy? At least Daryl calmed down quickly.

"I don't really think we can call it consummating if they've already consummated the marriage," Tyreese added, now just in good fun...everyone highlighting that word so much! But three of them at the table knew the truth of that one. Her, Daryl, and Maggie.

Beth wondered for a second if they would be more or less likely to torture them if they knew she and Daryl had never been together? One thing was for sure, she would be very happy if she never heard the word consummation ever again.

* * * * *

There might not have been any turkey, but a couple of chickens did the trick, spread out over the table so there was meat enough for everyone. Daryl only knew what Thanksgiving looked like from TV, but this was reality, and reality was looking pretty damned good. Beth passed him the carving fork and knife. He didn't know what to do. Well, he knew what to do...he'd cut up enough animals in his life...but...Daryl tried to hand them off to Rick. Rick was their leader, it was his right, but Rick refused.

"Your home, your table, your privilege."

It was his family...his wife beside him. It was still so overwhelming, but he made the cut, putting the choice portion on Beth's plate.

"There you go, Lil' Bit."

"Lil' Bit? Where did that come from?" Dammit, Maggie heard, and this time she'd noticed.

Beth looked to him, all curious. He knew she had no idea where it came from either. Daryl couldn't even remember the first time he called her that; it just happened...a stupid pet name. At first he just shrugged, trying to avoid it, but there were too many eyes on him...too many people heard and were waiting for an answer.

"She's little...Li'...Beth...Bitsy...Bit. Lil' Bit," Daryl explained. It made perfect sense to him, but he felt stupid. Then there were a bunch of awws that followed, and he felt just plain ridiculous.

Food and everyone diving into their own plates seemed to take the focus off him and Beth, at least for a few minutes.

"What?" He heard her small voice, realizing he'd been staring at Beth, barely even touched his food.

All he could do was shake his head. Didn't know how to answer.

"So, what did everybody used to do after Thanksgiving dinner? Me, I was all about football."
Beth cringed inside at Tara's question. She hadn't spoken much since they'd met, and now she picked this moment to bring up something that would open old wounds? Losing Daddy...her whole family except Maggie...still hurt. They should be focusing on the living, and that question brought up the departed. Couldn't Beth just have this moment to enjoy what she had gained...who she had by her side?

"Football. Man, I sure do miss football!" Bob replied, and for many of them, football seemed to be the consensus.

"Getting ready for Black Friday shopping," Rosita mentioned wistfully.

Beth thought maybe she could like Rosita if it wasn't for the guilt by association with Abraham...what he did to Daryl...

"Shane...he would always be over at our house..." Carl paused. It seemed like he was thinking about whether or not he should go on, looking over at his dad before he continued. "After we ate, me and Dad and Shane, we'd all play video games, eating store bought pumpkin pie 'cause Mom...she didn't cook so good. Anyway, Mom, she'd be putting up the Christmas tree..."

Beth realized, even if she was still too heart broken to say anything, this remembrance...it was giving everyone a chance to honor the people they had loved and lost and what they loved about their life before.

“What about you, Daryl?” Tara didn't know Daryl at all, but she should've known better than to push anyone who didn't offer, especially him.

Daryl shrugged. "Idonno..." His mumble was mostly sounds as Beth saw him start to retreat into himself, looking away from everyone.

"Come on dude, you've gotta have some sort of fuzzy childhood memory about Turkey Day?"

"At our house, there was always so much food...I mean, most of you knew Daddy...and he wasn't a small man..." Beth just started talking to take the attention away from Daryl. When she glanced his way, she could see just how grateful he was. Maggie was smiling at her, remembering. "So, it always took us a really long time to eat dinner. After, everyone would be so full and tired. Daddy would always tell us, every year, to leave the dishes until the next day, and we'd all go in and watch a Christmas movie together."

It seemed like once the story started pouring out, she couldn't stop.

"Daddy, he would always fall asleep in his chair, jerking and snorting every time his head fell back. And I think we all watched him more than the movie..." Maggie was nodding in agreement, "...and he would open his eyes, see everyone lookin’ at him, and say 'I'm not sleeping'."

It was a happy memory, but that didn't stop the tears from rolling down her cheek. Daryl saw as she brushed them away, once again finding her hand under the table, this time offering comfort instead of affection.

"I'm sure there's some Christmas movies somewhere 'round here," Daryl offered. "TV just tonight won't do any damage or drain too much power. It would do us all some good."
The girl...she said his name...was she asking him? What? Thanksgiving...the past...there was no answer.

"Idonno..." A mumble and a shrug of avoidance was all he had.

What was he supposed to say? The truth? *Maybe we had food...probably didn't. Grateful if my old man wasn't beatin' the shit outta me or my mom when she was alive and we lived together. Ain't no way he was sayin' the truth, and if he didn't say the truth he wasn't gonna say nothin'.* Daryl could feel their eyes on him, and it wasn't like earlier when they were pushin' for details of something beautiful about him and Beth. People who didn't know him, they were just waitin'. The people that did, they were pitying him, and he couldn't stand it, had to look down so no one could see his face. They knew...

"Come on dude, you've gotta have some sort of fuzzy childhood memory about Turkey Day?"

Problem was, fuzzy and childhood, those had been two things he'd never had. What in the fuck could he do to make her shut up and not ruin everything for Beth? His chest was constricting...trying to breathe steady wasn't helpin', and the anxiety tightening his muscles was forcing him to focus on the pain in his side...somethin' else he could thank these damned new people for...

"At our house, there was always so much food..." Beth's voice drowned out everything bad he was feeling. It was shaky, but she was speaking, taking everyone's eyes off him. "I mean, most of you knew Daddy...and he wasn't a small man...so, it always took us a really long time to eat dinner."

When she looked at him, her eyes asked him if he was okay. She didn't wanna talk, but she was doin' it for him. He didn't know how to tell her thank you with just a look, but he would thank her somehow, later...tell her...

"After, everyone would be so full and tired. Daddy would always tell us, every year, to leave the dishes until the next day, and we'd all go in and watch a Christmas movie together. Daddy, he would always fall asleep in his chair, jerking and snorting every time his head fell back."

Maggie remembered too, nodding as Beth told her story, but Maggie was much less emotional about the moment.

"And I think we all watched him more than the movie...and he would open his eyes, see everyone lookin’ at him, and say 'I'm not sleeping'." He watched as Beth forced a smile on her face when she was finished.

"No one else did, but Daryl saw her crying. Sacrifice. She didn't wanna talk, but Beth did it...to save him...keep him from having to tell people just how shitty his life had been. He wanted to reach out, brush her tears away, take her in his arms and hold her tight to protect her from everything, but he didn't know...what if she didn't want people to know she was cryin'...thought they couldn't see.

Instead, Daryl took her hand in his under the table. There were moments in life sometimes where things just came full circle. He remembered...Beth...taking his hand to comfort him...

"I...I put Merle down."

*He was quiet. He lowered his head, not knowing what came next. Beth moved so close by his side she was touching him. She took his calloused hand in both her soft, small ones, resting them in his lap. Their hands together looked so strange...from two very different worlds...but he didn't want her*
to let go.

"I killed my brother," he managed, just loud enough for the both of them to hear.

Beth didn't say anything. He didn't need her to say anything. She was there, and the silence that followed showed she understood...

The memory was fresh...but that...was that a lifetime ago? Their hands together...they came together so easily now. His were still calloused and hers small and soft, but somehow, they fit. And their world...it wasn't different anymore because they shared it. Daryl couldn't say anything to comfort Beth now, but he hoped that holding her hand in his...hoped it would be enough. It had been enough for him. That comfort, someone caring enough to simply grasp his hand...it could change everything...

"I'm sure there's some Christmas movies somewhere 'round here," he kept his voice low and soft, just for Beth even though he knew everyone else could hear. "TV just tonight won't do any damage or drain too much power. It would do us all some good."

Maybe for Beth, carrying on that tradition...something of her family, in memory of Hershel, it could help make things right. Traditions were important, and he didn't have any family traditions to share with her.

Thing was, Daryl hoped for something different. A TV...movies...people who hadn't had that for near two years or more, they'd be lost in it for hours. He'd bought them some time...some time for quiet, to be alone, just to be together and not have to worry about anything else in the world except each other. Daryl bought them time and was praying that Beth was willing to take it with him...
Chapter 57

It was sweet chocolate...perfect...the cake, and the moment, it was sweet too. Beautiful. Another moment in a long series of events that she never thought would happen to her, things that were impossible in their world. Daryl licked the chocolate off his fingers as Beth savored the cake he'd just fed her, a suggestive smile spreading across his lips. Wedding cake, or as close to a wedding cake as they were ever going to get. Duncan Hines box mix and a canister of milk chocolate frosting...that was it, but life couldn't get much better. Daryl took the bite size morsel of cake she offered him, but he took her fingers into his mouth too, sucking the icing off so there was nothing left when she pulled her hand away. When he looked at her like he was, Beth almost felt uncomfortable because of his intensity, trying to figure out just what he was feeling...thinking. Maybe it was the wine that made him look at her so boldly...but there hadn't been much wine at all.

"So...do we get cake now?" Carl broke the spell.

Beth laughed. Well, it was a shy sort of laugh...a giggle, a sound that was almost as embarrassing as realizing that they'd been lost in the moment...realizing they were still surrounded by everyone they knew.

"Carl..." Rick chastised.

"What? It's cake," Carl pronounced matter-of-factly. "And they can go get a room or somethin'."

The sound of laughter resounded around the table.

"Carl!" Rick was trying to be a good dad, but looking over at him, Beth saw Rick was laughing too.

"It's all yours. I got somethin' sweeter." Daryl wanted to kiss her; she could feel it, but he didn't. Not yet at least.

* * * * *

"Hey Maggie, hold up."

Everyone was heading towards the TV, and this was his opportunity for a minute alone with Maggie. Daryl hadn't said much to her since they all got back together...hadn't really had the chance to with the way everything went down. He wasn't nervous or nothin', but he needed to...no, he wanted to talk to her. She stopped, waiting for him, nodding her head to Glenn who left her side.

"Daryl," she acknowledged. "Are you okay? How are you feeling?"

She was looking down, indicating his side. He sensed she was feeling a little awkward...didn't know why she would be but really didn't care all that much at the moment.

"I'm fine. That's not it. I wanna talk to you about Beth."

"Okay..."

"I don't really owe it to you or nothin', but we're family now whether you like it or not." Daryl didn't mean to get all defensive or surly, but it was kinda still his SOP. Not with Beth, maybe not with
Rick, but everyone else. "I respected Hershel...your dad. When he died..."

Fuck it all to hell. Daryl got choked up. Had to stop so Maggie wouldn't notice. Should've never mentioned Hershel dying.

"I wanted to do everything right by Beth. If Hershel was alive, I would've asked his permission."

Maggie got all emotional too, but there was no way she could hide it. Most people couldn't hide from him, but maybe she wasn't even trying. All she could do was nod.

"I love her." He wasn't justifying, just telling it like it was. Didn't have to justify nothin' to anyone. "It might seem quick, but that don't make it any less true."

Hell, Maggie and Glenn were goin' at it a few days after they met, and he doubted there had been anything real there to start with. If Maggie had any doubts...well, what was it they said, *don't throw stones if you live in a glass house.*

"She's scared, Daryl."

*Shit.* It was his turn to nod, but he couldn't just nod.

"I know..." He'd wished Beth had a girl to talk to, specifically Maggie, and when she showed up, Daryl hoped that Beth would open up to her. He just didn't need to hear the details, especially coming from Maggie.

"Please be good to her."

Daryl was caught by that. He'd expected if Maggie said anything that would hit him, it might be confrontational, disapproving, maybe some opinions that he was man enough to take...but this...this had nothing to do with Maggie or what she felt. She said it just for Beth...her sister. He only had room in his heart for Beth, but he could share what he felt...knew, what he was living by...at least a little piece of it with her sister to try to ease her mind and let her know. It probably wouldn't make Maggie feel any better if she had any doubts or change how she was feeling about him...she seemed too emotional, but it was his truth, and it made him feel better about the life he was trying to make with Beth.

"I'd cut off my own hands before I hurt Beth on purpose." He was being as soft as he could...sincere. "You gotta know that."

She just nodded again, and it seemed like their conversation was over. Daryl said what he set out to say and more, but before he could move to leave...

"Daryl...wait." He hoped it wasn't gonna be more details about her talk with Beth. "I don't know how I feel about all this...it's all so soon. And you...you're so...and Beth, she's so soft and innocent...gentle..."

Daryl didn't like where this was going, but he was gonna keep his mouth shut, at least for now. Let Maggie say her peace. He would rather she say it to just him than in front of Beth.

"But I'm trying. And my Dad...he respected you. He saw something early on, even before the prison. He trusted you, told us you would always do the right thing." Maggie wasn't just emotional now, she was crying. Daryl was uncomfortable...awkward, didn't handle tears well, not even Beth's...especially not Beth's. "When me and Beth were growing up, he always used to tell us, in his stern, most serious voice, 'No man's good enough for your little girl, until one is'. I'm pretty sure he would've said that about you...for Beth..."
She sniffed back her tears, and Daryl had no idea what to say. He knew Hershel was good with him. They'd sat on the council together at the prison. Hell, Hershel had been the one to keep on at him about it in the first place when he didn't wanna do it, knew he wasn't right for the job, so yeah, there was a certain amount of trust that had to be there. But respect. Respect had been in short supply in Daryl's life, and to have a man like Hershel respect him...even more, trust him enough that he'd talked to his family...his daughters about it. If Daryl was a talker, he would've been speechless. Maggie came to him, hugged him, not too tight. Stiffening, not from pain, but from the contact, Daryl made an effort, putting his arm around her, lightly touching her shoulder. It was enough. More than he would've given before.

Watching Maggie walk away to join their family, he caught Beth's eye. She was sitting on the couch beside Rick, turned around, gaze steady on him. He'd bought time...time for him and Beth...alone. No one would come knocking unless the world literally burst into flames. If that's what she wanted...time alone with him...all Beth had to do was follow. Daryl wasn't gonna go to her and ask, not in front of everyone. He just hoped...

Daryl gave her a small smile, nodding his head towards upstairs before he walked away alone. He wished she was right beside him, holding his hand, but he allowed himself to know that she would come.

* * * * *

"It looks like we have a bunch of choices." It really was a massive DVD library, more movies than any one person should ever have. "There's White Christmas, Miracle on 34th Street, Christmas Vacation, Nativity Story, Elf..."

There was no point to go on. Nobody was paying any attention to her. Taking a seat beside Rick who was holding Judith on the couch, they both watched as the comedy unfolded.

"Hit the 'source' button until the TV says DVD."

Ear shattering static followed.

"Mute it!"

"Eugene, you want to get over here and give us some scientific input?"

"Try the 'auxiliary' button."

"Nope, that's not it."

"Is there a button that says 'line in'?"

"That's the same as 'source'."

How complicated were TVs? They were capable of navigating and surviving in an apocalyptic world overrun by walkers, and the whole group of them, Tyreese, Glenn, Bob, Abraham, and Eugene couldn't figure it out, all trying to grab at the remote at the same time. Well, at least they were good at surviving. Looking over at Rick, he was smirking and shaking his head in amusement. He seemed content. That was a good place for Rick to be. He deserved it.
"Did you try the satellite button?"

"There's no satellite anymore. What's that gonna do?"

"I don't know, sometimes it just makes it work."

"How about we just hit random buttons until something happens?"

"You're sarcasm ain't helping any."

Beth was starting to feel a little bad at the growing frustration. If they couldn't get the DVD player to work, would the entire night be ruined? Then Michonne strode across the room, reached down to the DVD player, and worked some magic.

"The DVD player has to be on." They all stopped and looked at her, outwitted by a woman. "Hit the 'source' button until the DVD screen comes up, then put this in, *It's a Wonderful Life.*"

Michonne tossed Glenn the movie case.

Judith was cooing in Rick's lap, begging for her attention, and Beth couldn't help but stroke her fine hair. Everything felt so normal, like the world outside didn't exist. Their family, lots of food...now she just needed some cozy pajamas and a big pillow to throw on the floor to lay on in the dark and watch the movie, cuddling with Daryl if he would. But he wasn't there.

"Where's Daryl?" She turned to Rick, questioning.

He tilted his head back, indicating behind them, and she found Daryl in the hallway with Maggie. She was about to go to him, but Rick caught her gently by the upper arm.

"Give them a minute, Beth."

Okay, she could give them a minute, but that didn't mean she wasn't going to watch carefully. There was no way she could hear what they were talking about, but it looked intense. Was Maggie crying? In the end, Maggie went in for a hug, and Daryl kinda hugged back. Maybe Maggie was good with him after all despite the concerns she'd voiced before when they'd talked. As Maggie was walking away, Daryl caught Beth staring. It was almost imperceptible, his smile, but it was there, and all for her. He nodded to her, and Beth didn't get it until he turned away and headed off. Daryl was asking her to go with him. To follow...and he was confident that she would.

It finally dawned on her. He'd masterminded it all. The movie...he never planned to watch it or expected her to watch it either. It was a distraction. He made time for them, just for them. She was so lost in the thought of Daryl that Maggie kissing her on the cheek as she passed by before flipping the lights off startled her. But now she just had to wait a few minutes to slip away, until everyone was engrossed in the movie. The last thing she needed was more teasing. Sitting back down on the couch the right way, trying to bide her time, Beth sighed quietly, feeling just how slowly time was passing.

"Go to him. Don't keep him waiting," Rick said softly, leaning close to her.

She didn't need permission, but Rick was right. It was their night. She didn't care what anyone thought or said. Daryl shouldn't have to wait for her; their time was precious. And maybe since Daryl seemed like he was feeling good today, not in as much pain...maybe that meant she could allow herself to sleep close to him again without worrying about hurting him. The bed was so big and lonely when she wouldn't let him sleep near. It was almost as bad as that horrible night after they fought, sleeping on opposite sides of the fire out in the open. That seemed like a different time...a different world. Beth didn't try to hide the fact that she was leaving, and at least one of them didn't try
to hide the fact that they noticed.

"Where's Beth going?"

"To her husband..." Rick sounded wistful...almost sad. He'd lost Lori...

Beth couldn't think about that now. No sadness or sorrow. It was her time to be happy. Their time to be in love.

* * * * *

Pacing...he was actually pacing the fucking room. He'd started a fire in the fireplace. It wasn't all that cold, but it wasn't warm neither, and it gave him something to do to occupy a few minutes. After, he'd just been left waiting...and pacing. It was a hard feeling, being separated from Beth. True, everyone had been back in the picture for what, less than a week? But after him and Beth had been alone together, just the two of them, after everything they'd shared, it felt like they'd been separated by a lifetime. Even when they were alone, no one really left them alone for long.

What if she wasn't coming? What if she didn't understand that he'd bought time for them...what he'd been asking after his talk with Maggie? What if she understood but wanted to stay with them? He'd been in this place before...on their wedding night, when he'd given up waiting for her.

*It wouldn't kill you to have a little faith...*

He had faith...

No, that was wrong though. Faith was about believing in something you could never know until it happened. He was a fucking idiot for doubting her, even as the minutes continued to tick by. If he'd learned anything in the last few days, it was that it was him and her. She'd chosen him...showed that through what she said and did.

Beth fought with him...fought for him.

*For better or for worse...*

Said she would leave with him...leave their home behind, leave their family, friends, and security for it to be just them.

*For richer or for poorer...*

Held his hand through pain, sewed him up, stayed by his side.

*In sickness and in health...*

For a chance at a life together.

*For as long as we both shall live...*

*For better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, for as long as we both shall live...*wasn't that how wedding vows went? Something like that. They hadn't said those words, but they were living every single one of them. Actions, sacrifice, dedication...there was no doubt...no more room for it. Now it was just about waiting, going from fear to calm. Beth calmed him...for the
most part. Daryl just needed to take a seat and wait it out.

He knocked it off the armchair on his way to the side of the bed.

*I don't know...you could try to find something pretty...to wear for me tonight...*

Looking at the pool of pale silk on the floor, he saw the gown that had been shifted from place to place since the night it had been meant for, through fighting, blood, invasion by their family and friends. Someone needed to take the damned thing and shove it back in the drawer where he didn't have to look at it, or better yet, throw it in the fire, the fucking reminder of the night that never happened. But he didn't have the heart. Squatting down, Daryl's hand went briefly to the ache in his side before he could retrieve the pristine white gown from the floor where it had fallen. It was a symbol of purity, innocence, a blank slate...that fresh start...and Beth...she made him feel like he was all of those things...new and clean and worthy of love...her love. How could he ever think about burning all those things away?

Feeling the silk in his rough hands and the lingering pain from the healing wound, Daryl realized the world had given them a second chance, a do-over of sorts under the best possible conditions. He and Beth, they would never get their wedding night back, but the dinner tonight, the celebration about them with everyone, it was as close to a real wedding as they were ever like to get...what Beth deserved. It was going to be tonight. Bob said *no*, but like he told Beth earlier, *Fuck Bob*. Daryl was driven by instinct. He knew that much about himself. That's what scared him about bein' with Beth...his instincts were all wrong for what he wanted to be for her...how he wanted to be with her. He wanted to make love to her...at least try, and his talk with Rick, that had given him some confidence, faith in himself, but he needed something more. Daryl needed a visceral reminder of what he was doing and what Beth was feeling. There was only one thing that he knew could override instinct on the most basic level when self-control no longer existed...pain...his pain...it would help keep him from losing control, making him aware of his every action.

Daryl settled on the side of their tall bed, Beth's nightgown spilling in his lap. He could imagine her in it, see her walking towards him all slow and shy, but no matter how beautiful that picture in his head was...the real thing...she was gonna leave him breathless.

"Phhh..." It was a sigh of relief.

The anxiety, fear, doubting himself, they were still there, but not weighing so heavy that he didn't know if he could do it. Maybe he had faith he could do it right, make it beautiful for Beth. There were some things Daryl knew he had no control over...Beth's fear, her anxiety, the pain that might be there no matter what because it was her first time, no matter how much he hated it...would hate himself for it. If there was pain, now he would be feeling it too. He was going to share as much of that bittersweet moment with her as he could...share that connection.

Daryl was going to be there for her, with her, try to ease her fears with a measure of confidence and compassion, love Beth like she should be loved. He smiled for himself, not because there was anyone there to see it, but because he felt it. He pushed the smile away when he heard her on the stairs. He needed to be serious and in the moment when she came through that door. In the hallway, Beth's footsteps were so soft...so very quiet, but there was no way he wasn't gonna hear her. Daryl was calm and centered, but that didn't mean his heart wasn't racing.

*Beth...*
Chapter 58

Daryl wasn't even sure she noticed him sitting on the edge of the bed when she slipped through the door and quietly pressed it closed behind her. What did she think, he was asleep without her? The light on the nightstand was still on. When she turned towards him, the soft smile that was on her lips just because...it was all he needed to see.

"What are you doing?" She crossed the room hesitantly, moving towards him slowly...almost cautiously.

"Waitin’..."

"I'm sorry...I just..."

"No." Daryl didn't need her to apologize. He'd known she was coming.

"I saw you with Maggie...then I just waited a little," she explained.

Was Beth thinking he was upset? Time to set this straight.

"Stop talkin’." Standing up right as she reached him, he still grasped the slick silk in his hand.

He shouldn't have said it that way, telling her what to do. Didn't mean to be intimidating, but it wasn't a time to doubt; they'd done enough of that already. It was time to feel...to live. She was so close now, hardly any space between, but he wanted...needed that gap to be filled. All of it. Daryl felt Beth's fingers touch...linger over his hand, but it wasn't his hand she was feeling, wasn't what she was lookin' down at...it was what he was holding.

"Beth...will you wear this for me...tonight?" He brought the gown up between them, offering it to her, watching carefully for her response.

Her eyes moved from his hands to meet his calm, intent gaze. She bit her lower lip, hesitating, maybe fighting something, but God, he wanted to taste those lips. Finally, Daryl got his answer. Beth shook her head no.

"You're still hurt..." There was a tremor in her voice, but he didn't have too much time to think on her fear 'cause Beth's hand touched the sore spot where he was stitched together.
He hadn’t expected it, his stomach muscles contracting involuntarily, but he didn’t wince or look away at the pain. It was there, he needed it, and tonight he was grateful for it. The endless blue pools of her eyes were now watching him closely, appraising his reaction.

"I told you, Beth, pain's part of being alive."

She shied away from his answer.

Daryl moved in closer, lifting her chin, finding her soft pink lips, kissing ever so gently, just seeing how she’d respond. He had to; it seemed it was his move to make, his hand on her back pulling her into him.

"I promised myself I wouldn't ask...I’d let you make that decision, but I'm askin’...will you come to me?" He kept his voice quiet, trying to be soft with her, not even sure she heard.

But she did. Beth had to have heard because she wouldn't look up at him, and he could feel just how tense she was pressed against him, the tightness in the small of her back where he held her. He’d fucked up by asking...assuming the biggest barrier he’d have to breach with her was about being put out of commission by his wound. He’d made the wrong move...after what Maggie said to him about Beth being afraid...he knew that all along. Even though Beth told him herself...told him he'd just have to deal with it, he should've waited. Should've known better. And what in the hell did Maggie tell her? He knew what other people thought about him, hell, he knew what he thought about himself, but when he was with Beth...it was so much different.

Daryl let his hand fall from her and let go of the idea of having her...being with Beth...

She accepted her release, her freedom when he let her go, taking a small step back from him, then another. Looking at the floor, Daryl was feeling...embarrassed, not really sure what to do, where to go from there. There really wasn’t any way to cover or even recover from this misstep. He didn't know hearts could actually sink; his hit the ground. But Beth wasn't moving away from him to distance herself. He felt the cool fabric slipping out of his hand, not because of him. Daryl didn't understand at first, she didn't say nothin’, but she nodded shyly as she pulled the nightgown out of his hand.

* * * * *

Beth began to take her hair down. The loose knot at the side of her head was a mess; it had been since before they went downstairs for dinner, but Daryl told her she looked pretty anyway. She smiled. He was a liar, but she loved him for it. He was always touching her hair, running his hands through it when they were alone or just innocently stroking it without any thought. In the end, she pulled some of the extra pins out, leaving just enough to hold her hair in place so Daryl could take it down. This night, this experience wasn’t just about her, it was about them. Beth wanted Daryl to have all of her, the whole package...especially the things he'd never had before that he seemed to want now...the soft, quiet, beautiful moments of bonding...being together.

The silk was cold sliding over her bare flesh making her shiver a little, but it started warming up settling against her skin. Beth debated if she should leave anything on under it, deciding against that idea. The nightgown...this one she wore served a single purpose; it was made only to wear just long enough so it could be stripped off and disregarded...it was just a veil. She had no makeup, no fancy lotions or perfumes of her own to hide behind. It hadn't been that way for a long time. Their world
had no use for deceptive packaging like that, and maybe the world was better for it. Tonight it was just her underneath...it was all she would ever really have to offer Daryl. It...she had to be enough. Beth idly let her hand glide down over her silk covered skin, over her hips, stopping herself at the top of her thigh, embarrassed by what she'd started to feel at her own touch...

Looking at her reflection in the mirror, Beth was glad the slip of a gown was white. It was the closest thing she would ever have to a wedding dress. Maybe that should make her sad, but it didn't. Not too long ago, she'd been like every other little girl, dreaming of her wedding day. The funny thing was, the fantasies...the fairytales she grew up with, the stories always ended with the prince and princess riding off together in the distant horizon after their enchanted wedding, and everyone was assured that they lived **happily ever after**. When she was younger, that was just it...everything was about the wedding, the dress, the ceremony, but the dream always ended with those superficial things. Life wasn't a fairytale. It never had been and never would be, but it didn't have to be. And life didn't stop after the vows were made. That's where it started. Reality didn't mean that life was any less beautiful. In her dreams, Beth's prince had been a faceless, generic ideal of perfection. Her reality...Daryl...he was scarred, flawed, rough, intimidating, but to her he was soft, gentle, loving, and fiercely and dangerously protective. Daryl wasn't a prince. He wasn't a knight in shining armor. He was a survivor...a warrior...imperfectly perfect.

Beth stilled and focused herself, feeling the butterflies fluttering in her tummy competing with the anxiety welling in her chest. Before she stepped out to go to Daryl...her warrior, her husband...she thought about how she wanted their story to end...

*                    *                    *                    *

And they lived...

*                    *                    *                    *

Gun out from under his pillow slid safely into the drawer of the nightstand...outta sight, outta mind. Crossbow propped against the wall by the door, far away but still close enough he could get to it if necessary. The bed...their bed...he didn't want it to be a place of violence or aggression, and weapons by and especially in the bed, well, it didn't get more violent or aggressive than that. He turned the deadbolt on the door, locking it tight, pitying anyone who came knocking...hoped they had enough sense to realize he and Beth were gone because they needed time alone. What else? Beth was taking her sweet time changing...was she stalling, making him wait? It was okay. He could wait. Funny thing was, he was okay, calmer now than he'd been before Beth said *yes*. He wasn't over confident, but maybe it was just that when it came down to it, he'd always been able to adapt, to be what was needed, and Beth needed him to be sure and capable.

The candles...they were what was missing, the white pillar candles Beth arranged so carefully on the mantle above the fireplace and on the bedside tables in anticipation of their wedding night that never happened. Well, now it turned out just to be a delay, and that was over. Was he smiling again? Yeah, like an idiot. He just refocused on the candles, lighting each and every one. In the scope of things, their living at the end of the world and all, lighting enough candles to last months wasn't the smartest move, but tonight, he didn't give a fuck.

Candles lit, lights off, weapons out of and away from the bed, there was nothing else to do but wait...think. Maybe he should strip down, wait for Beth in bed. No...that wasn't how this was gonna go. This was different than anything that came before for him. Sex had never been a huge deal, just a rushed moment of selfish pleasure driven by need, nothing more. This...Daryl knew...it was life changing. When that bathroom door opened...he knew it was going to eventually...it still caught him
off guard. If he was supposed to say something, do something, breathe...none of that was gonna
happen...

Beth...she was there, just a few steps away, eyes wide and nervous, waiting for him, breathing deep. How was
she still breathing when he couldn't seem to catch his breath? She was like that rare white
deer that one in a hundred hunters saw once in a lifetime if they were lucky. A creature so rare and
beautiful that no man...no real hunter...would kill it, starving or not, in reverence to its existence. It
was sanctified...Beth should be too. Daryl knew there was no way he could have Beth without
ruining her, but she was willing to give that piece of herself to him. He'd come to terms with that,
was willing to accept her gift. In all the years he'd spent in the woods hunting to survive, he'd never
seen one. But Beth, standing there, all in white...she was his...his white deer. It was his first time too,
loving...in that, he was innocent, and that part of him, as small and insignificant as it was...he would
always belong to Beth.

*                 *                      *                      *                      *

Eight steps. It took eight steps to close the distance until she was near enough that she had to look up
to see him, breath catching in her chest. They had been close before...close to being together, but
this...this time was different. This time, it was real. Daryl...he looked shy, confident, and expectant all
rolled up into one very complex emotion. Expectant...he was waiting for her...to take the nightgown
off? They'd been naked together before, not a lot though. It was still new and made her nervous, but
her hand went to her shoulder to slip the lace strap free of her arm. Daryl caught her wrist gently,
stopping her.

"No...don't. Just let me look."

Beth stood very still, closing her eyes, feeling Daryl circle her once, purposefully slow, like a
predator might before going in for the kill. He stopped; he was behind her. She needed to see, but
even with her eyes wide open, she couldn't. It was unnerving...intimidating. She could only see his
shadow cast against the far wall by the flickering candles behind them on the mantle...his shadow
engulfed her. She couldn't even tell she existed. Worse yet, Beth couldn't anticipate what he was
going to do...but what he did, it wasn't surprising. It was what she expected, deft fingers finding and
gently pulling out the pins that held her hair up off her neck. Setting the strands free, fingers combing
through its lengths, Beth could feel Daryl's hot breath on her neck before his lips met the back of her
shoulder, kissing a warm trail up until his mouth met her ear.

It was hard, him behind her, touching her, being kissed, and she couldn't do anything except stand
there and feel it all...let him lead.

"Can I touch you?" His voice was breathy and raspy and low...

Did he even need to ask?

"Mmm-hmmm..." Beth wasn't sure she'd be able to form real words if her life depended on it.
"Please..." Well, that one came out...desperately.

Daryl had barely touched her...done anything at all, but the anticipation, the anxiety, the instinctual
need, it just had her all messed up...inside and out. His hands were on her almost as soon as she
uttered her answer, traveling from her navel, up the line of her stomach, between her ribcage,
stopping to hold her firm just below her breasts. The other, it brought her to life, sliding up her thigh,
over her hipbone, coming to rest at the lowest part of her abdomen. His touch through the silk set her skin on fire, every nerve in her body tingling. Beth bit back a whimper, and even though she knew she wanted him to touch her, wanted to feel what Daryl was doing, her body shied away from him. But that, it only worked to force him harder against her...and he was hard. Beth could feel the firm length of him, straining against his pants at the small of her back. Daryl gasped when they were pressed together, and he didn't do anything to try to hide it.

He cupped her small breast, and Beth was suddenly self conscious...it was so little in contrast to his massive hand. How could he ever like them...they weren't enough...what if she wasn't enough? But what she was feeling drowned out her doubts. The stark contrast of Daryl's hand and his thumb running over the silk, the softness of the garment and the firmness of a man's...his touch...her nipple was hard and aching as his thumb passed back and forth across it. Beth hadn't noticed Daryl's other hand moving further south, over her curls. Having decided against wearing anything underneath, there was little enough barrier between them. His fingers found her sensitive spot through the silk; his caress was much gentler than it was at her breast, and this time she couldn't hold back the small noise that escaped her lips. And he was kissing her too, sucking softly at her neck...

Her world was spinning. Everything was happening so fast...the sensations, the feelings, they were all so good, but it was too overwhelming. In the back of her mind, Beth remembered how devastating it was for Daryl when she'd said no...told him to stop during their love play before when he was doing everything right, and that wasn't going to happen again. She just needed to be honest, calm...try to communicate what she needed. Covering his lower hand with hers, she stopped him, stilled him, slipping her hand under his until they were palm to palm. Sliding her fingers between his, pulling away just far enough so she could turn around and face him, Daryl squeezed her hand tight. She tried to look at him when she said it.

"I...I need to go slow..."

Why was it so hard to say? Because she didn't want to hurt him...ruin anything for him. But Daryl lowered his head, nodding, not looking ashamed, just a little self-conscious. He'd just been caught in the moment.

"I...I'll go slow, Beth. We'll take our time."

His face, his expression, he looked so innocent, so young and inexperienced, but his words, his tone, his assurances...he was every bit a man...everything she needed. Daryl pulled her against his chest, wrapping her in his tight embrace, not giving her a choice, but it was what she wanted. His breathing was so deep and steady, his heartbeat so constant where her cheek rested against him...it calmed her. It was a beautiful, innocent moment, a moment of closeness that Beth needed to catch her breath before she allowed herself to be lost in Daryl's love...to become someone new and changed with him. Something more.
Shit. Slow...he was goin' slow. Okay, he just needed to cool down, back off. Slow didn't just mean speed, it meant any movement forward. He'd just been caught in the moment...caught up in the idea of her. Now it was time to be hands off. Let Beth lead while she could before it became all him...let her set the pace, show him what slow meant. Somehow he knew slow was gonna be agonizing.

Beth and the buttons on his shirt...he could've gotten them undone quicker with a broken hand and missing fingers, but just like his fingers fumbled at his cuffs earlier 'cause of nerves...well, now she was fighting anxiety. But her hands were steady; slow but steady. They were warm and soft against his skin, tracing his collarbone, running down the center of his chest. Closing his eyes, Daryl couldn't tell if that made it better or worse...not what he was feeling, that was all good...but what he was needing. He started to move to shrug his shirt off, then Beth could see better, have more access. He'd never really been okay having his clothes off, having people lookin' at him because that just wasn't him...and well...the scars. But with Beth, those inadequacies didn't really come into play anymore. He stopped motion though. This was all her. Her decision, her lead as long as she wanted it.

She stopped, focusing on one part of him, pressing into the indentation where his hips cut down. Her fingers slid just far enough under his waistband to follow that line of him then retrace back up. This spot, it didn't do nothin’ amazing for Daryl besides the fact that she was touching him, but Beth...looking at him, apparently it was something he just didn't get. Her smile, it was somewhere between angel and devil. She was chewing her bottom lip...that...what she did to her lip...she needed to stop. He was already so fucking turned on, if he got any harder, he was gonna break. She kept her hand resting at his hip, fingers hidden just beneath the edge of his pants, but she felt him looking, turned her face up to see him, eyes all sparklin' in the candlelight.

"I like this...this part of you..." She was so beautiful, sweet...still so unjaded by the world. All Daryl could do was grin, shaking his head.

"What?" There was laughter...joy in her voice.

"Nothin’." But it wasn't nothing. He remembered...

It was the second night they were in a real bed together, the night Beth saw his scars. She'd touched him after, trailing her hand down his chest, over his stomach, and that spot, that was where she'd stopped, where she'd lost her nerve. He'd wanted to take her that night, almost did, but he stopped himself and almost lost Beth 'cause of his anger. That was before...before he told her he loved her. Now, Beth was all smiling, just waiting, watching...

"No...what...really?"
"You...just you..." His answer was followed by a soft sigh, some of his tension escaping with it.

There was no anxiety in her smile; even if it was just for that moment, calm graced Beth’s face. Both of her hands went to his shoulders, firm, full contact with his skin, pushing the crisp shirt down his arms. Definitely the right decision to let Beth lead, not take his shirt off on his own...her burst of confidence hit him the right way. His biceps tightened and flinched at her touch, eliciting the tiniest breathy giggle from Beth. He was glad he was strong for her, that she liked his body...made her feel all giddy. Knowing it turned him on, but he wasn’t gonna get all cocky about it. The shirt was so stiff that he heard it hit the floor, or maybe it was just 'cause his senses were so heightened. Go slow didn't mean he couldn't kiss her, and she yielded to him. But that kiss, it didn't last long at all.

Beth’s hand was between them, sliding up his thigh. He tried to focus on her lips, tired to brace himself for what could come next...hoped she wouldn't...not yet...

Cupping his cock, Beth hesitantly stroked him through his pants.

"Hmmh...ahh..." He had to pull his mouth away from her, biting back everything he was feeling.

This was not going slow, she had to know that, right? Daryl couldn't stop her. He couldn't tell her to slow down and risk knocking her confidence. All he could do was let her, give her a few moments, then try to distract her...redirect her without letting it...himself get too far. Then Beth upped the ante. He couldn't kiss her and hold on, so he wasn't kissing. If he didn't let her, she couldn't reach his mouth, but on her tiptoes, her moist lips met the tight cords of his neck. That was even worse...no, not worse...so good. He had to stop thinking about Beth and what she was doing or it was gonna go all wrong. Daryl was gonna go over that edge he didn't want to...instinctual, needing to own every inch of her, taking and not giving...

Fuck. He had to focus. Her caress was so soft, but tonight that was hitting him harder than a tight hand and a firm stroke ever would've.

Think. Focus. Puppies. Kittens. Butterflies...

Cute and fluffy wasn't working. It reminded him of Beth. That wasn't gonna turn him off.


That was gettin' him closer to being steady.

Bolts. Bullets.

Beth brought her other hand into the mix, going for his belt buckle.

Crossbow. Gun.

Gun. He had a real and valid reason to hit pause.

"Beth, you gotta stop." His tone was serious and solid. Had to be.

An insistent grasp on her upper arm and she ceased all movement. Her expression was confused, unsure...God, he didn't want her to feel like that ever...like he was rejecting her, and he didn't mean to startle her. Daryl caressed her cheek gently, giving her a reassuring look.

"Beth, you're fine. It's my fault."

He should be the one ashamed. Reaching behind, Daryl grabbed the pistol pressed against his lower
back where he'd forgotten he'd been packing it to dinner. Things like that, sometimes they just became a part of you. But he'd wanted everything to be perfect, no violence, no reminder of what the world was like outside their gates.

"I forgot to put my gun away."

Her slender fingers closed as much as they could around his wrist, stopping him from leaving her. If he wanted to pull away, he could've, but Daryl let Beth hold him. Once she was sure he wasn't going anywhere, Beth's hand caressed his over where it gripped his gun, shaking her head.

"No sorries...this is who you are...who I love. I love you. All of you..."

"God, Beth...I love you..."

He pulled her close, fingers threading through the wavy strands of her hair, her palms resting on his chest. Daryl knew she was right. This was who he was, who he'd always be. He might lay his gun and crossbow aside from time to time, but he would never be able to put them down...put them away. And that was okay.

When Beth's hand trailed down, he hoped she wasn't going back to finish what she started. What she did though gave him some perspective, a much needed reminder of what was to come...why they were being so slow...for both their sakes. The bandage at his side, her warm fingertips traced over it then lower 'til they met bare skin. She didn't put pressure on his wound or nothin', but her fingers lingering there were enough to remind him of the ache.

"It hurts?"

It was a strange question at a strange time, but he was gonna answer truthfully 'cause he always wanted the truth from Beth.

"Yeah...a little still."

Daryl understood what happened. The moment was broken, and Beth realized she was lost.

"Daryl...I...I don't know what to do..."

*Neither do I...*

But he couldn't say that, and he didn't really mean it. Just insecurity.

The tremor in her voice brought them back to reality. As much as he liked her touching him, her short burst of confidence...this...her hesitance, it brought him back to where he realized he wanted to be. He'd been torturing himself so much over Beth's virginity, not knowing how to handle it, whether he was good enough, if he could do right by her. Now, it probably made him the biggest prick in the world, but he was glad she was a virgin...wanted to share in that innocence. He wanted her. He wanted it, but in wanting to be her first, he knew how much of an honor it was...something to be cherished. Daryl didn't just want to be the first man to have Beth, he wanted to be the only man she ever knew. That was part of himself he couldn't push away.

His cock jerked, fighting to be freed, and being pressed against the girl he wanted wasn't helping none. It was hurting like hell. Daryl stepped back, putting some distance between their bodies, reaching out to Beth, offering her his hand.

"The only thing you gotta do...come to bed. Let me make love to you."
Those words, *make love*, came outta his mouth like he was a fucking pro, but in that, he might be just as lost as Beth.

* * * * *

Just as the white nightgown was only a thin veil disguising nothing, it proved no challenge to Daryl's intent when he slipped it off her shoulders. It skimmed down her body with no further hindrance, pooling in a silken puddle on the floor at her feet. He just looked her up and down, slowly, appraising every inch of her, his eyes not going to one place in particular. It was unnerving, just standing there naked...all her flaws and imperfections on display...and she didn't know what she was supposed to do. Just stand there and let him look?

He must've sensed her unease, moving in close. Their bodies weren't touching until he swept his hand down the center of her back and pulled her to him in one swift motion, Beth gasping. Daryl's other hand in the mass of her long hair, tilting her head back gently until her face lifted and he captured her lips. Every thought of anything but him escaped Beth...wanting to be with him, grasping desperately at the back of his neck, trying to pull him impossibly closer. He understood, palms smoothing down over her butt cheeks, lifting her up against him until the rock hard bulge straining in his pants was nestled against her, so near to where she wanted him to be, where desire was welling. Daryl planted a lingering kiss at her collarbone...it shouldn't have, it was just a kiss, but it drove her to the point of breaking. Beth knew it wasn't just that. It was everything that had been building and growing between them, not just since the first kiss in the car dealership, but since they ran from the prison...maybe since the first hug...before either of them really knew it could be real, and now they were free to be together.

*I want you now.*

That's what almost came out. Beth was able to call it back at the last second. With their personal experiences...her lack of experience, that probably meant something very different for both of them. She meant *Let's move forward*. Daryl might've heard *I want you in me now*, and while that compulsion was true, Beth had no idea what she was asking for, and she still needed to go slow.

Laying her cheek against his, lips so close to his ear...

"Take me...to bed..."

Beth felt the breath catch in his chest, then its long, warm release against her neck causing her to stiffen and shiver. He didn't say anything...no words were really needed, just setting her on the edge of their bed, taking a step back. Watching him, watching every move...Daryl's hand at his belt buckle. Beth heard its metallic clink. His breathing...heavier than usual, but steady...his shoulders, tense and tight...rock solid, powerful...skin stretched taut over his arms. And his eyes, they were on hers now, not focusing on her bare breasts or taking in her naked form, he was looking in her eyes...looking at her...seeing all of her, the part that mattered. That was more intimidating and intimate than anything, forcing her to cast her gaze away. It wasn't the best idea or timing because that was the moment Daryl's pants slid over his hips, freeing him of the last of his clothes. It was the part of him that scared her the most, but she wanted it. She'd told herself she wouldn't look again...since the last time. Beth hoped not seeing would cut the nervousness, calm her fear...but she couldn't look away. There was nothing to do about it now except touch and enjoy.

Reaching out hesitantly, her fingers made contact, slow...running them up from the base of him. It
was velvety smooth, his skin standing in sharp contrast to the solid, throbbing rod beneath. Looking up at him instead of at it, he was watching her, but Daryl's expression was more pain than pleasure. His face was fixed in sharp concentration, jaw tense...there wasn't enjoyment there. She was doing something wrong. Pulling her hand away, any confidence she'd had with his body disappeared. But Daryl liked it when she touched him on the only other intimate night they'd shared. At least that's what he'd said, and he'd...

"I'm sorry...I..." She didn't even know what she was apologizing for. If she wasn't doing it right, he needed to show her...teach her what he wanted.

"What?" It was like he was coming out of a trance. "You don't gotta stop." The intent expression on Daryl's face shifted to confusion.

"But you don't like it...you look..." Beth didn't know where she was going with it.

"I do...I just gotta focus so things...don't go too quick..."

"Oh..." She understood.

That was honesty right there, making her blush and look away. It was still going to take her time to get used to everything. Maybe he liked it. Maybe he wanted her to touch him, even if it wasn't the best idea, but he didn't give her the chance to go there again. Sitting at the edge of the tall bed was almost the same as standing in front of Daryl, her heels resting on the ledge of the bedrails so her legs weren't dangling, just slightly bent. Daryl stepped in closer, caught her off guard having been distracted by her moment of embarrassment. Planted firmly...standing squarely between her legs, so close, Beth started to panic a little inside. Was this how he planned to go about it...do it, because this wasn't how she pictured it...not what she wanted at all. She wanted to be in bed...together...feel the comfort of him over her...on her. Pressing a hand hard against his chest to stop him...well, he wasn't doing anything that needed to be stopped...she just needed the world to pause so she could tell him.

"Please...not like this. I want us to be in bed..."

Daryl brushed her hair back from her face, tucking it behind her ear so he could cup her cheek. He was being so calm, so steady...the patience of a saint.

"Beth, we're not there yet..."

Both of his palms found their way to rest on her knees. He was playing nicer than she'd been; she had gone for the most intimate part...but then she'd asked him to go slow, and he listened. His hands weren't soft or gentle running up her thighs, but she didn’t want them to be; Daryl seemed to know that. The firm pressure made her ache, and sinking her teeth into her own lip only intensified that growing need. Daryl watched her intently, the sparkle in his eyes caught in the flickering candlelight. Was he enjoying watching her reaction, touching her, making her feel...enjoying it more than he enjoyed being touched? It didn't matter, she couldn't even think...his hands traveling up her legs as far as they could go, fingers sliding from the front, caressing her outer leg, finally gripping the soft flesh underneath. His hands encompassed her, Daryl pressing his thumbs down with gentle pressure on the top of her thighs...

"Ahh..." Beth felt stupid making noises when he touched her, but this one she couldn't help...it was an unexpected pleasure.

She had no idea these spots were so sensitive...but then a brief almost incoherent moment flashed in her mind. He'd touched her like this before...the only other time they'd ever been this close to being together, and it hit her then too. He remembered that tiny moment...that small thing about her...what
made her quiver...

God...he was so attentive, but that memory...her abilities to comprehend anything that came before faded, conquered by the now. He squeezed a little harder sending pulses of sensation to her core...and some instinct forced her to try to clench her legs together...move away from his touch even though she didn't want him to stop. But she couldn't, her soft inner thighs and knees hindered by Daryl's solid legs. That pressure...that contact made everything worse...better...just confused. A hand on her back and a soft kiss brought her back to a more familiar place...a more innocent place as Daryl stepped out from between her thighs. Hooking an arm under her knees, he lifted her, laying her in the center of the bed where he came to rest at her side.

Beth lost moments with him...when he was caressing her...kissing her. She felt it all, experienced everything, but it was a separate level of consciousness that processed things...feelings and emotions...differently, and the concept of time played no part. It was her mind letting go, letting her body and what she wanted take over. Even when Daryl's hand traveled south, she didn't tense or pull away, didn't feel the panic she felt before, just letting it happen...wanting it to happen. His fingers stroking gentle circles on her most sensitive spot brought her to a more desperate state of being, forcing her to open her eyes briefly...watching him watching her...it felt so wrong, but it was so right.

The euphoric state dissipated just a little when Daryl's fingers traced down her soft folds to where they'd never been before. Beth held the sharp breath she sucked in, her muscles tensing involuntarily as he slowly attempted to slide a finger into her untouched center.

"Beth, just relax. It's gonna be okay..." Daryl reassured her before pressing forward.

She tried to relax, focusing on feeling him close, the gentle kisses he was showering her with. It wasn't painful, just not really comfortable, but there was something about the painstakingly slow in and out motion that satisfied her on a much deeper, more primal level...made her want...need to be with him even more. When he kissed her deep, no smooth shift between soft and innocent to full possession of her mouth, she knew he was attempting to distract her...but he couldn't. He was starting to slide a second finger in, but it was too tight of a fit...starting to hurt.

"Oww..." It was soft coming from her mouth, just enough to get him to stop as she reached down, pushing his hand away, Daryl looking down on her with concern...and his own insecurity.

The small hint of pain, that wasn't what made Beth stop him. She had reconciled herself with that reality after her talk with Maggie. It wasn't that, it was what it would mean if Daryl continued. This wasn't the way she wanted to lose it.

* * * * *

Daryl was a better man than he gave himself credit for. Even with Beth laid out on the bed beside him without a stitch of clothing, he was able to curb his instincts despite his pressing need, a torture that could only be cured by Beth's body. He would be lying if he said there wasn't something in him, a part of him that was urging him to spread her legs, driving deep and hard until his need was quelled, replaced by the relief of filling her...owning her...leaving his mark in her, but he held back and got something more in return. When he put Beth in the middle of their bed, it was a soft moment...innocent as could be. She said slow, so he was gonna go slow, give her everything she wanted that he could, that he knew how. Touching her softly, just leaning over her enough that he could see her...watch her enjoy and respond...it was as good as the combined relief and torture of her
hands on him. This hadn't ever been the case in his past, and now that he knew what it felt like to have this closeness, this intimacy with a woman, he didn't know how he lived without it...almost wished he hadn't, but...

But this was just with Beth. Beth did this to him, made him want to be like this. If it happened before in his life, it wouldn't have been with Beth...sharing it, this intimate bond with his woman...his wife...in their bed together.

Maybe it was the concrete knowledge of what they intended that banished Beth’s anxiety or nervous anticipation about how far they were gonna go. Maybe now she was just fully ready to let go...while he was fighting his instincts, she was giving into hers. It was hard to imagine a woman...Beth...wanting him as much as he wanted her, but she was giving to his every caress, every touch of his lips. Daryl found that when he stopped thinking everything out...where he was going to stroke her, how he was going to kiss her...it came naturally. He would need to think consciously and act carefully for what came later, but for now, this love play, all he had to do was remind himself *slow, soft, gentle*. Maybe he could be a good lover.

Beth's lips were warm, and her mouth...there was still the lingering flavor of chocolate from the cake. Her skin tasted sweet and fresh and natural, and it made his state of desire even worse when she trembled as his lips or fingers met a sensitive spot...but she didn’t move away. Beth...she was caressing him too, so painfully soft, kissing him when he was close enough...when she could. He wasn't giving her much chance though. This...it was about her first time. That's how it was gonna be. And he had to ignore a lot of what she was doing. He didn't need anymore foreplay...didn't need foreplay to start with. Couldn't let himself get too far gone. He thanked whatever power was out there that Beth restricted her touch to his upper body, fascinated with his arms and back. He felt it all but could fight to ignore it. If she touched his cock at this stage in the game...well, there would be no ignoring that.

She was so lost in the moment, so intent on his kiss...gripping his neck, drawing him down...that she didn't seem to notice his hand smoothing through her silky curls, and when his fingers tenderly probed to find the right spot, she didn't fight or go tense. Beth opened herself to him. Consciously or not, Beth giving to him in that small way...well, it wasn't helping his fight against instinct...need. They were so close to sharing...he was so close to having everything with her. Rubbing her gently, Beth's body arched, soft breasts pressed against his chest, her hips forcing herself firmly against his hand, and he could feel her fevered breaths while he was kissing her. Her eyes opened. Seeing her watching him while he was at her lips...touching her so intimately, even if it was only for a moment...he wanted more of her. Intent fingers found their way to her very center. So warm and slick to the touch...and knowing he'd done that to her... Passion, that might've been what was trying to conquer him now, not instinct, 'cause he'd never felt this one before, but he still had to fight it...fight it for Beth. She went still, pulled back from his lips when he tried to press a finger into her, tense and scared, drawing in a quick breath.

"Beth, just relax." She might not know her body was fighting him, but it was. "It's gonna be okay."

Daryl pushed forward before Beth had a chance to think too much. She flinched a little, but didn't really pull away. That didn't mean Daryl didn't cringe inside. Beth was so wet, probably as ready as she was ever gonna be, but even when she relaxed a little, giving to him, she was tight. He didn't even wanna think about it, but at the same time, he couldn't get it out of his mind. He wanted her no matter what. Daryl set a slow but steady rhythm, just trying to get Beth used to something. Her breathing was heavy, but then so was his...

*Fuck*...everything started hitting him all at once. Labored breathing, throbbing dick, aching balls...just wanted in her. He was only a man...could only hold back so long. Daryl needed something
harder...more intense, rougher for himself so he forced deeper into her mouth, kissing her with brutal intent, knowing she could handle it and wouldn't hate him after. But a hard kiss only satisfied so much...he needed her...all of her.

*Slow. You gotta go slow...*

The thing was, they had to do something, but he couldn't just jump straight into it. Beth...she just felt so little...even with just his finger...nothing like he ever had before.

Still owning her mouth, assaulting her lips, Daryl attempted to slip another finger in...just two, that shouldn't be too much. She nipped his lip a little, not even realizing, but fuck did he notice, breath catching in his chest, instinct set on fire by the unexpected trigger. He was quickly brought back to concern though...

"Oww..." It was so soft that another man might not have heard, but he heard. She was his love.

Beth pushed him away, drawing her thighs tight together. Daryl didn't really know how it was gonna go from here if she wouldn't even let him...

"I'm sorry, Beth..." He settled his hand on her hipbone, thumb stroking back and forth over her smooth skin, trying to soothe her, but despite stopping him, she didn't seem all that worked up. "I just thought...well, it would make things easier on you this way...hurt less." Daryl tried to explain himself awkwardly.

Beth's small hand came up, brushing his shaggy hair outta his eyes with a soft, shy smile on her face shaking her head no. She was calm.

"I'm not afraid of the pain anymore. It's just..." She hesitated, looked like she was tryin' to figure out something in her head...get the words right. "I love you...that's not how I want you to have me...not how I want to give myself to you..."

Daryl wanted to accept it, wanted everything Beth was offering. He nodded.
Pressing a knee between her creamy pale thighs, Beth didn't deny him. His hands slid under her, asking her to shift her hips for him. All of Beth was his to adore, but the trail his lips laid up her body felt rushed. Fuck, there was no denying it. It didn't just feel rushed; it was rushed. Daryl just kissed her so he wouldn't move over her too quick. Her skin was warm and quivered at each spot his mouth tasted, but he didn't take the time to linger and enjoy. Now it was just a means to an end they both wanted...he'd needed for so long. Seduction, foreplay...they were past that. He did stop at the small peaks of her breasts to appreciate. How could he not? Daryl finally settled over her, probably laying too much weight on top of her...but he needed to feel her...his cock pressed against her, just to give Beth time to feel him near, close...naked.

Expectant, nervous eyes on him...her fingers gliding down his spine as she made contact with his skin. Beth's lips parted to speak, but he wasn't about to let that happen. She accepted his lips in reply to the unspoken words, his fingertips barely brushing her side. Bad move, but so fucking good, Beth thrusting her hips up against him. Reaching down between their bodies, dick in hand, guiding himself to her hot center, that first warm contact, just flesh on flesh was...he didn't even know everything he was feeling, but just feeling...it was more than he ever knew. Beth closed her eyes now, her head turned away slightly at the first pressure. If she needed to look away, that was okay...whatever helped her, but Daryl had to look at her even if he couldn't have the contact of her eyes.

She was so fucking tense. He got it, understood, but she couldn't be or it was gonna be a catastrophe. What was he supposed to say? *Loosen up or it's gonna go bad...hurt more than it has to.* Yeah, that's what she needed to hear. She just needed to relax, stop thinking, turn herself over to what her body was telling her she wanted, what he could feel she was so ready for.

"Beth..." He needed her to look at him. "Beth." Finally, her eyes were on his. "Just let the fear fall away."

The pads of her fingers brushed his cheek. A nod, and her face was calmer, accepting. A nod was good 'cause this time, Daryl wasn't gonna stop...couldn't even if she wanted him to. There was no goin' back now, and she had to understand. A few tender kisses to remind her that it was about love...

It wasn't just instinct. Sense told Daryl that one quick thrust to get it over fast would be better, even kinder, but he couldn't. *Go slow.* That's what he'd promised Beth, and he was good for his word. He'd go slow. Lacing their fingers together, pinned against the mattress, his hand overwhelmed hers. Daryl didn't know if he took Beth's hand to comfort her or steady himself. Pressing forward, painstakingly slow, meeting resistance, Daryl could feel her breathing...quick, short breaths...her fingers clenching his upper arm, nails biting into the skin stretched over tight muscle, taut from bearing his own weight. He could see it on her face, the way she bit her lip when he pushed more.
He wished Beth would share what she was feeling with him instead of trying to hide it so he could bear some of the burden, comfort her even though he didn't know how. With a final firm force, her resistance broke. A quiet whimper, some tears, and it was done. Pulling back from her hand that didn't want to turn his loose, Daryl brushed her tears away with fingers he wished were soft for her...

"I love you, Beth..."

She gave him the hint of a soft smile...and a few more tears he wiped off her cheeks. Daryl felt shitty for the pain he caused Beth, but it was a beautiful moment...they were together, and the worst was over. When he took her lips softly, like a lover should, she was slow and innocent in responding, but she allowed herself to be distracted. Seated all the way in Beth, it was fucking painful not to move, but Daryl was gonna give her a few seconds of still to get used to him inside. Breathing steady, kissing, he was able to kinda focus on something besides his dick surrounded by the deepest part of Beth he could reach. In a few breaths, he could let go and allow himself to enjoy her. As soon as he thought enough time had passed, just when he started pulling back, Beth's little hand was at his heart.

"Please...just a moment more..."

*Shit.* Time must be passing differently for them, but he would give her all the time he could stand...whatever little that would be. Daryl wasn't in a good place at all. He was feelin' everything, all his senses acute...heightening the good and the bad. Muscles tight with no relief, core and abs tense from forcing himself to hold still...hold back...that tension pulling the stitches and reminding him of the sting in the wound at his side. He'd almost forgotten that. Turning his attention back to Beth, his free hand between them, finding her hard nub, he would try to give her something to separate from the pain.

*Give her something...*

*No...*

He should've made sure she came before...'cause girls...most women didn't...weren't able to during sex...right? And Beth, it was her first time, so she wouldn't. For Daryl, that had never been his problem, worrying if the woman he was fucking got off, never even really paid attention. But this...with Beth...she was different. It was his concern. He loved her. Nothin' to do about it now. Watching her though, seeing her responding to his touch, a confused combination of pain and pleasure...it was fucking intense bein' so connected to someone. When Beth's hand went to the back of his neck, kissing him deep, tongue caressing his, her palm pressing hard against his lower back...Beth, she was ready now, asking him to make love to her...not in words, but better, with her body.

Daryl resting on top of her, pressed close between her thighs, Beth touching him...it was the calm before the storm. She wanted to tell him something...wanted to say...what she didn't know, but he kissed her instead, his mouth silencing her. Daryl knew her, knew she had a tendency to over think things, and now he wasn't going to give her that chance. When Daryl aligned himself with her, his head butting up against her, Beth turned away, closing her eyes, not wanting him to see whatever emotion might come. She was tense, she knew it; Daryl could feel it. He wasn't stupid. Despite herself, Beth was afraid of what was about to happen when there were so many other things in their world to be afraid of, but this fear, it was natural...normal.
"Beth..." His voice was soft but strained..."Beth...

Daryl wanted her to look at him while he was taking her, so she forced herself to open her eyes, meet his gaze, give him what he wanted. But it wasn't that...it wasn't for him.

"Just let the fear fall away."

All Beth could think was how beautiful those words were...those words coming out of Daryl's mouth. She trailed her fingertips down his cheek, taking in the person he was...her Daryl...before she nodded. Daryl captured her hand, fingers locked tight together, pressed to the bed. Gentle kisses covered her lips as he started to push forward into her. Breathing ragged, Beth held Daryl's arm tight, her fingernails digging in, but she couldn't help it, and he didn't even notice. Biting her lip now, trying to deflect some of the discomfort...she didn't want Daryl to know because he was trying to be gentle, going so slow. Finally, there was a sharp sting as she tore under his force, Beth crying out...trying not to but failing. She thought Daryl would stop after, to give her a second, but he didn't, driving forward until he was all the way in, as far as her body would allow.

_Breathe...just breathe_.

Daryl disentangled his hand from hers when he finally went still, but she was reluctant to let go.

"I love you, Beth." His voice raspy and forced, but his actions...his touch was soft as he brushed away the tears on her cheeks.

Beth forced a small smile for him. Daryl didn't move, a strained, unnatural still overtook his body as he gave her time to adjust. The sting wasn't unbearable now, but she could still feel it, and there was a much deeper ache from being filled and stretched to accommodate him. It was unpleasant but balanced by Daryl, his weight on her, that comfort...his love. His kisses made it better, and she tried to kiss back...she did...but she wasn't all in, still consumed by everything new and foreign she was feeling. Beth couldn't think about anything except herself, and Daryl was being so good to her. But when he started to move...it felt like so little time had passed...she wasn't ready. Beth touched her hand to his chest.

"Please...just a moment more..." She just needed a bit more time.

And Daryl was worried about control? He had more patience than she could've ever imagined. He didn't just stay still now though...his hand running over the soft curve of her stomach down to the place just above where their bodies were joined. When he caressed her...it was such a confused feeling. It was so much more sensitive now...so close to being unpleasant...but it wasn't, it was so good. Having Daryl inside changed everything. The pleasure that came with his touch, it made her need, drawing him down by the neck so she could capture his lips this time, pressing at his back. Daryl got the message and didn't question it. The feeling of it was new and raw, and so very physical. When he started, the movement...it was overwhelming, not helped by the deep ache that was still there and the leftover sting, but there was something oddly fulfilling about the long, slow strokes Daryl was maintaining...a perfect, steady pace. She needed to kiss him now, needed to touch him, needed the whole experience...needed to feel everything.

It was almost...almost involuntary, when she moved her body with his, her hips meeting his rhythm, but she was conscious enough about it that she was hesitant...unsure. Beth had to open her eyes, look at him to see if she was doing it alright. Watching him while he was taking her...it was the most erotic thing she'd ever experienced. Daryl's hair was sticking to the sweat on his forehead that was fixed in concentration, the stitches in the gash over his eye pulled tight. His lips were parted now as intoxicating, feral noises escaped his mouth and she could hear...feel his heavy breathing. And Daryl, he had no problem making eye contact with her...seemed like that's what he wanted. Beth just
needed to know that what she was doing was right, and what she saw...heard in Daryl, it was answer enough, but she got a half nod as well. It wasn't just right, it was good for him...and it was starting to be good for her too.

He leaned in, kissing her tenderly, the tip of his tongue tempting her lips, hand in her hair...this was where physical and emotional joined to make love. Pulling away from that kiss, Daryl started going a little harder on her, a quicker pace...

"Daryl..." She kept her voice soft...didn't want to jar him or break the moment, just had to remind him that she was still there, feeling, and needed him to stay gentle.

"Sorry, Beth..." Barely able to make out the words his voice was so hoarse...so deliciously male...the smile came to her face unbidden. She couldn't remember what the sorry was for and couldn't care anymore.

After that, it was like flashes of fevered moments, seeing his face, feeling him, touching him to make sure he was real. Feeling the tension in Daryl's body, his muscles flinching and rippling, knowing that he was forcing himself to hold back...it should have frightened her, knowing he could snap at any second, but it didn't. His power...his strength...it was addictive, knowing it was there...and she loved him for it. And knowing that he cared and had enough control to hold back, it made Beth want it even more. There was only one first time, and he was making it about her, what she needed...after this...there would be time for everything.

Something started to change in the way Daryl was moving. The steady, slow thrust and withdrawal...it became more intense, somehow more focused and connected. After each stroke reached deep inside, his coarse hair intermingling with her soft curls, pressed as close as possible, he arched, rubbing against her in just the right place. It sent flutters into her tummy, each moment of direct contact making the tension in her abdomen build. The tiny pulses of pleasure that started to radiate from her core took control of all her focus. It hit her then, taking her breath away, her vision went blurry, and pulling her eyes closed tight, Beth saw thousands of falling stars. Clenching her thighs tight against Daryl's muscled hips, a shattered wave of pleasure swept up from her center all the way to her chest where it started to dissipate.

He was much more urgent now, not steady or rhythmic...driven instead by his own need...rough, but somehow, that was okay...what Beth needed too. Every fiber of her being was so much more alive, sensitive beyond comprehension, and she could actually feel Daryl throbbing inside of her, the last spasms and tiny pulses of her own pleasure connecting their experience. His final thrust was too deep...too hard, but...

"Oh...God...Beth..." He buried his face beside hers, letting go.

It was her name Daryl called out when he came. Her name. She did this to him. Beth gave him that moment of release and pleasure. That and the flood of his warmth that spilled into her, filling her...that ultimate end of coming together eased all of the pain and discomfort that came before. Beth hadn't even caught her breath...couldn't even think...before Daryl started to move off of her.

No. She didn't want it to end. Beth was still feeling, still so sensitive, needed the comfort of his presence pressed against that sensitivity, the weight of him on her. She didn't want the physical void she knew was going to follow all too soon.

"No...don't move..."

It came out desperate because she was. Daryl stopped, resting against her again, breathing heavy, but he still found it in him to kiss her. Beth realized just how sore her lips were now, but it was a
delicious sore.

"I ain't going nowhere..."

Beth fell asleep so quick after, head at his shoulder, hand resting over his heart, the way they'd been sleeping together since they began. Her soft, warm breath against his neck was an agonizing comfort. She was breathing steady, her naked body so warm nestled against his side, but Daryl was still on, every nerve on fire, every sense alive, and he couldn't sleep for nothin'. This state...it'd never been his MO. It'd been run and find a place to sleep, or if it was in a bed, his bed or his place for the night, the woman would get the not so subtle hint and leave, and he would've passed out. But now, he wanted Beth awake, wanted to talk to her, didn't have nothin’ in particular to say to her except she was beautiful, he loved her, he wanted her, and was never gonna let go. He couldn't do it though. He couldn't wake Beth up. She needed to sleep...rest, and Daryl wasn't gonna be a selfish prick and wake her. Sliding his arm out from under Beth, she wasn't even fazed, so soundly asleep.

"Phhh..." Posted at the edge of the bed, running his fingers through his damp hair, Daryl was so keyed he didn't even know what to do with himself.

Then he remembered. Pulling the drawer on the bedside table, praying it didn't squeak, he pushed the pistol aside and dug in the back. The partial pack of cigarettes he'd stashed there, that was exactly what would do the trick. He was running out, but the occasion called for it. He needed it. Daryl brought the pack up to his nose, inhaling deep. They were starting to go stale, but the scent of the tobacco was still heady enough to hit the right spot so he wasn't gonna complain none. Grabbing the crystal ashtray beside the bed that he'd never used, Daryl went to the fireplace, tossing another log on the bright embers, watching the flames start to lick up around it, catching fire again.

Careful to be quiet, he drew an armchair squarely in front of where the flames were jumping, planted his ass on the soft cushion, set the ashtray on the arm of the chair, and slid down, sprawled out, letting the heat of the fire taste the bare skin of his legs. He could feel himself smiling like a fucking idiot.

"Hmmph." Where in the hell did that stupid laugh come from?

Daryl was happy...

Daryl was happy and actually satisfied by something that in his past had never left him feeling anything after it was done. And he couldn't get the images of Beth out of his head...or what it felt like being with her. After the bad...when the painful part for her was over...well, it had been good...no, incredible...

* * * * *

His dick wrapped tight in her slick embrace, coated in warm honey...once Beth let him move, Daryl's thrusts were slow and as gentle as he was capable of being. It was torturous ecstasy, finally being inside Beth, processing what he was gettin' to feel, trying to sense Beth to make sure she was okay. She was needy, her lips asking for constant attention, something that had never factored into fucking for him before...but this wasn't fucking, so he gave Beth what he could. He could barely breathe between kissing her, her hands on him feeling like they were everywhere at once, loving her...making love to her. It was slow at first, and she was hesitant about it, but everything just got so much more intense...so much more fucking amazing when she moved her hips with the rhythm he'd
set. And for the first time since...Beth made solid eye contact with him. That in itself was mind-blowing, but there was something in her eyes. She was unsure, asking him if she was doing okay. Daryl nodded, assuring her, not really knowing if he could’ve spoken, but he ran his fingers through her hair, kissing her all nice and gentle to further confirm his answer. How could she even think she was doing anything wrong?

Beth's movements, her hips rising and falling with him...that meant she was enjoying too, right? It wasn't intentional, just the natural rhythm of life, but Daryl realized too late that he'd let himself get lost, and he wasn't going so slow and gentle anymore. The ache in his side hit him at the same moment Beth's hand found its way to where his heart was pounding in his chest, reminding him.

"Daryl..." All she had to say was his name in the softest whisper, and he corrected, made that effort...understanding.

"Sorry, Beth..." It was a growl, but the intent was there.

Her understanding smile that followed staid Daryl's confidence. He slowed, they moved together, learned each other...were one. It wasn't just him making love to Beth. They were making love.

Knowing he couldn't last forever...it had been so long, and not just that...it was Beth's body pressed to him, Beth touching him, Beth looking up in his eyes every so often, all of the pent up energy and fucking need. Maybe it was better, her first time and all, since she wasn't getting much out of it, that it didn't last too long. Daryl bore down, pressing and grinding against Beth with each thrust...the beautiful, delicate noises she was making but trying to hide...they were so fucking addicting...made him sound like an animal with his grunts and groans. She wasn't asking for his lips anymore, head pressed back against the pillow, tangled blonde hair wild around her face, lips parted, breathing heavy. That moment, seeing Beth, laying back, so into it that she wasn't scared or shy or unsure...all those inhibitions gone...she was just with him.

He was so close. She was pulling at him again now, palms kneading at his shoulder, hand at the back of his neck, fingers threading through his damp hair. And then her tight warmth clenched his cock...was she? Yeah...Beth was coming... and that drove him over. The urgency of those last few thrusts, he couldn't stop himself even though Beth was gripping his arm deadly tight, her other hand now forced hard against the center of his chest. The searing pain in his side, he felt that too, but it wasn't doing nothin' to curb his burning need. Daryl had to watch her, had to see Beth's face, driving deep into her core that final time. He felt shitty when she cringed a little, but this was what it was supposed to be like, the intensity and urgency of being so consumed with each other. And Beth, she was still riding her pleasure. Seated to the hilt, spilling into her body, Daryl buried his face in the silky hair at her neck.

"Oh...God...Beth..."

Feeling bad for being rough at the end, before he even had time to fully enjoy, Daryl went to pull out.

"No...don't move..." It wasn't a request but a fevered plea.

Beth wasn't regretting nothing or hating him. So Daryl settled himself against her, letting Beth bear just a little bit more of his weight, taking her swollen lips tenderly with his, tryin' to catch his breath too.

"I ain't going nowhere..."

As he cooled down, Daryl's mouth found the soft spot where Beth's slender neck met her shoulder,
Snapping back to present, Daryl exhaled a long breath, one he hadn't realized he'd been holding. Pack of cigarettes laying beside the ashtray on the arm of the chair...remembering Beth, he'd forgotten he needed a smoke. Now he really had to have it. Flipping his Zippo shut, taking a long drag, Daryl enjoyed. His house...no, his home, food, fire, weapons, all a man really needed to survive. And his woman...his wife, now in every way, sleeping in their bed, worn out 'cause of him. His wife...his Beth. Daryl knew it was true, but it still felt strange thinking those things about his own life. A home, food, fire, weapons, that's what Daryl needed to survive, but Beth was what he needed to live.

Content...that's what he was feeling. He was feeling other things too. Sated...but he wouldn't say no to Beth if she called him back to bed, wanted him. The ache in his side grounded him, reminding him no matter how good he felt, he wasn't immortal. Daryl couldn't help wonder if he'd busted a stitch. Wouldn't do no good looking 'til morning though. Muscles he hadn't used in a long while sore from rediscovery, others sore from being tense and holding back. Overall, he was just feeling so alive. And Daryl was already planning on making good on that promise he made to Beth, a day in bed, doing whatever she wanted...felt like doing with him. He would willingly serve out the rest of his sentenced bed rest as long as Beth was beside him.

"Daryl...?"

He hadn't heard her get out of bed or get close to him, and Daryl realized why Beth could sneak up on him so easy. He didn't have to...didn't wanna be on guard around her. Beth was the only person he was willing to let his guard down for. Cocking his head to the side, he caught her approach. She was wrapped in the knit throw from the foot of their bed, exposed translucent skin illuminated by the candles that still burned around the room.

"What are you doing?" She was in front of him now, eyes sleepy, hair mussed. "You look like a rock star on a throne..."

What the fuck? She must've been really drowsy, not making any sense, but he couldn't help grinning.

"Couldn't sleep. Didn't wanna bother you." But she was awake now...well, sorta...and he wanted to hold her. "Come here."

Daryl reached out, pulling her into his lap, holding his cig up so she didn't get burned. Beth made herself nice and comfortable, nestled against him, the soft blanket between them. He wished it was just her skin on his. He'd wanted to talk to her, wanted her awake, that's why he'd left her alone in bed. Now that she was with him, he was at a loss. But there were things he needed to say...things he should say. Trying to get more comfortable himself, Daryl shifted a little under her.

"Oww..." It was just a little noise, but he heard. She was sore...he knew she was gonna be.

"Lil' Bit, you okay?" He was all hesitant now, fearing the answer...the truth.

"Mmm-hmm..."

Raising an eyebrow, looking down on her, she was smiling soft and tired. If it had been that bad on her, she would be showing it, wouldn't be cuddling up to him all content. He'd have to take her word on it.

"Tell me something..." There'd been silence for a few moments...comfortable silence...but Beth talkin' was just as good. He waited for what came after, but she didn't say nothin' else. He realized
that was it.

Daryl had something he wanted to tell her. It was so selfish...but it was about him, and it was true.

"I wouldn't go back. If I had a choice...I wouldn't go back to the way things were before..."

The way things were before the walkers took over and the whole world went to hell. He wouldn't have ever met Beth, gotten within five miles of her. Yet here in the darkest world possible, he'd found his light. Beth's lips touched his collarbone lightly...a kiss as soft as a whisper, and he could feel wetness on his chest. She was cryin', but he knew somehow they were happy tears. Leaning down, Daryl rested his head against Beth's, arm wrapped tight around her, cradling her close. He let out a contented sigh, then inhaled her...breathing her in deep. She still smelled like Beth, sweet and fresh, like sunshine and hope, but now, his scent was there. She smelled like him too. Her breathing was soft and steady; he thought she'd fallen asleep in his lap.

"I love you...too..." Daryl knew after those words fell from her lips, Beth drifted away because her body went limp and relaxed against him.

*I love you too...* She was replying now 'cause she didn't when he said it while they were making love. She didn't have to say it, he knew it...but she did anyway.

His cigarette was burning away...he hadn't even noticed, flicking the ash off into the crystal ashtray. Beth...her smell...his scent on her, it was right there with him. It was a choice, take another long drag, inhale deep, let the nicotine fill him, but then Beth, her essence would be overpowered...gone. But it was possibly one of the last cigarettes on the planet. Daryl smiled to himself, setting it in the ashtray, didn't stub it out, just watching the glowing tip slowly burn down to nothin'.
Chapter 61

Morning came softly. For a minute, he didn't know how he got back under the covers. Then he remembered Beth falling asleep in his arms by the fire, carrying her to bed, laying her down and gently stripping away the throw blanket she’d wrapped herself in so he could replace it with the warmth of his body. He’d pulled her close, her back pressed against his chest, the smooth cheeks of her ass nestled all nice and tight up against him. Draping his arm over her, Daryl enveloped her in his protection. That was how their night ended. But something was different now...they'd shifted in the night, Beth turned towards him, facing him, her hair illuminated by the ray of sun that peeked in through the edges of the curtains covering the window. It was her halo. She wasn't awake, but she snuggled closer now, so close he couldn't see her face. Maybe it was instinct, but Daryl let himself believe that even in sleep, Beth wanted to be near him.

Daryl was still feeling drowsy, his weighted eyelids dropping, trying to coax him back into the oblivion of sleep, but he didn't wanna go. Being awake was better than a dream. He couldn't see her face, but he could feel her, and Beth's image was gonna be imprinted in his mind forever. The taste of her sweet lips, how her soft touch made him feel more alive than he'd ever been...Daryl put a quick stop to that before he got himself all worked up...

Even after he'd given Beth the ring symbolizing the promises he made to her, promises he'd held in his heart before...ring or not...he'd been worried that the morning after he'd feel shitty about what he'd done, unworthy of her, knowing it was all too good to be true, and things that were too good to be true never lasted. But he wasn't feeling any of those things. There was no way even the stark light of morning could taint all he had...everything they'd shared. This was his life. Daryl finally had something that was all his, that made him happy, someone he loved who loved him back. Instead of being ashamed of his life, the fact that he was nothing and no one...that wasn't who he was anymore. Beth gave him pride. His life now, having Beth...he was proud.

Rolling onto his back and throwing his arm over his eyes, Daryl knew if he stayed close to her...could feel her, he would never be able to get out of bed, and that was a necessity now. With as tired and spent as he was still feeling, Daryl knew it was early. He needed to get downstairs and do some recon on breakfast before anyone else woke up and he had to deal with them.

Simple instructions. Daryl gave himself simple instruction to make himself move.

Sit up.

Son of a Bitch...

He threw his hand to his side, biting back the growl that almost broke free. Yeah, he remembered that now...the tear he felt picking Beth up and bringing her to bed. Looking down and pulling his hand away, Daryl could see the faint pink blush on the surface of the bandage, blood that apparently seeped through all the gauze.

Shit.

Well, what was done was done. He'd have to look at it later. It wasn't a problem for now. It sure in the hell wasn't goin' nowhere.

Pants.

The warm flannel plaids were comforting sliding up over his legs.
Shirt.

Wife-beater thrown over his head.

Crossbow.

Nope...he wasn't dragging that down with him. This was gonna be a quick trip.

Gun.

Pants wouldn't hold that up. He was going in unarmed. Everyone was sleeping anyway. He'd just have to deal.

Cigarette.

Yes...he was gonna enjoy that smoke now.

The floor was cold on his bare feet, and the sun streaming in through the kitchen windows was so bright it was glaring into the hallway. It was too fucking intense for him. Hand up to shield his eyes, Daryl groaned a little, taking a long drag off his cigarette, wishing it was dark again.

Shit.

Caught off guard...how did he not hear 'em all or even sense they were there? He was gonna blame the sun for this one. Apparently everyone he knew now was having breakfast in the kitchen, sitting at the table, on the counter, standing. What in the hell were they all doin' up so early? His vision was still blurry, fingers trying to work the sleep out of his eyes. And why in the hell where they all looking at him? He was caught off guard, so fucking what?

Daryl curbed any need for confrontation he was feeling, reminding himself that he was happy and didn't have nothin’ to be ashamed of. There was no reason not to be pleasant except for that damned sun.

"Mornin'," Daryl made the effort.

Crossing the kitchen to the fridge, catching the butt of his smoke between his lips, he wanted to find food quick and get out.

No one answered him...no one returned his pleasantry...just a restrained throaty chuckle from Tyreese and some quiet sniggers from the rest of 'em.

"Good afternoon." That was Rick, and Daryl could hear the amusement in his voice even though he wasn't laughing.

"What...?" Daryl didn't quite get it.

"Afternoon," Rick repeated.

He had to look out the window to see the truth of it. Yup. Afternoon. Daryl thought they were early for breakfast when he was late for lunch.

"Whatever..." Well, that was pissier than he'd meant.

More sniggers.

Cake...there was cake left. Daryl grabbed that, putting it out on the counter.
"Carol and Maggie made muffins for breakfast. We saved some for you and Beth," Sasha pointed out, Daryl spying them on a plate near where he'd just set the cake.

"Thanks."

Ducking his head back in the fridge to see what else it had to offer, he could still feel their eyes on him. Why couldn't they just go about their own fucking business...mind their own food? There was no reason he needed to be the center of attention.

"What in the hell y'all lookin' at?" Daryl straightened and turned to stare them down.

If they even mentioned something about Beth...

Nobody was saying nothin' now; they knew better, but Glenn, he was smiling like a brainless jack 'o lantern, making ready to speak. He better pick his words good, 'cause Glenn...well, Daryl already let him dodge a bullet once for a comment he made about him and Beth. Those scales were balanced, and it wasn't gonna happen again.

"Those ridiculous plaid pants."

Well...that wasn't what he expected Glenn to spit out.

"Pfft..."

Everyone laughed, and Daryl realized what a sight he must've been. Plaid pants, wife-beater, cigarette hanging outta his mouth, hair a shaggy mess, barely awake. Let 'em have their good laugh. He was going back to bed...back to Beth. At this point, he was just grabbing random containers of leftovers so he could get the hell out.

"Are you planning on hibernating for the winter?"

Nope. Not hibernating, just a day in bed, but he kept his comments to himself. Wasn't gonna give 'em any ammunition. After he'd assembled his haul, Daryl grabbed a fork and plopped a small piece of cake on the plate in front of Rick and Judith. She gurgled, diving in hands first. It would've been face first if Rick hadn't held her back. Rick looked up, raising his eyebrow and frowning.

"Come on, let the kid live," Daryl smiled, seeing the cake smeared on Judith's face. "And she's gonna get more on her than she's gonna eat anyway."

Well, maybe that was only partly true as she shoved a giant fistful of chocolate frosting in her mouth, laughing and coughing.

"Judith didn't sleep at all last night 'cause she was so sugared up. All she wanted to do was play. Dad couldn't get her to stay still for a second." Carl's voice was laughing, and even Rick was amused though he was pretending to be the stern, practical father.

How could he not be happy? How could they not be happy? They were in a place where they could live and the kids could laugh and play. It was a new day...a new dawn for them all.

"Looks like sweetness kept Daryl up last night too," Dammit Michonne. He wanted to hate her, hate what she said, but he couldn't. It was sweet, and she recognized that. "But don't you own a comb? That hair could use some working on."

She smiled up at him from where she sat at the table beside Rick. Michonne's smiles were always genuine. Taking another long drag off his smoke, flicking the ash on her empty plate, he gave her
just a little bit of a half-hearted glare.

"So, what's the plan for today?" Carol broke the few seconds of silence in which no one was torturing him or trying to make his morning...afternoon...whatever...hell so they could get a laugh out of it.

To be fair to Carol, he was always the one who was motivated and ready to get things done at the start of the day...but not today.

"Ask Rick. I ain't doing nothin'. I'm on Bob-ordered bed rest."

"Bed rest," Bob emphasized.

"Is Beth going to come down?" Maggie slid off the counter where she sat like Beth was gonna be skipping down the stairs any second and she was gonna swoop in and steal her.

Maggie was having a hard time letting go, and Daryl, he understood. Beth was her blood, the last of her blood. Shaking his head, not unsympathetic, knowing Maggie's concerns, Daryl tried to convey that everything was alright. But he didn't even know if Beth was okay...how she was feeling. He just needed to get back to her. Maggie nodded at him, some sort of understanding.

Then, all attention was on Judith as she flipped her plate, sending smashed cake flying down her front and into Rick's lap, a blob of frosting clinging to Rick's beard. Rick sighed and Judith squealed and laughed, face and hair coated in chocolate, clapping her hands together, sending even more cake flying.

"Come here, Lil' Asskicker." Daryl discarded his cig on Michonne's empty plate, taking Judith from Rick so he could clean up.

He held her out at arm's length watching her little hands reaching out for him, trying to grab him...share her cake.

"Nope...that ain't gonna happen...you're too sweet for me..." Daryl smiled at Judith, shaking his head no, talking to her all sweet and soft like.

Judith...Lil' Asskicker...it was funny how quick life passed them by. She got big so fast. Daryl remembered the day she was born...her first day was almost her last. Now, here they all were, against the odds, proving that life found a way.

And once again, every set of eyes in the room was on him. What, wasn't he allowed to be happy? Yup, he was...and he didn't have to justify it.

"Give her to me." What? Michonne wanted Judith. "Get out of here before you lose your chance."

*                      *                      *                      *

Beth could feel him watching her, knew he was beside her awake, but she wasn't quite there yet. Sleep didn't want to let go. His hand was in her hair, brushing it out of her eyes soft and slow, like he didn't want to wake her but couldn't stop himself. She was awake enough that her thoughts were reading as blurry images...hazy dreams of the past. They had been together such a short time, but measured in events, it was a lifetime. There were moments after they first ran when he wouldn't even
look at her, much less touch her...now they belonged to each other...and she remembered it all. As her senses started to become more aware, Beth felt not just tired, but spent...her entire body ached...every muscle and tendon. And the expected soreness, that was hard to ignore, but she couldn't have felt more whole...complete...happy.

Wondering how long Daryl would just lay there, waiting for her to wake up and what happened then, Beth was feeling butterflies in her tummy again. Everything had been so intimate...so open and honest during the night. Now she was facing another first...the morning after. Was it going to be awkward? Beth breathed in deep before she decided to open her eyes. He smelled like cigarette smoke and some lingering sweat...an intoxicating and dangerous perfume...and a little bit like her; Beth took pride in that ownership. But then, there was the faint scent of blood. That was...odd. It wasn't that Daryl never smelled like blood; usually that was part of him, but now?

There was just enough light from the window that she could make out the features of his face, his hunter's eyes on her, watching carefully. Not knowing what words should come, Beth nuzzled closer to him, letting her lips touch his hesitantly, her hand clenching the shirt at his chest.

*Shirt? Why was he dressed?*

"You okay, Lil' Bit?" His first words to her were soft and measured, sounding like he was afraid of the answer.

"Yeah." How could she not be?

A blush was rising to her cheeks, and she had the urge to look away, but she didn't. She let Daryl see what he did to her. He smiled a little...shy...looking away. Beth realized this was a first for him too, waking up with someone after...

"Where were you?" Beth tugged at his tank top, reminding him that he was dressed and pointing out that she knew he had left her. She sounded needy...well, she was feeling need. If she had a right to be needy any day, it was today.

"Food...I went for food." Daryl was all raspy...she didn't know if it was because he was tired or something else.

Food. She wasn't hungry. The only thing Beth had on her mind was trying to figure out how to get his clothes off without having to ask him to take them off. There had to be a rule, at least for today. No clothes in bed. Beth could feel the sparkle in her own eyes as she caught his again, raking her teeth over her lip, knowing now it got to him even if she didn't know why.

"Phhh..." Daryl rolled away from her and out of bed. "Let's get some light in here."

*What just happened?*

"Daryl...no," Beth protested, sitting up on her knees in their bed, soft white sheet clutched against her bare breasts.

But it was too late. Daryl threw back the heavy curtains, arms outstretched, head tilted back like he was absorbing the sun, taking life from it. Beth cringed away...it was too bright, too soon.

"We've been inside too long. We need light or we're gonna die."

That's when Daryl turned around, and she could appraise him in the light of morning. He was clearly more awake than she was, but his eyes were just a little bit sleepy. His hair was mussed and tangled. Shoulders and arms were strong and firm and muscled...looking just a little bit more defined than
usual if that was even possible. And why was he still dressed?

"I need you, or I'm going to die..." Beth smiled, blushing away at her own boldness in the cold light of day.

If that didn't bring him back to her, they were in a bad place. Daryl bowed his head, nodding, taking a few steps that brought him to the edge of the bed. He rested a knee on top the mattress, but kept his distance.

"You sure...?"

So whatever was bothering Daryl was about her, not him.

"Yes..." Beth nodded too to make sure she got her point across.

He was on his knees in front of her, looking all self-conscious. This had to be the last awkward moment, right? The morning after. After this...well, there had been a lot of first, and truly, there were probably still going to be more awkward moments as they got to know each other...learn each other, but Beth really hoped the painfully awkward parts were over for both of them.

"Beth..." Daryl was fighting with his words and with himself. She wanted to assure him that everything was okay, but sometimes it was best to just let him get it all out. "I didn't...I didn't mean to hurt you last night. I should've...I tried..."

That's what this was about? He was feeling guilty. Beth could see it in the way he was holding himself. The thing was, she knew Daryl was everything a man could've been, needed to be in that moment. He'd done everything right, even if he didn't know it...wouldn't believe it coming from her mouth.

"Shhh...no..." She wasn't going to let him torture himself over nothing...well, it had been such an important moment, but it wasn't bad.

Beth moved in close, leaning up, kissing him soft and sweet a few times before he finally lifted his head to look at her. She couldn't help smiling. He was hers as much as she was his, and Beth was never letting go.

"It was sweet pain. I didn't want it to be anybody but you." Daryl's lips met hers this time, gentle but lingering, and just a little unsure. "It was beautiful. Can you share that with me...remember it that way?"

Daryl was finally smiling again, smiling with her, nodding. In their world, they were lucky to be breathing. People didn't get what they wanted anymore...they had to fight for what they needed to survive. But somehow she did...she got what she wanted. It was hard, in the light of morning, worrying that she wouldn't be as beautiful to him, every flaw even more evident, but Beth let go of the sheet, letting it slide over her breasts, crumpling on the bed in front of her. Daryl sighed so deeply it sounded like he was releasing the stress of the entire world. After everything, his lips on her neck softly sucking at the tender flesh surprised her. He moved so quick to her but was so slow in his actions. Beth pulled her eyes closed tight, just letting herself feel, gasping as his mouth traveled down towards her collarbone. Her hands were at his shirt, tugging, and he got the drift pretty quick, pulling it off and tossing it aside in one swift movement. Beth saw him, but all she could focus on was the red...the bloody bandage.

"Daryl..." It was worry, but he read it as need, reaching out, trying to pull her close.
"Daryl...no...stop."
Well, the firm tone did it. He looked down to where her eyes were fixed, his fingers gingerly poking at the gauze, forehead crinkled, but he wasn't surprised. He already knew. How could he not? Now Beth was feeling bad. She should've said no...been the voice of reason...listened to Bob, but Beth wanted him too much, let that get in the way of Daryl healing.

"Yeah...I'm fine. Ain't nothin' to worry about."

When Daryl took it upon himself to insist that he was fine, well, that usually wasn't the case. Wrapping the sheet tight and fully around herself again, Beth wasn't going to give him any false hope.

"Really?" Daryl was sulking now.

"Really. Lay down."

"I said I'm fine," he asserted, but he wasn't going to win. Not this time.

"Daryl."

He gave finally, laying back against the pillows, but not without a fair amount of grumbling and groaning. Daryl had said he wasn't used to being told what to do, but in this case, it was something he needed to get used to pretty quick. Beth wasn't going to take chances with his injury. Pulling back the bandage and gauze, the crusted blood made it stick to his wound and skin. Glancing up, Beth caught Daryl's lips twitching in discomfort, the rest of his face fixed in concentration. There was...there had been a lot of blood. The stitched laceration was red and angry and puckered. Beth looked with her fingers, finding two broken stitches...but they weren't just busted; they tore through the flesh they'd been holding together. And with all the blood, what if the interior stitches ripped too? Starting to feel emotional, Beth gasped and didn't even try to cover.

"I should...I'm going to...I need to get Bob..."

Daryl snapped up her arm, tight, before she could even start to move.

"Ain't nothing he can do. It's all crusted and dried. Just gonna have to heal on its own."

Beth tried to pull away, but it wasn't doing either of them any good. He was right. Sewing it again wasn't really an option, but...but she would just feel better letting Bob look. Daryl wasn't turning her loose though.

"Daryl..." It was a plea this time, not a warning or command.

She had lost the upper hand because of her emotions.

"Beth, no."

Daryl finally freed her but started to protest again when she made to move out of bed.

"I'm just going to get some water and clean it, let it get some air."

The cloth was soft and soaked in warm water, but any comfort that should've provided was overshadowed by rubbing away the congealed blood, no matter how gentle she was being. Daryl's stomach was tense and tight where Beth's other hand rested to steady herself, and the muscles twitched where she was cleaning. At least he wasn't pretending or trying to hide from her.

"Sweet month..."
"What?" Beth paused her task, looking up.


She nodded, understanding, going back to work. It was just talk. A distraction from the pain...the unpleasantness for both of them.

"I'm grateful...happy with any sweetness we get." Beth smiled, thinking. They'd shared so much joy and happiness already. "We could kick Abraham and his people out of the guest house and hide down there for a few days."

"Pfft...they don't even have to be trackers to find us down there. Not far enough away." He was just being realistic. "Where would you have wanted to go...if we'd met...gotten married..."

Beth knew what he meant and why he couldn't find all his words. What kind of honeymoon would she have wanted if they fell in love and got married in a world that had never fallen? It made Beth sad, made her heart ache...not because she missed the old world and was thinking about what could have been, but because she knew what would have never been. Daryl wouldn't have been in her life. She wouldn't have his love. There might have been prom dates, graduation, community college, a husband eventually...but none of that could have even partially filled heart with the love she felt now, and Daryl, he owned all of it.

"I don't know. Savannah is so pretty and romantic, maybe there. Or New Orleans. I've never been there, and it seems so magical." Beth looked up to see him calm, just taking her in. "What about you?"

"Hmmph..."

Daryl shrugged his shoulders and shook his head a little. Why did she even ask? Daryl would have never considered honeymoons. He told her he'd never even thought about this kind of future with anyone before her...but he answered.

"Just somewhere quiet and alone. Maybe our home, whatever place was gonna be ours." He paused. He was contemplating. "I've never seen the ocean. I would've liked to see the ocean with you."

Done, setting the bloodied cloth aside, Beth was glad that was over.

The ocean...she would like to stand on the beach with him, Daryl holding her hand tight...watching the sun dip into the still waters in the far horizon...

"Are you okay?" Beth questioned when Daryl sighed in relief.

"Mmm-hmm."

This time, she believed him.

Daryl caught her rolling her aching shoulders...

"Come on." Sitting in the center of the bed, he called her to him. "Turn around."

Safe between his legs, Daryl brushed her mussed hair aside and pulled away her sheet, baring her back. His warm, broad hands squeezing her shoulders...Beth needed it so bad, but they were too rough; he didn't realize though.
"Oww...gentler..."

His touch softened...just firm enough to be heaven. Fingers pressing into the base of her tight back, running up along the side of her spine to where her hair met the nape of her neck.

"That okay?"

"Mmm..."

Hands sliding down, thumbs keeping firm, even pressure beside her backbone, palms and fingers spanning the entire distance of her back, fingertips barely brushing over her ribs...it was meant to soothe and work out the tension, wasn't it...? It wasn't meant to arouse...she told herself.

Then lips...moist, warm lips at the back of her neck. Beth startled, not expecting it.

"Shhh..." His hot breath on her skin.

Daryl's mouth moved to a tender spot at the back of her shoulder that she didn't even know was sensitive...maybe it was just sensitive because of him...

"Daryl...please..." Beth was begging, "...no..."

She said no but every piece of her meant yes...needed it to be yes...

Beth might have said no, but she forced herself to remain still. She had to say no, but she wasn't going to move away.

"I got a little more restraint than that, Beth..." He drew out saying her name, all breathy and gravelly...

Why did he have to speak with his lips so close to her flesh?

Daryl had her all wrong. It wasn't his self-control she was worried about. He had the patience of a saint. It was what his touch...his kiss was doing to her. Here it was, the day in bed she'd been wishing for since they found their new home. A day that was meant to be spent with Daryl, not just beside him.

A day with Daryl...beautiful. A day saying no...cruel agony.

How could all of those things go hand in hand?

Beth had to remind herself it was for the best...for both of them.
"Beth...get your coat. Let's go," Daryl called up the stairs, hand resting on the banister.

"You sure you don't want Carl and me to come with you?" Rick offered, arms crossed, leaning against the wall near the windows.

"Yeah, I'm sure. This is just somethin' we need to do." Daryl was watching, waiting for her to appear at the top of the staircase. "Phhh..."

"That's what they do."

"Huh?"

Rick had the shadow of a smile.

"They make you wait, but you do it because they're yours, and it's worth it."

He understood now, knew it was the truth. And it was a good moment, Rick sharing his marital wisdom like a real brother would, something Merle never could've or would've. Daryl was impatient all the same. Just 'cause he was willing to wait for her didn't mean he was gonna do it quietly.

"Come on, Beth," he hollered, making sure there was no way she wouldn't hear this time. "Beth Gree...Beth Dixon!"

That one broadened the smile on Rick's face. Still so new...Beth wasn't a Greene. They'd actually snagged another whole day alone without anybody bothering them, an extra day in bed together, not doing anything, and not doing that either...as hard as that had been...but just being. Maybe it was a good thing for both of them to recover. But today, Daryl was feelin' right as rain. Beth shoved so many antibiotics down his throat, if a fucking walker bit him, it would probably disintegrate or turn back human again. Today, it was back to reality...their new reality as part of the group, but together now. It was gonna be a good start if she'd just hurry up. What in the hell was she doing?

One of the front doors rattled, drawing his attention away from the stairs. Whoever was on the other side of the door was tryin' to open the wrong one. Idiot. The right ornate door came open.

Abraham...they still hadn't dealt with what happened. Daryl would've been okay not dealing with it for another day, just one more day without the conflicts of the real world, but now there was no way to avoid it, coming face to face with him while Beth wasn't around. Just seeing the prick...he'd put his hands on Beth, thrown her to the ground. Daryl went tense. Abe went on guard, and from the corner of his eye, Daryl could see Rick straightening, his face gone grave, sensing the tension of the possibly volatile situation. Everything was so still, Daryl could feel the air charged with aggression. Abraham narrowed his beady rat eyes...looked like he was thinking on something before he spoke.

"I didn't mean to hurt your girl...Beth," he corrected quick. "I don't put my hands on women. I was
just trying to protect her."

There were so many things that could've come out of Abe's mouth that he wouldn't have accepted, but this rang true. Abe didn't apologize for attacking him, didn't apologize for misjudging the situation he'd seen between him and Beth, didn't say *sorry* at all. But he explained why he did what he did—to protect Beth, and who he was—he didn't put his hands on women. He could reconcile himself with that. Daryl forced himself to acknowledge, nodding.

"If you touch her again..."

"Got it." Abe didn't need him to finish to know what came next. "Tell Beth I'm sorry."

There it was, the only thing that could matter, an apology for Beth. Nodding acceptances and acknowledgements, both men understood they were on terms. They might not be on good terms, but they were on terms. It was better than nothing.

The shrill scream from upstairs...it put them all back on equal footing, in survival mode. Taking the steps two at a time, pulling his bow over his shoulder, loaded and ready to go, Rick and Abe pounding up the stairs behind him...there was a crash, some tumbling, another scream. What in the fuck was going on?

*Beth...*

His gut was in knots, and his heart was racing. At the end of the hall, the door leading to the stairs to the attic was standing wide open. He'd checked the attic...cleared it. There'd been nothing there. Had he missed it...a walker trapped up there he hadn't seen?

"Beth!"

It sounded like more shit was falling as whoever was up there was trying to get away. Stuff was crashing down; his world was crashing down.

"Beth!"

The bare light bulb in the attic was in sight, casting an eerie yellow glow down the stairs. Finally in the doorway, looking down the sights of his bow, left...right...forward...nothing. Where was it? Where were they?

Laughing.

Laughing? Daryl was starting to be able to breathe again, seeing the pile of women on the floor.

"What in the hell is going on up here?" Daryl hadn't even realized Rick and Abe were beside him.

More giggles. Tara snorted, then Maggie and Beth busted up laughing again. They were trying to untangle twisted arms and legs, not having much luck.

"Almost as good as pay per view," Abe mouthed.

*What?*

"Hmmph," Rick chuckled, Daryl glancing over at him.

Then he finally realized, started to go tense, getting ready to turn on Abraham, but Rick gave him a stern shake of the head. Daryl forced himself to lighten up. Not everything said was a personal attack.
"What happened?" Rick tried again.

"That ran right into Tara," Maggie pointed over into a shadowed corner where a dingy grey furball, a filthy raccoon was hiding. "She tripped, then she got me and Beth tripped up too."

This was all because of a fucking raccoon? He sent a bolt flying into the fur, barely aiming, but the shot hit home just before he threw his bow across his back. Didn't know how it got in, but he wasn't gonna have it running around his house. Daryl extended an arm to Beth and Maggie, pulling them both to their feet.

"Beth, you okay?" She nodded. "Maggie?"

"I'm fine."

He offered a hand to Tara too. Couldn't say why he did. Daryl still couldn't place her or figure out why he had a bad feeling about her, but it was still there.

"What are you doing up here?" His eyes were on Beth now, and his heartbeat was almost back to normal...almost.

"Looking for Christmas stuff...ornaments for the tree."

Beth was happy and safe. Not just in the moment, but she was happy and safe. What more could he want?

Daryl went to retrieve the raccoon that caused all this chaos and near gave 'em all a heart attack.

"I've been calling you. If you don't hurry up, there won't be a Christmas tree today. It ain't gonna cut itself.

Just saying it, Christmas tree...it made him feel all warm inside. Excited

Putting a hand to Beth's lower back, leading her away, Daryl passed the raccoon off to Tara.

"What am I supposed to do with this?"

"Give it to Carol. She'll cook it up for dinner. It's already skewered. Vengeance for you."

She looked at him cross-eyed like she didn't actually believe him. That told him something about her. Tara had been with Rick's group, meeting up with him sometime after they were all separated when the prison fell. How long they'd been together, he had no idea. Rick's group had it rough; there hadn't been much hunting. And before, wherever she came from, in all the time since everything fell apart, she'd never had to eat anything worse than a 'coon? Daryl remembered that long winter after the farm, Carl sitting on the floor of an abandoned house opening cans of cat food while he'd been plucking an owl that was nothing but skin and bones. That was desperation, but they'd found their salvation in the prison. Now they hadn't just found salvation. They'd found home.

"Seriously?" The question finally came out. "We've got plenty of food."

"Waste not, want not."

* * * * * *
To get to the thickest woods closest to the driveway, they had to go to the very edge of the property line where the old barbed wire fence cut away from the private road into the dense trees. This was where they were going to find the perfect one...their first Christmas tree...his first ever. But their reminder of the real world was waitin' for them right there, all tangled up in the rusted wire, one strand that pinged, wrapping around the walkers, holding 'em tight. As soon as they saw, smelled, sensed...whatever...him and Beth, they started jerking and fighting, the barbs on the fence digging in deep, shredding the skin and rotted flesh. Daryl was glad they were there, the reality that the shit storm of the world was still around them no matter how safe they felt, no matter how many summer barbeques they thought they were gonna have on their quiet little plantation, sipping mint juleps, the darkness was right outside...they needed that reminder. They couldn't get weak.

And it was a good chance to test out his new crossbow, make sure it was sighted in. Sure it took out a nuisance animal in the attic, no problem, but walkers and headshots and skulls were something entirely different. It didn't disappoint. Going to load it again, it wasn't just a heavier draw weight, it was a tighter draw from being new. His other bow was getting so worn out. Things didn't last all that long when you used 'em every day to survive, not just hunting, but fighting a war to keep alive. Cocking it, feeling the effort it took, Daryl remembered Beth struggling to load his bow the last time they were out in the woods together...the happy memories they were making were gonna last a lifetime.

"Lil' Bit, here you go. Other one's yours."

They both needed to stay sharp...well, in Beth's case, she needed to get more time under her belt, and she didn't question when he handed the bow over.

"It's a little bit bigger, heavier."

"Yep, more powerful too. You'll get used to it."

It might not have been a moving target as in running towards them, but it wasn't stationary either; it was struggling, lunging against the wires that restrained it, trying to get at them. Beth's bolt managed to sink in deep just left of center. Just left of right between the eyes. She was almost a natural at this. If people would've just taken the time to work with her back at the prison or even at the farm, she would've been one hell of a sure shot. But just like people took one look at him and judged, thought they knew everything there was to know, Beth spent the whole time after the farm being underestimated. She was capable of handling herself even though Daryl never wanted it to come to that; she just needed someone to teach her how. She'd fought before, not just walkers. She'd gone after Abe when Abe attacked him. Shouldn't have done it, gotten between two men fightin', but she did. And Beth...she'd killed.

Retrieving his bolts, Daryl left the walkers to hang. It was a job for tomorrow, fixing the fence. Maybe he should've praised her for her shot, but she didn't need it. She was already glowing...she knew. He took back his bow, putting the extra bolt in its proper place and reloading before he set it aside.

"Beth, make a fist."

"Hmmm?" That one caught her off guard.

"You heard me." Daryl watched her close her fingers, balling up her hand. "Hmmph, hasn't anybody ever shown you how to make a fist?"

That was a stupid question. Who would've taught her? Not Hershel. He was a peaceful man. Beth's brother Shawn, Daryl never knew him, but she said he was overprotective, and overprotective didn't
mean teaching someone how to fight; it meant fighting for ‘em. That's what Daryl was too...overprotective, but there were too many what ifs in their world for him to chance it. And Beth wasn't helpless. She was gonna learn some. He took her hand, straightening her slender fingers.

"You don't tuck your thumb under your other fingers," he corrected gently. "If you do, when you hit something hard, you're gonna dislocate or break it. Fold your fingers down...no, don't tuck them under. You want the pads of your fingers to touch your palm, not the tips. Good. Now, fold your thumb over the top of your fingers." Daryl illustrated with his own fist.

"Like this?"

"Mmm-hmm. Now, the thing is, when you go to throw your punch, you gotta keep your wrist straight. If your wrist is straight, you'll be landing your punch with your first two knuckles." He ran his fingers over his scarred knuckles, feeling the rough skin that stretched over them. "Those are the knuckles you need to focus on. They're the strongest, the least likely to break. If you don't keep your wrist straight, you'll be making contact with the knuckles on your ring finger and pinky. Those are weak. They will break. Don't keep your wrist straight, and you can break the long bones in your hand too."

Beth looked at her fist then up at him all wide-eyed. "That's pretty complicated, just making a fist to punch someone."

"Yeah, well, fighting's not easy." Daryl affectionately covered her fist with his hand. He couldn't resist the contact. "Your fist is small. That means your area of impact is going to be smaller, but your strike will be sharper. Okay, hit me."

He released Beth's hand, holding his up, tightening his arm to steady it for the impact.

"What? No..."

Beth took a step back and away.

"Not me, hit my hand."

She was hesitant in her approach, barely tapping his palm, eliciting a disapproving glare from him. Daryl didn't even have to tell her, she hit again, but it wasn't enough to make someone blink much less do any sort of damage.

"Pfft...God, you hit like a girl, Greene."

"I'm not a Greene anymore," Beth countered sharply. "I'm a Dixon."

So, he'd hit the right nerve.

"Prove it. Dixons don't hit like girls," he growled.

Beth had that determined look she got on her face sometimes, and there was a glint of fire in her eyes. That fire...that spark was one of the things that made her a survivor.

"Come on, Beth...show me."

She wasn't the scared little girl that the others might think they saw. Daryl had known that for a long while. She had no problem challenging him, but she was unsure. To be fair, just showing her how to make a fist and telling her to keep her wrist straight didn't make him teacher of the year. Beth needed more than that.
"A punch isn't just about the force in your arm and fist. That's barely anything." Daryl threw a punch in the air. It felt strange not making contact with anything. "It has to have driving force behind it, from your shoulder and upper body."

He showed her a punch again, this time slowing down, trying to let her see every deliberate muscle movement, Beth watching him with intent eyes and nodding. After, she punched his hand three more times, and the last two stung pretty good. Daryl smiled, thinking about the fact that it still didn't sting as much as the time she slapped him full in the face. He still knew he deserved that one. And that, it showed she could deliver when she needed to. It was enough for the day. He didn't want her getting all sore and bruised up on her first time.

"Good." She deserved that. "But Beth, if you're in a situation where you need to punch someone, they're probably gonna be coming after you for the kill. Hitting is gonna be your last resort, either to try to get to your weapon if you dropped it or to get away. If you've got a weapon, use it."

"I know."

Daryl didn't question that. Beth was battle tested. She had that one kill to her name. He was just leading into the hardest part of the lesson. They hadn't talked about it, what actually happened, since it happened. They hadn't ever talked about the details. Well, the direct way was painful, but usually the best approach.

"Stabbing someone in the gut, it's dangerous. It's fatal without a doctor and can be disabling, but it can take a really long time for a person to die, sometimes days I've heard. That means they might have enough left in 'em to take you out too. I know that wasn't the case for you back at the camp; we were lucky." His voice was low but serious, and she was listening to every word.

Daryl still hated himself...hated that he hadn't been able to protect her, made her have to kill.

"I know sometimes you don't have time to think when you've gotta fight...gotta protect yourself. But if you know, you don't gotta think."

"Go for the heart," Beth asserted.

Good, she was realizing.

"Yeah, but not here," Daryl placed his hand high at the center of his chest where his heart was thumping. "The ribcage is called a cage for a reason. It's gonna be harder to drive through where the bones are protecting it. Aim here instead," running his hand down just below his sternum where his ribs separated.

Nodding, Beth took it all in.

"Drive the knife up. Even if you miss the heart, there's other vital stuff you're likely to hit. The lungs. Liver. Drive in, then twist the knife if you can to do more damage, for the kill, before you pull it out."

"And what about from behind?"

No.

"Shit, Beth. If they've got their back to you, you run." Daryl was trying to teach her how to protect herself, not how to attack.

"If you're going to teach me how to fight, you have to show me how to win."
There was spirit in those deep pools of her eyes.

"Okay, Dixon." That brought the sparkles out in the flecks of blue and a small, sweet smile.

He grinned too before he went serious again, turning around and grabbing both sides of his back. "Kidneys. They'll cause massive blood loss since they filter a lot of the body's blood. Same thing as up front. Stab and twist."

Facing her again, she acknowledged that one too. "Got it."

And he might as well play out all the scenarios he could for her while they were at it. Daryl grabbed her quick, pulled her close, hard and aggressive, Beth gasping, startled.

"Daryl..."

"What are you gonna do now, Beth?" He was holding her tight, maybe tighter than he should've, but she needed to know. "You can't shoot, you can't stab, you're not strong enough to pull away. What are you gonna do?"

All she could do was shake her head as he released her, taking a step back so she could see what he had to show her.

"Someone's got you up close like that pinned, or even if they've got you on the ground and you can't raise your arm to stab, slice here." Daryl drew his fingers across where his leg and groin met. "Femoral artery. Even if you just nick it, it's game over in a few seconds. They'll bleed out in under a minute."

Daryl stopped, thinking on his life. He'd never killed anybody before the world went to hell. He'd been in more than his fair share of fights, bad ones too, but he'd never killed. He knew how to kill though. He tried to remember how he knew, but it didn't really matter because it was there. Before, that made him dangerous. Now, it made him a survivor, an asset to Beth, a protector, and still dangerous.

He didn't feel her step closer, but he felt Beth's cool hand sliding under his jacket and shirt, up over his stomach, his bare skin quivering at her touch, until her hand stopped and pressed firm where his ribcage parted.

"Here?" Blue eyes on him, face serious and solid, both questioning if she was right and showing she'd been listening.

"Mmm-hmm."

There was still something so new about her touch that it made his breath catch in his throat. It might not have been an intimate touch, but it was intimate for Daryl. Any touch, any contact...none of it had ever been a part of his life. He wanted it from her, let it happen, but still...it was new.

Slipping over his ribs, firm, warming now to the touch, Beth's hand found his back.

"Here?"

"Yes."

Beth's touch was innocent, her face still, hand trailing down his side, across his exposed hip, over the waistband of his pants. Knowing where she was going, innocent intent or not, Daryl closed his eyes tight and bit his lower lip to steady himself.
"And here?"

Was it him, or was Beth's voice breathier?

"Mmm..." He inhaled and exhaled deep to maintain control. "Phh..."

All this talk about death, it made Daryl want to act on life with her...he wanted her. She was surprised but not startled when he pinned her against the back of the truck, his hands gripped tight on the top of the tailgate on each side of her shoulders, blocking her escape, leaning close over her. Beth didn't give him the chance, kissing him soft and sweet, pulling away quick like they were gonna get caught or something. He thought she was being shy, was gonna go in and kiss her...no reason to be shy. It was their world...but there was something else.

"You protecting me, teaching me how to live...and to...I don't have anything to teach you." So sad and hesitant.

It was him. It had to be him. He wasn't doing enough to show her what she meant, how much he loved her. Maybe he still didn't know how, just in normal ways, and he knew he didn't always have the right words. Looking down, Daryl shook his head _no_. He protected her, and he was teaching her how to survive. Survive. Beth...she showed him how to live. Live. Love. There was a big fucking difference...a difference between surviving and living. Surviving and loving. He wouldn't know that...feel that without her. It was all in his head, so clear, so perfect; she deserved to hear it, but he couldn't find the words. Daryl found her left hand tough, his fingers lingering over her ring just for a second before he pressed it hard over his heart, not at the point where it would be easiest to kill him, but where she could feel it the best. Beth knew then, knew what he meant. He could see it in her eyes; they couldn't lie to him.
"It's not straight."

"Which way, Maggie?" Glenn held the tree up, waiting for direction.

"To the left...no, left," Maggie prompted.

Beth was keeping her mouth shut, enjoying Maggie and Glenn's antics. She could only see half of Daryl from under the evergreen's lowest branches where he was laying on the floor, waiting to screw the trunk into the tree stand.

"My left..."

"Was that an answer or a question?" Glenn looked all confused.

He seemed so young again, almost as young as when they all first met. It was funny how just a little bit of security, food, sleep, not fighting for your life at every turn, a razor...normal things...could change people. Beth wasn't stupid. She knew what was out there. Saw them...the walkers out there today. They couldn't get weak, but they could enjoy.

"Never mind. Just let me see."

The tree started to go over as soon as Glenn let go.

"Son of a bitch!" Daryl growled from under the branches, Glenn grabbing and steadying it before it could do any damage. "Tree ain't anchored. Can't just let it go and expect it's gonna grow roots and stand on its own."

"Sorry, Daryl."

The semi-serious tone of Glenn's voice was all a lie. His smile was wide, and his eyes were dancing with joy.

"Sap..."

For a second, she thought Daryl was cussing beneath the Christmas tree. Then, when she realized what he said, Beth couldn't help joining Maggie and Glenn who were already laughing at Daryl's expense. Rick was beside her; she hadn't even noticed him arrive amidst the laughter, Judith squirming in his arms reaching out for her.

"Yeah, that's it, forget you even have a father." Rick pretended disappointment, passing Judith to her. To be fair, Beth hadn't really been around that much the last few days, and before that...before...well, she'd been as good as dead to Judith. "Daryl, Glenn, give it about ten degrees towards the window. That should do it."
"You'd think after living out there on the road, a damned Christmas tree wouldn't be all that hard to handle."

Beth couldn't figure out what was more entertaining, Daryl's commentary or the fact that it was coming from someone who looked like he'd been consumed by an evergreen. He was playing it all tough and cynical, but it was Daryl. He was putting on his survivor's face because he wasn't ready to show everyone what he was really feeling.

Daryl was on his feet, standing back now, appraising the tree. "Looks pretty damned straight, right?" As his eyes panned the room, Beth knew he wasn't just looking for an answer, he was seeking approval, even if he didn't know it.

He got both, answers and smiles.

"And this thing, it's gonna last all the way to Christmas?" That question was for her, just her. He was soft in it, standing so close beside.

"Mmm-hmm. It should last until after New Years if we feed it."

"What does it eat?" The way it came out, Daryl was perplexed, maybe even put off by the idea that he would have to go on a run looking for some Miracle Grow or something of the like.

"Just water with a little bit of sugar, that's all."

Daryl's hand clasped hers. She hadn't expected it...it surprised her. She looked down where their hands were joined, then up at Daryl who was looking at the tree, just looking.

This was their first time celebrating the holiday season as a family, and doing so, with everyone she still knew alive and under one roof, Beth couldn't help having Daddy...his absence...on her mind, but today she wasn't bitter or sad. It was still there, the sadness in her heart and the emptiness in the pit of her stomach still so fresh, but there was joy. He would've wanted her to feel that. Even though everyone in their house was family now, Beth couldn't help focus on Daryl, Maggie, and Glenn. She imagined...before, Daddy probably had a pretty clear vision of what he wanted for his daughters. Good Irish Catholic boys would've certainly been at the top of his list, but he probably would have settled for one or the other. What he got...Daryl and Glenn...well, Daryl...rough around the edges, an aggressive survivor even before the fall...he might have some Irish roots, he was certainly tough enough, a fighter. And Glenn, an Asian boy who couldn't be any less Irish or Catholic or country. Christmas on the Greene farm, with her and Maggie married to Daryl and Glenn, that would have been quite an occasion. But it was strange to think on what this day would've been in the world before because it wouldn't have happened. They all had different lives...were different people who would've never met. Beth was happy with now, and she hoped Daddy was somehow looking down, happy too.

"Now what?" Daryl's voice snapped her back to the moment...this moment she had, as impossible as it seemed.

"Lights I guess, right?" Glenn offered. "Are we doing lights?"

"Hell yeah. We're gonna do lights; we're gonna do it all." Daryl certainly wasn't holding back.

"Oh my God..." Maggie got out, laughing.

Then Beth saw Glenn, his face forlorn, holding up a foot of tiny colored tree lights all of which ended in giant knot of green wire and multi-colored light bulbs. He lowered them back down into...
Daryl looked at his reflection in the mirrored surface of the simple silver bulb. Realizing he took too long examining it, holding that first ornament...his first ornament in his hand, he found a place to hang it quick before anyone noticed. Looking around hesitantly, he realized nobody was paying him any mind or judging him. They didn't care. Everybody was doing their own thing. Glenn and Maggie were hanging some sort of garland on the mantle over the fireplace. Ty just fixed the angel at the top of the tree, the one that seemed hell bent on taking a nose dive off its perch. Bob and Sasha were sitting together, trying to figure out a little chiming carousel that Beth told him went 'round when the candles on it were lit. There was a lot more to this than just a Christmas tree apparently. Daryl picked up another ornament from his box, a glittery white snowflake. This was a good one. It reminded him of Beth breathless and beautiful in the snow. Rick was kind of just standing off to the side, holding Judith, watching the room. And then Michonne, she was on the floor with Carl, sorting boxes of bulbs and ornaments. Rick, Michonne, and Carl, they were like a family too...another family within their group.

"Let's keep all the bulbs and common ones together, separate the unique and really ornate ones so we can find good places to hang them," Michonne directed to Carl.

Getting all self-conscious, Daryl looked down at his box...they were all pretty random...looked up to where he hung his ornaments on the tree. Were they supposed to go somewhere else?

Beth's hand low and soft on his back caused him to tense until he realized it was her.

"You okay?" Pale hair in a disarray falling around her face, lights from the tree dancing in her eyes, Beth was glowing.

"Yeah...um, is there supposed to be a system to this or something, where these things all go?"

"Hmm? No, not really...I mean, we never did...had a system or anything." Beth glanced to Michonne and Carl sorting, seeing what he meant, shaking her head a little and smiling bigger. "Maybe some people do...

Well, Beth sure didn't seem to have any concrete answers, but that was okay. It was new for both of them, a step in their life together, and he was gonna hang the ornaments wherever he wanted as long as it was okay with her. Picking up the next one from his box, it was a tiny glass bird, wings spread in flight...a little songbird, delicate and fine, a rainbow of colors and light reflecting off the cut crystal.

"Here, you should hang this one..." Beth wouldn't take it from him though. "It reminds me of you..." he offered, feeling anxious...maybe shy. Why did he even say that?

"How?" There was joy in her melodic voice.

Hell, why did she have to ask? Maybe she just wanted to hear him explain, but he couldn't.

"Idunno," Daryl just brushed it off, not feeling comfortable enough with everyone around to spill his
guts.

It was beautiful and fine and delicate, the cut glass full of life, and a bird...a song bird...it was Beth.

She didn't take offense that he didn't explain. She knew him better than that.

"You should hang it, here..." she pointed out a spot above her head, right below the angel at the center of the tree where it couldn't be missed. "...it's special. It will be our first ornament..."

Her voice softened and quieted, like she was sharing something secret just with him, soaking in all of it to remember. She reached up and touched the crystal bird after he hung it, touched it ever so briefly before she retracted her hand like she was afraid it was going to turn to ash.

"What?" She caught him staring.

She knew, but Beth knew he wasn't ready yet, couldn't go there with everyone around. Couldn't touch her. Couldn't pull her close. Couldn't kiss her. Not in front of everyone. Not yet. Maybe not ever. That was theirs... Beth got real close, and his body went stiff as stone when she laid her hand at this chest. God, he loved her so hard. And he might not be comfortable kissing her around the others, but Daryl sure in the hell wouldn't push her away...wouldn't deny himself her affection. Up on her tiptoes, Daryl waited...anticipated...wanted her sweet mouth on his. If she kissed him, that was okay...but at the last second, he felt her warm lips on his cheek lingering just a little longer than a peck. Sometimes life was just a bitch no matter how sweet it was.

*                      *                      *                      *                      *

"...it's been...I don't even know how long we've been here...but look at us, Rick. We're playing house. Celebrating Thanksgiving and weddings, putting up a Christmas tree..."

Beth paused and listened. She shouldn't have...it wasn't her conversation, but Carol, what was she getting at?

"We're safe. We have walls, food, supplies. We just found Daryl and Beth. We're not weak; we're just getting back on our feet," Rick countered fervently. "This place, it's good for us. We need this."

Beth leaned against the wall just around the corner from where Rick and Carol were arguing, minimizing her existence, fearing someone would see her...sense her near.

"What kind of life can we have here? What kind of future is it for Judith and Carl? For us...any of us if it's just us?"

"Would you have said this if the farm didn't fall? Would you have wanted to leave then?" Rick's voice was quiet, but his tone didn't lend to the idea that they were having a pleasant conversation.

And Beth had never heard Carol like this. Granted, she hadn't spent much time with her after they created the community at the prison, most of her days spent with Daddy and Judith, but Carol had changed.

"I'm hardly the woman I was back on the farm."

"Yeah, that's pretty evident." Rick's voice went harsh...judgmental, and Judith got fussy. "But you
Leave the prison? None of them had been ready to leave the prison. They didn't have a choice. Thinking on it though, trying to see anything beyond the moment where Daddy died, trying to focus on the chaos that followed before Daryl took her away, Beth couldn't remember seeing Carol anywhere that day.

"Is that where we're going with this? That was different, Rick. Lizzie and Mika where back there...and you..." Carol broke off, her voice wavering, "but you didn't give me a choice then. You decided. You made that call without anyone else, and now you're trying to make autonomous decisions again. You don't get to do that any more."

There was definitely something she didn't know, something Beth didn't understand going on between Rick and Carol. Something about leaving the prison, not running from it, but Carol leaving. Lizzie and Mika too. And Daryl, there was a rift between him and Carol as well.

...be careful around Carol...I'm serious...

Daryl told her that. Daryl told her to be careful...watch out, and Daryl wasn't like that...judgmental or warning for nothing, so it had to be something.

"What is this really about, Carol. Winter's coming. We've already had a snow. I'm not going to split us up again. We just found each other despite everything, and Daryl's not going to be willing to leave. I'm not either."

"Rick...Washington D.C., community, people, structure...you won't have to fight anymore. You can go soft there, get weak if you want, lay down your gun. There could be a cure. But until then, you're going to have to man up and listen to what the group wants. That's what being a leader is, abiding by hard decisions that you or the minority might not like. Most of us are going to want to go, me, Abe, Rosita, Eugene, Tara, Bob, Sasha, Glenn, Maggie..."

"That was before we got here," Rick cut her off. "Before, when we had no direction, no hope. Hell, I was willing to go just to have a reason to keep going...a purpose. And Abraham, Rosita, Eugene, Tara...I wouldn't exactly call them part of us."

"You're going to have to let the group decide. Abe, Rosita, and Eugene, they all need our help if they're going to make it to Washington. And Daryl, he's just going to have to realize...like you...you could be a farmer, but you couldn't be just a farmer. Daryl can be Beth's husband, but he can't be just that."

"Carol..."

"No, Rick. Once we get back out on the road, he'll understand the mistake he made. He'll realize."

"And what is that...what mistake?" Rick barked.

Beth waited...feared. Was she the mistake?

"Complacency."
Beth seemed a little less than enthusiastic sitting at the piano. Glenn suggested it, everyone gathered together, lounging alone or sitting in small clusters waiting to enjoy. Beth really hadn't had the chance to play since they got there; it had been such a storm of events. Something was bothering her, something on her mind. She didn't deny them though. Beth was about making other people happy, even if that made her sacrifice.

A melody filled the air, something Daryl recognized as a Christmas song although he couldn't name it, but Beth didn't sing...she just played. Glancing at Rick leaned against the wall by Michonne, he was somber and distracted too. His wife and his brother were so fucking grim; they were supposed to be happy. It was a good day...better than good. Daryl knew he would have time alone with Beth later to sort her out, but Rick, if he was so clearly out of the happy frame of mind, he could go to him and Michonne now and discuss some small realities without ruining anything.

Maggie made to move at the same time he did, thought he was headed to Beth, and took a step back, apparently yielding to his right to his wife. Daryl nodded her on, watching Maggie smile and slide onto the piano bench next to her sister. He appreciated Maggie backing off Beth for him, and even though Daryl hadn't been planning to go to Beth, he paused, letting Maggie think he'd chosen to let her go instead. He could make nice with his sister-in-law. Beth gave her sister a smile and continued playing, finally deciding to sing after Maggie started.

"You okay?" Daryl questioned, settling against the wall beside Rick.

"Hmm? Yeah? Everything's fine."

Well, that was a bald face lie, but he wasn't going to call Rick on it. Instead, Daryl caught Glenn's eye from where he was watching from his armchair, nodding him over.

"Is everything okay?" Glenn questioned.

"Yeah, I just wanted to talk about setting some real guard duties around here. I know you've been looking out when you can, and I haven't been much use laying up in that bed, but we can't just pretend that there's nothing going on outside those walls."

"Is there something going on out there?" Glenn seemed to have reverted to his more childlike self, less aware of their bigger reality.

"Pfft." There was humor in it, even if it was dark humor. "Yeah, the end of the world is going on out there in case you forgot."

"No...I mean..." Glenn paused...abashed, feeling stupid. "I mean, did something happen?" He finally shrugged off them laughing at him.

"Nothin' major I don't think. Just two walkers caught up in the fence when me and Beth were out finding the tree. Didn't look like they'd been there too long. We know they haven't been there longer than you've been here."

"Did you have any around before...when you and Beth first found the place?" Rick pulled Judith closer like he was protecting her from the thought of walkers.

"None, not a one. Not inside or even around any of the fences, even with the cattle in the fields ringing the damned dinner bell."

Daryl stopped a moment just to watch Beth, her slender, delicate fingers caressing the piano keys. They were made for music, for love, but she could kill...had killed, and he was teaching her to kill more efficiently. If they could just stay here, safe in their own world, he could give her the life she
deserved. She wouldn't have to fight...kill anymore.

"Rick, I'm gonna need some help fixing the fence tomorrow morning." If he was gonna keep them safe, their perimeter had to be solid, even if it was just the cattle fence on the outermost edges. "The two caught, they pinged some of the wire."

"We'll get it done first thing."

Beth felt his eyes, looked at him, still playing, not missing a key, singing with her sister, but her face was still forlorn.

"Is everything okay with Beth?" Michonne broke his attention away from her, he started to go defensive, feeling Michonne was prying until he realized the question wasn't about them, it wasn't *Is everything okay with you and Beth*, just *Beth*.

"Idunno. Maybe she's just tired."

The truth was, Daryl knew it wasn't that. They'd spent a lot of time in bed doing absolutely nothing, but he didn't know what was wrong...had to come up with something quick. Didn't need them thinkin' he couldn't take care of her, couldn't make her happy. But it was the wrong answer either way.

"Tired..."

_God, Glenn, shut the fuck up..._ Daryl cringed.

"Hmmph," Rick snorted and Michonne, she just smiled wide.

Daryl could feel his face gettin' warm.

"Stop."

They kept on smiling and all their eyes were on him, but they didn't say nothin' else. Daryl knew sooner or later they were gonna get bored of teasing him. They had to, didn't they?

"We'll make sure that Abe, Rosita, or Eugene...someone down at the gatehouse is on watch tonight, and tomorrow, we'll work out some sort of consistent schedule." Rick brought the subject back around to something more useful, but his voice wasn't without amusement.

Everyone eventually made their way upstairs to bed or whatever it was they did before they went to sleep. Beth went to help Rick with Judith. She was fussy and would only quiet in Beth's arms. She got her way though, Lil' Asskicker. Being the only baby in the apocalypse kinda made you an object of affection. Daryl was left alone to pull the plug on the tree lights and shut down the house for the night. Instead, he flipped off the lights, planted his ass on the floor, and looked up and the twinkling ornaments on the tree, backlit in red and green and blue and yellow and pink from the strands of Christmas lights. The whole room was starting to smell like pine, a comforting scent that made home smell even more like home. Still knowing someone like him didn't belong in a place like this, somehow that familiarity, the fragrance of the forest growing ever more distinct made his presence acceptable. He might not have belonged, but this place, it belonged to him.
She watched him. He just sat there, knees drawn up, staring at it intently with such a sense of childlike wonder. It was just a common evergreen, a thousand more just like it out in the woods. But Christmas trees represented hope, light, and life in the darkest, coldest days of winter. And what was this time if not the darkest and coldest days in the winter of humanity? This tree...it was the first tree there'd been since everything fell apart. Even at the prison, when things were starting to get stable, they hadn't bothered. It just never came up. For Daryl, this wasn't just the first Christmas tree since, it was the first Christmas tree ever. Beth couldn't help getting all sentimental, going and sitting quietly beside him on the floor. He glanced her way, acknowledging she was beside him with a deep, contented sigh, looking back to the tree. A few seconds of nothing, just silence.

"Is this one good...what it's supposed to be like?" His eyes left the tree to find hers, and in the dim light, Beth could see the answer to his own question in them.

But Daryl, she knew it was never about him anymore. It was about her, her happiness, and he was unsure.

"No...it's better."

Their first tree, their first Christmas together, their first house...their first everything. Daryl nodded to her, accepting, then went back to looking at the tree. Beth smiled to herself, thinking about how everything played out. They weren't expecting relatives for Christmas...their family, no matter how unique or crazy, was now a permanent fixture.

And because of some of that family, Beth had a lot on her mind. Carol's discontent...her whole conversation with Rick, things Beth didn't understand like Carol leaving the prison, Washington D.C., a cure? Carol saying everyone was going to want to leave, even Maggie and Glenn. Daryl deep in conversation with Rick, Glenn, and Michonne. They had to be talking about leaving too, didn't they? She wasn't ready to give up the home they just found. But she could subjugate those fears and worries to just be with Daryl in the moment, not ruining it for him.

"It smells so alive...the tree. It smells like..." Daryl hesitated, maybe not knowing how to pinpoint what it reminded him of because there was no memory of it to remind him.


"Christmas," Daryl repeated, sighing, but this time, it wasn't contentment. It was something else. Something on his mind too.

"You know, seeing this now...if my old man ever allowed any holiday in the house, any tradition...it should've been this one."

Daryl never told her about his past. What little things he'd shared, they were painful. Even when they were happy memories, they were laced with sadness...memories of abuse. He told her once, not long ago, that if she wanted to know anything, all she had to do was ask. She hadn't found the courage yet. But now, Daryl was choosing to share.

"It was always about food, hunting, surviving...being outside. This...this is just bringing the outside in." Daryl wasn't looking at the tree anymore or at her.

He was fixated on his hands sitting on his thighs, fingers picking at the threads around the hole in his pants at his knee. Daryl had new clothes...other clothes that fit, but he still favored these, his pants that were probably going to be washed and worn until they fell to pieces. Beth didn't know what to say, but it didn't seem like he was expecting anything either.
"He never did though. Never had a tree. Maybe 'cause he thought it would come with expectations."

*Never got nothin' from Santa Claus...*

Beth could still hear it in her head, the way he spat those pieces of his life at her in anger...pain...thinking she was judging him.

*Never got nothin' from Santa Claus...*

It still made her sad, even a little teary.

"What's wrong with you, Beth?" Daryl's voice was still soft and reflective.

There was no way he could see her watery eyes. No way. No, that wasn't it. Not just this moment. He was talking about the bigger picture. He saw her affected earlier. And Daryl was flipping away from his admission, not like he regretted saying it but that after he said it, he wasn't ready to discuss it or have any follow-ups. He was, however, ready to check up on her welfare. She wasn't willing to burden him though.

"Nothing."

Well, that wasn't convincing, and Daryl told her so by the look he flashed her way. When he didn't look away, it was Beth's turn to avoid, looking up at the tree sighing. Even in the dim light, his gaze was too intense and unrelenting.

"I don't want to leave, Daryl. I can see...I can actually see our life here, what it would be like. I'm not ready to go..."

"We're not goin' nowhere." He was confused and concrete all in one.

"Then what were you talking to Rick about?"

God, she didn't want to seem like she was prying.

"Just setting some watches. Everybody's had the chance to settle in. Seeing those walkers today, well, if we're all here, it couldn't hurt."

"Oh..."

"Where did this idea 'bout leaving come from?"

Hesitating, not answering, Beth didn't want to open a giant can of worms.

"Beth." Stern, he wasn't gonna let it go.

There shouldn't be secrets. There shouldn't be anything she couldn't tell him.

"I heard Rick and Carol...they were arguing about leaving. Rick...he said he wanted to stay, but Carol said there's no life here for anyone, that we were just playing house. She said something about Washington D.C. and a cure..." When she looked back to Daryl, he was contemplating what she said but didn't look all that surprised. "I mean, Abraham told me something about Washington the first morning they were here, but I thought that was just his people. Then Carol said Maggie, Glenn, and most of the rest of them will want to go..." She had to stop and take a breath.

He took it all in for a minute. Beth chose not to tell him that Carol thought he was getting weak and complacent.
"Yeah, I heard Abraham and his DC spew before, when I first met up with 'em all in town. I guess they were headed that way 'cause he didn't even wanna follow me here. Didn't trust me. Made that pretty clear." So, there'd been bad blood between Abe and Daryl from the moment they met? At least they seemed to be on terms of civil avoidance now. "I don't know what's supposed to be in DC or this cure thing, don't know if I could even start believing that. I can ask Rick about it tomorrow."

"It doesn't matter. We should stay...unless you..."

"No. Our life's here...but you...you've got Glenn and Maggie. If they leave..."

"I'm with you, wherever you will go...or stay." There was joy in being able to say that to him, meaning it, knowing there was no other possibility in her heart.

Beth scooted closer, invading his space, a move that might have made Daryl uncomfortable, but not her Daryl. He nodded, the slightest upturn at the corner of his lips. She could feel it, the warmth and comfort of knowing that she came before all others in his life, and realized for Daryl, this was an entirely new concept, that he came first in someone's life...in her life...too. She loved him so much it made her heart ache...

"Being with you...you make me feel so alive..." Beth couldn't say why she said it, and it sounded so stupid; she blushed away embarrassed.

Daryl was on his feet, offering her a strong arm up. Her heart was pounding so fast.

"Come on..."
"Carol...what the hell?"

Everyone was supposed to be in if they were sleeping in the main house, but here she was slipping through the front doors, quiet as a mouse, no idea he hadn't made it upstairs yet. She swung around quick, not startled, but on the defensive.

"Oh, Daryl, you scared me." He knew that wasn't the truth. Carol didn't scare easy anymore. "What are you...you two doing sneaking around in the dark?"

She looked past him, back to Beth, realizing he wasn't alone. Had she just turned this around on him, trying to make it out like he was somewhere he wasn't supposed to be? He wasn't even gonna entertain that.

"What are you doin'?"

"I just needed some air. Did I break curfew or something?" She flashed a sugar sweet smile, moving towards the stairs.

He let Beth's hand slide outta his so he could go deadbolt the doors, make sure the house was locked up tight.

"Nope. No curfew. Camp out in the yard if you want." Daryl had to work to keep his anger in check.

It was just rubbing him the wrong way. He didn't give a rat's ass if Abe and his crew wanted to head off down their yellow brick road to DC on some fantasy suicide mission, and he didn't care if Carol, Maggie, Glenn, or all the rest of 'em wanted to hold hands skipping down the lane, but Carol's conversation with Rick...Beth didn't need to hear that. People insisting they had no life or future here when they were doin' just fine, had been perfectly happy until the others came along, causing problems, stirring up shit, and now claiming he and Beth were just playing house. He wanted to pin her down on it, confront Carol, tell her if she had these kind of opinions, she was welcome to leave. If she had something to say 'bout how they were living, she could say it to his face...but not in front of Beth. He couldn't. He would just get all riled up. He'd kept cool when Beth told him 'cause she was clearly upset by it all...it took a hell of a lot not to react then, but he didn't want Beth to know it bothered him. It was a fucking happy day, and he wasn't gonna end it like this.

"Alright then. Sleep tight. Don't stay up too late." She took a few of the steps before turning back, looking down at him then Beth. "It's a beautiful tree for a beautiful family."
Maybe she was just trying to be nice, but it came out condescending. Beautiful family... him and Beth. If he remembered correct, remembered from his painkiller daze when Carol felt the need to trap him and confess to taking out Karen and David, she had more than a thing or two to say about him and Beth being together, going something like...

*She's so young...*

*You must be relieved. The group's back together so you don't have to bear the burden of protecting her...*

*Is Beth pregnant?*

*Why say you're married? What does it matter?*

*This isn't you, Daryl...*

Did she forget about all that, because he sure in the hell hadn't. He remembered every word she said, and now with the 'beautiful family'? And 'beautiful tree', didn't that fall into the category of 'playing house'? It was all bullshit. But she didn't know either of them heard those words. What was she playing at? Carol knew...she knew any of his trust that she used to enjoy, it wasn't there anymore. He'd said it just about as clear as he could.

*It ain't about forgiving. Ain't my place to forgive. It's about trust. And I got Beth now...*

There'd been an implicit warning there. He might not have said it, but it was pretty fucking clear. Carol was smart enough to realize. He loved Beth, and that was all that mattered in his world. Nothing was going to threaten that. Anyway, it didn't really matter. She could do whatever she wanted, convince the entire group to leave, but if she thought she would get one of them, either him or Beth, onboard...play them against each other and they would follow, that wasn't gonna happen.

Carol had no power over the decision whether they stayed or went. Beth and him decided that whatever they did, it would be for each other, not the group, long before any of these issues starting floating around. Beth was with him, and they both wanted to stay, with or without anyone else.

It was Beth who made sure their bedroom door was locked tight behind them. She hesitated a moment, back to him, hand pressed against the door. Seeing her there like that, Daryl was able to forget his troubles. They were worries for the morning, things to discuss with Rick when they had some time alone, nothing that needed to be brought to the bedroom. The soft curve of Beth's ass, the arch of her back, her neck bared, ponytail swept over her shoulder...it was invitation enough. It was different now. The first time had been beautiful, a bond they shared, but now apprehension was traded for anticipation, worry for want, fear of hurting Beth replaced simply by the desire to share pleasure with her. Daryl was still feelin' the butterflies beating hard in his stomach though. Somehow he knew with Beth, that wasn't ever gonna go away. And strangely, it was still new for him. He'd never been with the same woman more than once.

She went still when his hands traced the curve of her hips. Daryl could feel the tension in her body, his fingers sliding under her shirt over the warm skin of her stomach, pulling her back so she was pressed hard...could feel what she did to him. His lips found her neck, the moment she should've melted into him...he knew something about what she liked now, what turned her on, but that was when Daryl realized something was wrong. Beth wasn't tense. She was rigid...cold.

*Shit.*

Here he was thinking he could be all forward since the first time was over. All his anxiety and worry were gone, but that didn't mean Beth felt it. Beth had been all comfortable and intimate in their short
honeymoon after their first time together, but then she'd known it wasn't going anywhere, him serving out his Bob ordered bed rest and all. Now though...and thinking back on all the moments they'd shared, Beth, she was forward enough, but when it got real, she was lost. It was just so new for her, every aspect of it. He needed to go slow...still slow. Maybe she was still nervous...still afraid. Daryl didn't want her to feel that way...afraid, nervous. They needed another time under their belt; she needed to know that it wasn't always gonna be like the first time. Fuck, he didn't even know what he was thinking. Didn't know what she felt or would feel, but it had to get better for her.

"We'll still go slow. I'll be gentle..."

Those words felt awkward as hell comin' outta his mouth, confusion balling in his chest. Not that he didn't mean 'em, because he did. Just, all of a sudden, they'd gone from totally connected, teasing and tempting all day, to now...this. He didn't wanna have to convince her or talk her into bed. Never forced anyone, sure in the hell wasn't gonna start now. Convincing was just a different form of forcing. Beth sighed, but that sigh wasn't a sigh of relief. He didn't feel the tension released from her body pressed to him. She was just totally unreceptive to his affections. Daryl let her go, stepping away, giving Beth the space she needed. Whatever.

She turned around to face him, but there wasn't any dread or fear in Beth's eyes. Whatever this was, it wasn't about that...about being with him.

"What happened with Carol...?"

It sounded like it was difficult for her to ask...like she was tiptoeing around it, but it still hit him hard. All this shit with Carol was coming to a head at once, and this at least, this thing with Beth, it was gonna be put to rest tonight. She'd been hinting around about it...

*Just tell me, who's next for you, one of the new girls, or Carol...*

Okay, so Beth said that when they were fighting, tearing each other apart when he was trying to hurt her, chase her away, but sometimes anger brought out people's real fears.

*No, they can all find out at the same time...unless you want...need to tell someone first. Rick...Carol...*

Now that one, that one came from Beth when they were both cool and calm, happy, deciding how and when to tell everyone about them, about being together...being married. He'd never thought it was a real issue, but maybe it was. Maybe ignoring it brought them to where they were, this unexpected divide. If she needed a concrete answer, she was gonna get one.

"I told you, Beth, I ain't been with no one since before the shit hit the fan. That means I never fucked Carol," he snapped. Beth had that deer in the headlights look. Yeah, his words were harsh, but he just needed to get the truth through that head of hers. "I'm sorry there wasn't no blood in our bed to prove what I said. I know you don't have a past. I do, but that don't mean she's a part of it. You're just gonna have to take my word on it."

Daryl regretted lashing out at her, what he chose to say, but it was already done. No taking it back now. Beth's sharp breath made it clear she heard every word of it. He hated himself, but anger got the better of him. Daryl had no virtue to protect. Some of the women, they were just moments in his life before; others were regrets. She'd known that. They'd talked about it, not in great detail, but they'd talked. He didn't try to hide nothin’. No virtue to protect...but his word, it meant something. It was the only honorable thing he had, and Beth questioning it...it tore at hit.

"Daryl..." He could barely hear her whisper soft voice.
She was moving closer now, but he took a step back to maintain the distance.

"My word, you're just gonna have to take it."

He just needed to let it go now, but he wanted Beth to say she understood. Tell him she believed him.

"That's not what I meant...not what I..."

Fucking hell, all that and that's not even what she was asking. He just made a fucking fool of himself, and what he did...said...he'd been the one doubting Beth and what she felt for him. Daryl found a place sitting on the steps to the huge ass bed, planting his face in his palms. He was wrong in thinking Carol had no power over them...him. She was a threat, proved that tonight in her ability to sow discord between him and Beth. But Beth was a better person than he was. Always had been.

"Come sit by me?"

She was perched on the edge of their bed looking down on him like some bright angel. He didn't deserve any of it.

"I'm a dick." Daryl shook his head, refusing her.

"And you're not even drunk." Her voice was lighter now, not so burdened.

The exchange was an odd sort of apology, but she deserved better. On his feet now in front of her, Daryl wasn't sure if he should offer a real apology or if enough had been said. He was still working on the figuring out Beth and what she needed part of his life. Didn't have all the answers straight away. He allowed his hand to slide up her outer thigh, resting on her hip just to have that comforting contact. He'd never fucked up touching her...he didn't think at least.

"Do I make you weak?"

Daryl almost didn't catch it, her question, too focused on her hand trailing down his stomach, fingers coming to toy with his belt buckle.

"Hmmm?"

"Do I make you weak?"

In truth, Beth brought him to his knees every time she was near, but that wasn't what she was looking for, her soft expression, her innocent eyes on him. She meant making him a weak person.

"Do I look weak to you?" Well, that came out cocky.

When she cast her gaze down, he didn't get it. Beth's fingers caught through one of his belt loops like she needed to make sure he wasn't gonna run away. Okay, it needed to be truth time. Everything needed to be laid out on the table, whatever it was...whatever she needed from him.

"Beth?"

"I think...I know she was...is your friend, but Carol, I think she thinks I make you weak." Once Beth started, getting those first words out, all the rest just spilled. "She told Rick you could be my husband but you couldn't be just mine. She said that once we leave, you'll realize you made a mistake, that you were complacent...but I think she meant me...I'm the mistake, and I don't know why. She thinks Rick's weak too. I don't want to cause problems...that's why I didn't tell you before."
It was just all crashing down. Beth all wound up, questioning herself, people in his house trying to manipulate behind his back...this shit wasn't gonna fly. He had a mind to march down the hall and set Carol straight, but he needed to be with Beth, tell her how it was.

"I'm a fighter, Beth. Fought my entire life." It wasn't cocky; it was the truth. He lifted her chin so she would look at him while he said what he had to say. "I fought to stay alive. I fought for Merle, and Sophia, the farm, the prison. I've always fought and bled for our group. I've fought, but I've never had someone of my own to fight for 'til you. You make me strong. You make me wanna fight for myself. And I'm gonna keep fighting for us, no matter what."

That brought a small smile back to her lips. He was never good with words, but sometimes when he meant it, the words just came out right. God, he wanted to kiss her, taste her, forget about everything else, tangled up in her body, finding love in Beth's arms and comfort between her thighs.

"What happened with Carol? Why did she leave the prison? Did something happen?"

There it was, the real question. It was very different from what he originally assumed, the question that set him off. Daryl was starting to realize he missed a whole hell of a lot in this conversation Beth heard between Carol and Rick. He wasn't ready to tell Beth, but she already seemed to know that Carol leaving the prison had nothing to do with the Governor's attack. He'd told her to be careful around Carol, didn't ever think he needed to tell her why. He wanted to protect her from all that, but sometimes protecting someone meant telling hard truths.

"Rick made her leave...banished her." There was still so much of the story missing for him. He had no idea what happened after the prison, how in the hell everyone else met up, why Rick took Carol back.

"Banished...why?"

Beth's voice...she wasn't surprised, but she knew it was something bad. She was smart enough to know that in their world, the rules from before didn't always apply anymore. Sometimes moral lines had to be crossed to ensure survival. That meant if someone was sent away from their group, their family, which in and of itself could be a death sentence, they did something unforgivable.

"Phhh...she killed Karen and David."

There were excuses Carol gave with her confession, because they were sick, because they were going to kill everyone, because somebody had to do something, but none of those reasons mattered; it was still murder. Daryl was somebody. He did something. He went on a run for the meds, and people lived. Beth was shocked, but she didn't ask anymore questions of him. Maybe she saw it in his eyes, that it bothered him...a betrayal from one of their own. A killer within. But now it wasn't just his burden; it was her burden to bear too.

Beth, on her feet, pressed close, holding him tight, her cheek against his chest, it took him back to a place, before the prison fell, before Hershel died, before Carol murdered, a moment when he should've been comforting her, but instead she saw his need for comfort. A hug...a hug after Zack died...a hug from anyone else he would've fought, but he hadn't had the strength, will, or desire to fight her. Daryl didn't know how he felt about fate, destiny, all that shit...always kinda thought he made his own, but maybe Beth was meant to be his. He was meant to be Beth's. Maybe that was how it was meant to be all along.

The gunshot shook the silent night. Others followed in quick succession.

"Daryl," Rick called urgently from the hall just as Daryl grabbed up his crossbow.
"Stay here," he got out to Beth before he flew out the door.

It was only a matter of time before the real world came knocking... found them again. Tonight seemed to be that night.

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Shit, he was outta shape, starting to breathe heavy by the time he and Rick made the run to the main gates by the guesthouse. To be fair, the ache in his side reminded him he'd been sidelined for a bit. Daryl needed to work back up to the heavy lifting. Everybody else who decided to see what there was to see was close behind, but it was all over and done with, the bodies piled up on top of each other just outside the wrought iron gates by the time they got there. Daryl was trying to hold it in, biting it back...the rage that fought to be unleashed. It was no more than ten of 'em. Just ten walkers. Ten walkers couldn't break the gate. Ten walkers...they could've taken the time to put 'em down quietly. Ten walkers meant shit, but ten gunshots...

One gunshot and no one or nothin’ could locate you unless they were close already or really good at tracking...

Two...two and your location was compromised...

More than two and you might as well put a gun to your fucking head and pull the trigger yourself.

Daryl had to turn away, walk away, run his hand through his hair, trying to wrap his brain around it all.

"Are you crazy?!" Rick shouted.

It was probably better Rick was taking point. He commanded more respect and was less likely to tear someone limb from limb.

"You got a problem? There was a threat. We eliminated the rotting sons of dicks."

Of course...of course it was gonna be Abraham taking a stand against Rick...against them.

"You do not fire a gun unless your back is against the wall. You do it quiet. You don't go in guns blazing like some half-assed western. You can't do that when you're trying to hold a location." Rick was trying real hard...trying to hold it together.

Abe and his crew, well, they may have been on the road the whole time, never tried to stay in one place, but they had to know...they knew sound drew walkers. For men like Abe, men who lived just for the fight, sometimes knowing didn't matter though. He was a hammer, saw everything else...every threat...as nails. A hammer only had one function, and that function wasn't thinking. That was dangerous.

"Job's done. Don't like how I got it done, don't ask me to hold the gate. If more come, we'll take those out too."

If more come? Take those out too?

"You got all the answers, huh?" Daryl couldn't hold his tongue anymore, moving towards Abe so he
couldn't ignore. "'Til I brought your sorry asses in, there hadn't ever been a fucking gunshot here. No walkers neither!"

"Calm your tits, Deliverance. Do you hear anymore coming? It was just these."

Rosita moved in, shoving Abe back, trying to shut his mouth.

"Yeah...calm...we'll see how calm you are when a herd rolls through after hearing from three counties over. Or people. You think them gates gonna hold then? Might as well advertise 'welcome, vacancy'."

Yelling and fighting in the open was no better than gunshots, but it didn't fucking matter anymore.

And Abe, Rosita, Eugene...did they even care? They wanted this to happen. They needed a reason to leave. Needed everyone to go along without a struggle.

"Daryl...Daryl..." Rick was trying to get his attention, running interference, trying to keep him from getting at Abraham.

Daryl finally blew out the air he'd been holding...stopping, letting Rick win because he wasn't gonna let him by no matter what.

"Go on back to Beth. I'll handle this down here. Getting more worked up isn't gonna help. We're not going to solve anything out here tonight." Rick had the good courtesy to move in close and tell him how it was so nobody else got to hear.

Rick was right, but that didn't make backing down any easier.

"Whatever," Daryl spat, turning away from the confrontation.

"Daryl, wait," Maggie called out.

Whatever she wanted, whatever she thought that she could say to make it better, being his sister-in-law and all, well, he wasn't gonna stand around and listen. She might be family, he got that; he'd said that to her, we're family now whether you like it or not, except now he was the one not liking it.

Glenn and Maggie were all chummy with Abraham and his people. As far as he was concerned, right now, that made it feel like they'd picked their side. He just ignored and kept on moving. He couldn't ignore though when a hand grabbed at him, clamping down on his arm. Shirking away, he swung around to face Carol.

"Don't touch me." Spitting venom, he was in no mood to play nice, especially with her.

"You need to calm down. This isn't the end of the world."

So superior. So entitled. Of course she was right in the middle of the drama.

"How 'bout you mind your own fucking business. You don't get to tell me what to do."

She looked at him all stunned and broken like he'd laid the back of his hand across her face. There was a time where he might've bowed to what she said, a time when her admonishment would have gotten to him, when they were both very different people, but those times didn't just change. They were gone. Daryl left her standing, mouth all agape, surprised that he had the balls to stand up to her in front of everyone.

He didn't look back on any of 'em, starting his long walk in the dark back to the house, trying to
compose himself so he didn't take his anger back to Beth. Now he just had to find a way to tell her that their safety was compromised, their sanctuary possibly lost. It might be a long walk in the dark, but it sure in the hell wasn't long enough to prepare him for that reality.
Chapter 65

Chapter Notes

~Author's Note: I hope you guys enjoy this chapter. Part of it is a little NSFW. For everyone in the United States, I hope you have a wonderful 4th of July holiday! Thank you as always!~

Carol killed Karen and David.

Beth sat on the floor on the far side of the room between the bed and the wall. Hugging her knees tight to her chest, she wasn't hiding. One of Daryl's guns was laying on the floor beside her, and she knew how to use it. She just needed the comfort of a smaller spot. Daryl told her to stay even though she knew most everyone else probably ran towards the sound of danger. She stayed because Daryl hadn't told her wrong yet. The gunshots...it had just been those fired at the beginning; no others followed, but that didn't make waiting any easier. Something bad went down out there, and inside...inside the safety of their home, now she had questions about Carol and her motivations. Being alone with these new revelations was torture enough.

No one had clean hands anymore. They all did what they had to in order to stay alive.

...Beth, the world doesn't give us many choices anymore. Most of the time, it's just live or die. That doesn't make us monsters. We're just survivors...

That was Daryl's take on killing to survive, and she believed him...well, didn't just believe him...knew it was true. She killed. She'd seen Daryl kill. Beth even watched Carl shoot the boy in the woods during the Governor's first attack, but this...this was different. Beth didn't know much of what happened after the outbreak at the prison, going into isolation with Judith, but she knew Karen and David were killed. Everyone in their family did. She was smart enough to know that however they were killed, it was done up close and personal and not with a gun. Gunfire echoed in the prison, and they didn't hear anything. Did Carol cut their throats? Stab them in the heart?

Carol killed Karen and David.

Beth went back and forth, locking their bedroom door, unlocking it, then locking it again, trying to deal with the new reality of her world and the people she lived with. She finally decided on unlocked because Daryl was out there. If something happened to him, it wouldn't matter anymore anyway; there wouldn't be a reason to care. Imagining how Carol might have tried to justify her actions...killing two people to stop a sickness from spreading, that they were sick and dying...things Carol might tell herself to help her sleep at night, even someone with marginal intelligence could see past those kind of justifications. They were just excuses, nothing more. So many people had already been exposed...all those who lived in D block, all the people who went in the morning the outbreak started...Rick, Glenn, Daryl, Sasha, Ty, even Carol. And Carol, she exposed herself to an even greater chance of infection. Killing Karen and David, coming in contact with their blood, bringing it back to everyone else. Would she have killed anyone who got sick? When Daryl led the run for medicine, Daddy went in to help Dr. S with the infected. If Daryl hadn't gotten back when he did, if Daddy contracted the sickness, would Carol have killed him? Or Glenn...Glenn was sick in there too. Judith...that thought made Beth nauseous. Carol would've never killed a child, especially after losing her own daughter...would she?
Daryl said Rick banished Carol from the prison for what she did, but how did she end up here if she was forced to leave? What kind of hold did she have over Rick that she thought she could talk to him like she did earlier? Calling him weak, being all condescending, telling him the way she thought things had to be. Rick had done right by them all along. They hadn't always been happy with him and his decisions, but he kept them alive. Right now, it didn't feel like they needed any outside forces like walkers to ruin what they had; the conflict building inside was threatening to tear them apart from within. And now...now whatever was going on out there...

Stop...just stop.

There was no use pondering it...contemplating, especially what happened in the past. Carol...whatever she did, whatever the reasons and excuses, it was done. The only thing to worry about was the future, and Beth had the truth now. Instead of feeling unsure about what she was sensing with Carol, she knew that something stronger and more powerful had been driving her feelings of ill-ease. It was instinct. Beth was relieved Daryl was on the same page. The revelation about Karen and David showed her that her instincts were strong, maybe not as strong as his, but strong all the same. Even though it was petty, the most insecure part of Beth was thankful that there had been a misunderstanding between her and Daryl...that Daryl thought she was doubting him in regards to a relationship with Carol. She didn't want to be that kind of woman, the one who questioned her husband's past, especially with Daryl when she knew his was so painful and he was so self-conscious about the subject. But Daryl offered it up, and he was extremely adamant about it...about never having slept with Carol. The fact that he'd been harsh with his words, said some things that were cutting and uncomfortable, that showed just how serious he was.

What everything boiled down to...Beth wasn't stupid...she was old enough to understand, Abraham, Rosita, Eugene, whatever mission they had driving them that Carol was so radically in support of, they needed to get to it and take whoever else wanted to go along with them sooner rather than later. Maggie might go, and Glenn...she hoped not. Well, all of them might go, but if that was how it needed to be, so be it. If they left, the group would be split again. It might make them weak, but pitting everyone against each other, that was worse; it would make them even weaker than cutting down their numbers. It made them doubt themselves. They needed to go if that's what they wanted, but Beth could never tell Daryl this...what she thought. He would do whatever he believed would make her happy despite what he felt was the right choice, and Beth didn't want to influence him that way. Daryl would have to come to his own conclusion so he didn't make a rash decision he might regret later in regards to them, their family and the others they brought along with them...whether they stayed or went. There was no manipulative intent in her. Beth wasn't going to play the role of Lady Macbeth, whispering in Daryl's ear. Carol was doing enough of that with Rick.

She calmed herself, trying to push everything else aside. There was one thing they both needed...both wanted. Daryl needed to have her, and she wanted to be had. It was an overwhelming desire, one she hadn't fully understood before, but now...well, knowing made waiting and anticipating all the worse.

When he finally came back to her, when that door finally opened, Beth was kneeling in the middle of the bed waiting for him...waiting to be there for him, whatever he needed because she needed it...him too. All her anxiety, all the confused images and thoughts creating chaos in her head because of D.C., the idea that there was a chance they might have to leave their home, Carol...all of it was banished...conquered by the singular need to be alive. And whatever happened out there, it had absolutely nothing to do with what was going to happen in their bed.

"Beth?" Daryl whispered, his voice drawn and affected as he looked her up and down in the dim light glowing from the one bedside lamp she left on for him.
It was like he didn't expect to see here there like that, her concerns for every other portion of their world erased, waiting for him. And then, seeing that, he looked away like he couldn't face her.

"There were walkers at the gates. 'Bout ten of 'em." He was angry...and lost...

Beth didn't have to ask for details; she could piece it together herself. Somebody had the bright idea to shoot those ten walkers when they could have taken them down silently. Now there was the chance that more heard; more could be on their way. That scared her a little, this threat that just seemed to appear, but saying something wasn't going to help the situation. It was better just to let Daryl talk...say whatever he needed to say.

"I thought this place...it seemed different. I ain't stupid. Just thought we'd get a little more time here...together before all hell broke loose. This place...it seemed special."

Beth could handle pissed Daryl, she could handle Daryl when he was angry, but now he was doubting himself, his shoulders slumping forward in defeat over something which he had no control. Tonight she wasn't gonna stand for it, but she had to go about it carefully. Emotions were running high; anything she said contradicting his own opinion of himself with her passion that she knew the truth about him and who he was might come off as berating, even if that wasn't her intent...it could put him in a worse place, making him confrontational.

"They still keep comin', Lil' Bit. They find us no matter where we go. I can't keep you safe."

Wishing Daryl would close the distance between them, come to the bed so she could touch him...that was the one power she had over him...the power of her touch, but he didn't. If she went to him now, Beth knew enough about Daryl and his insecurities to realize he would read it as pity. That wasn't where they needed to go.

"You could build a fortress around me and we still might not be safe. The world would eventually catch up to us, but it doesn't matter..." It all played out so perfectly in her head, but Daryl didn't give her a chance to finish.

"You're right, it don't matter. Nothin' I do is ever good enough." Hating that Daryl was in this place of doubt, Beth chose to ignore what he said, knowing she needed to get him away from it.

"It doesn't matter because we can't know the future...but I'm not afraid of being alive." Daryl was quiet now, his thoughtful eyes on her, listening to what she said. Sometimes quiet Daryl wasn't a good thing... It was a warm feeling, knowing she could reassure him...comfort him. It was her strength. "We don't know if there is a tomorrow, but we get tonight..."

Beth let her shoulder drop, ever so slightly, imperceptible to anyone but her, the nightgown slipping down her arm. Everything was still covered, but the oh so subtle change, it caught Daryl.

"Don't you think that's beautiful?" Beth, running her teeth gently over her lower lip, knowing she could be seductive, at least to Daryl.

His eyes spoke volumes, the way they took her in, worshipped her, wanted her...sometimes the intensity in them made Beth uneasy, scared her, but now...

"You're beautiful..."

Even though his eyes told her everything she needed to hear...his words, they made her heart skip a beat. Looking down, she couldn't take his gaze and his voice, but Beth did take great satisfaction in
the place she could bring Daryl to. Smiling softly to herself, Beth knew, if anything, she would be able to offer him comfort and pleasure for one night. He always made everything about her. Tonight it would be about him.

"...The world would eventually catch up with us, but it doesn't matter..." The softness of her voice, the bright faith radiating from her eyes...Beth was trying to lull him into a false sense of security, trying to make him feel better.

He wasn't naive. Didn't know shit about women, but he knew what Beth was doing, knew what she was about, knew the way she was working. He wanted to give in, believe it didn't matter, but the whole fucking world was waiting out there to kill them, and he had to be realistic if they were gonna keep alive.

"You're right, it don't matter. Nothin' I do is ever good enough."

Well shit, now he was just going and feeling all sorry for himself. And Beth was persistent. Just decided to talk right over what he said.

"It doesn't matter because we can't know the future...but I'm not afraid of being alive." When she went poetic like this, about life, it always caught him especially deep. Darkness was always closing in on them, even when he let himself pretend he was holding it at bay. Beth always held onto the light, despite the darkness, even if it was the smallest ember. He fought the dark, and she nurtured the light. "We don't know if there is a tomorrow, but we get tonight..."

Casting her eyes down, she'd won. He couldn't put up a fight if he wanted to. Daryl never wanted this moment to fade, never wanted to close his eyes. He wanted to remember Beth like this always. The delicate, gentle girl, his wife, kneeling in the middle of their bed, calming his troubled soul...the demons that tore at him from the inside with just tender words and things she believed to be simple truths. Her faith and constancy made him strong, but not strong enough that he didn't need her. That was a weakness he was willing to accept.

He watched the wisp of material fall off her shoulder, baring it and part of her creamy pale chest in the faint light, shifting on his feet, fighting the need. This happened before, to two different people from another world it seemed, when he'd been confused and awkward and she shy and demure, refusing to look at him, quickly pulling her pink sweater back up onto her shoulder. The prison seemed like a lifetime ago. Now she met his eyes with quiet confidence and made no move to cover. Daryl's soul was stirred by her haunting image...but his soul wasn't the only thing stirred.

"Don't you think that's beautiful?"

She was right. They didn't know if they had tomorrow. Hell, they didn't know if they had five more minutes left, but maybe that was what made life so precious, knowing it was just a fleeting moment, and finding that one person...Beth...who made him want to live forever. Time would eventually kill them both if the walkers didn't get to them first, but not their love. She would never be more beautiful than she was in this moment because he had her now.

"You're beautiful..."

They were the only words that he could manage to give her. Beth's breathy gasp...it made his heart
beat double time, still having no fucking idea how someone like him was able to take her breath away. Daryl didn't even realize he was doing it, pulling his shirt over his head, until he flung it aside. Going for his pants, Beth shook her head no, coming off the bed to him with catlike grace, pushing the sleeve of her nightgown back up over her shoulder when it should be coming off...hitting the floor. Making good on the implicit promise she made earlier when toying with his buckle, Beth didn't just unfasten it, but wrested the entire belt free from his belt loops, letting it fall. Freeing her tussled hair from its tie, Daryl's fingers raked through the silken mass at the base of her neck, closing, pulling back, forcing her to look up at him. Her eyes...they might be the most extraordinary part of her. He was almost too focused, almost too lost in her that he didn't feel her hands at his waist, working at his pants button...almost didn't, but he did. Beth's fingers, they still weren't sure or entirely confident, but she wasn't afraid...knew exactly what she wanted...was going to do.

He knew what she wanted...sure in the hell knew what he wanted, but he wasn't so sure how Beth wanted it. He was in virgin territory again. Never been with the same woman more than once. Only been with Beth just the one time...her first time. Fuck it all anyway. He was gonna end up over thinking it. Maybe all that mattered was he knew what they both needed. Beth's delicate fingers making contact with his hip almost broke him...it was torture. He wanted her hand to go down, but instead it traveled up, painstakingly slow, tracing the center of his stomach, eventually up over his collarbone. Fuck, he was tense...tense because of what happened tonight...walkers, people, and she felt it...was perceptive enough to feel it in him, her palm coming to rest firm against the side of his neck where it tightened under her touch.

"Just let go..."

Just let go...Let go...

She was giving him permission...everything he needed to hear...what he needed.

Let go.

Beth...she was willing to give, and tonight, he just really needed to take. Pushing her back towards the bed, pressing hard when she had nowhere else to go, he forced the nightgown off her shoulders, gentling only 'cause he didn't want to tear it...ruin it. There were so few pretty things left to her in their world. Freeing Beth's perfect breasts, cupping her soft flesh, exquisite pink nipple hardening when his thumb passed back and forth over it...Daryl dove into her neck, lips assaulting her skin, the fragrant strands of her hair tickling his face. This time, Beth didn't resist; she melted into him. When his mouth found hers, she was hard pressed to keep up until she finally just stopped trying, letting him lead...dominate. Only pulling back when she had to have a breath, and he forced her to catch it quickly...not willing to let her go.

Daryl couldn't say how they made it on the bed...it was a miracle though in his state...he would've been more than willing to take her up against it. Cock throbbing hard, he just needed to be in her. He stopped though, pulled back, making himself see Beth, remember she was there. She was on her knees in front of him, her lips red and swollen, going to run her teeth across the bottom one; but she stopped herself...it was probably too tender. He wasn't moving...wasn't touching her, wasn't saying nothing, just on his knees in their bed too, Beth watching him closely, questioning with her eyes, expression confused at the distance he kept between them. She looked a little overwhelmed. Why did feelings have to be so fucking complicated? Daryl was feelin' all sorts of shitty for forgetting about Beth and what she might need. Tonight it was really clear what he needed...what he was planning to do. The way he was going, he was just using her for his own release...his own pleasure, and she deserved more than that, more than what he'd done to every other woman he'd ever fucked.

He couldn't just fuck Beth...
"Come here..." Voice forced and raspy, he wasn't even sure how he was able to speak.

But he needed Beth to come to him. If he moved toward her in the slightest bit, he'd be totally lost.

She had to come to him...

And she did...

Daryl caught her lips, all soft and gentle this time. Slow...just lips, letting her take it wherever she wanted to go. Her tongue was shy, all timid coming to dance with his, not that they'd never been there before but because Beth was smart enough to know he'd stopped himself for a reason...needed a second of calm to cool down and that too much of anything would send him right back to where he'd been, threatening to go over the edge. Same reason she restricted her touch to his chest, his arms, the back of his neck instead of touching him...even though he wanted that...needed her hands wrapped around his dick no matter what it did to him. But she knew better.

Beth didn't pull away when his hand slid down her stomach...fingers through her silky blonde curls beneath. She knew where he was going, not shying from him. He needed to find her...get Beth there too...get her to really need him, not just think she needed him. Reminding himself to be gentle...tracing the soft folds of her, Beth opened to him. He'd done absolutely nothing for her, not a fucking thing, and she was so slick...hot...burning to the touch. It was one thing for him to be on so quick all the time. All Beth had to do was look at him, and he'd be rearing and ready to go at a moment's notice, like it or not...fought it most the time until recently. But Beth, all wet and warm and welcoming when he'd barely touched her...God, that meant she wanted him...needed him as bad as he need her, all prepped and primed for him.

Pressing Beth back on the bed, hair spread out around her head like a white-gold crown, she didn't fight him one bit. Daryl was gonna make sure Beth got something...what she needed outta the whole deal for herself because as soon as he sunk his cock in her...well, he wasn't stupid. Knew himself good enough to know he was gonna go quick. Not even having to ask or coax her, Beth spread her long legs for him, inviting Daryl to settle between their comfort. It was a beautiful welcome. Running his hands up their silken lengths, looming over her, he paused just long enough to make eye contact...make that connection with Beth before he dipped his head down, tasting her breast. Flicking his tongue teasingly over her stiffening flesh, Beth's fingers threaded in his hair, pulling at him, the others gripping his bicep tight, squeezing even harder when his muscles tensed at her touch.

So consumed in his own enjoyment, Daryl lost tack of Beth's hands...that was dangerous...until one wrapped firm and tight around his raging shaft. Pulling back sharply, teeth raking over her nipple, a half pained half pleasured groan fell outta his mouth. He almost stopped her, almost told her no 'cause he couldn't handle her just touching him, not now...he was already there. But that wasn't it...that wasn't what she intended, what she wanted. It was an end to their foreplay that hadn't even started for her yet. But she decided she was done with that, literally taking matters into her own hands, guiding his cock to her...where he was aching to be. He'd never been one to much like women taking charge or being dominant, but from Beth, this little gesture set his world to flames.

He had to fight it, fight losing it...that was going to be his battle for the rest of his life being with Beth. Her small hand in stark contrast to his throbbing cock, her urgency, her need for him to take her, it made him feel so fucking awake and wildly alive. And Beth's shy expression, for just one beautiful instant, shifted to the tiniest seductive smile as the sensitive tip of his dick slipped into her honeyed entrance. Daryl's own urgency, need, desire...all coursing through his body, burning through his veins...drove him forward. She gasped, pulling back from his abrupt thrust that seated him all the way in her slick heat...he was fighting pleasure, pain, and guilt, gripping her thigh tight with calloused fingers...trying to steady himself with a hand forced hard against the mattress. Beth
had been playing with fire, didn't know what she was asking for or doing...but he should've known better than to be so quick about it. He was a prick; maybe he always would be. Burying his face in her soft hair at her neck, Daryl held still, trying to catch his breath...maybe just trying to settle himself.

"Sorry, Beth..." Hating that he had to apologize to her in bed.

But her labored breathing in his ear...not helping to keep him calm at all...

"No...don't stop...Please..."

Holy fuck...

Beth's whispered plea, her palm kneading firm into his lower back, her lips tickling...teeth catching and gently tugging at his earlobe...where in the hell did she learn that? Daryl did let himself go...letting go just to the point of what he thought Beth could take, what he was willing to ask of her. Long, powerful strokes that sated his need...but remembering that Beth was there too. Even though he started out just needing to take, thinking that was all he was capable of doing tonight, after a minute consumed with himself, he wanted...no, needed to touch Beth...please her...

"You okay?"

"Yeah..." Breathless and beautiful...

He took her lips softly, a sharp contrast to the invasion the rest of her body was accepting, their sweet taste lingering in his mouth after she pulled them away, too distracted to focus on his kiss. They grazed his flesh where his neck met his shoulder, Beth burying her head there, arms wrapped tight around him, trying desperately to pull closer when there was no fucking way they could be anymore connected. Daryl could feel the soft noises she was biting back against his neck, trying to hide them when he wished she wouldn't...wished she would let go...share. He sure in the hell didn't try to hide what he was feeling even if he sounded like a fucking animal, probably couldn't if he tried. Despite how far gone he'd been before they even started, Daryl held out longer than he could've hoped, prolonging both the pleasure and the torture of being with Beth. Her breasts heaving against his chest, the soft sheen of sweat clinging to her skin, the way she tasted, Beth's scent...warm and fresh like spring...it was all too much to comprehend with the tension he was holding onto, the tension building that made him want to scream...and the tiny tremors he could feel in her molten core. He wasn't good at this. Daryl had no delusions about his skills in bed. Sure, he knew what went where, what got him off, but he'd never needed or wanted to be a good lover. With Beth though...with them, everything seemed to fit...work like it was meant to be, like he didn't have to try all that hard to get her there.

Beth tensing, clinging hard to him, so desperate...when she came, it was everything he needed. Her spasms took him to his own desperate place of no return...several hurried thrust before the final drive full and deep in Beth, spilling into her, the pulses of his pleasure burning out with his final surges until he was totally spent. But the best part about that moment with her wasn't that he came, that all his tension and worry were released and forgotten in those seconds of pure bliss, but that Beth...she cried out against his neck, trying to hold back but not able to. And when she cried out, it was his name on her lips. Resting his forehead against hers, Daryl closed his eyes, breathing Beth in, feeling her, her body trembling under his...not from fear or anxiety...just from the experience...just from being. It was beautiful...she was beautiful. He stayed with her, in her, on her a long while, knowing that's what she wanted...what he wanted too. Beth's hand trailed down his back, his skin sensitive and receptive to her comforting touch. When he had the strength to move, rolling off her, Daryl refused to break contact for long.
"Come here..." He was hoarse as hell.

The words weren't necessary anyway 'cause he wasn't giving Beth a choice, pulling her close. Hand resting behind his head on a fluffy down pillow, arm wrapped around his girl, Beth's head laying on his chest where he still breathed deep...he was content. The still moments passed...moments of together when before Beth he would've wanted nothing more than to get away, to be left alone...and now, there wasn't nowhere else he'd rather be. Catching up a stray lock of her soft hair, letting it fall through his fingers, he marveled at the smallest things about her that made him happy. It was wrong, but the whole world could burn to ash around them, and as long as he had Beth, it wouldn't matter. That story sounded familiar 'cause it was...the way they began. World falling apart...check. Just him and Beth...check. He'd learned what love was; he was happy.

"Oh my God..." Beth's sudden breathy exclamation brought him outta his quiet place of contemplation before he was ready to leave.

She was hiding her head at his shoulder, snuggling closer, for what, comfort? Protection? He had no idea what in the hell was going on with her.

"Beth, you okay?"

Nothing.

"Lil' Bit, what's wrong?"

He could feel her shaking her head against him. Leaning over, Daryl tried to brush her hair back, tried to get her to look up at him, finally seeing her wide eyes staring back. She was all flushed, as much as he could see in the faint light.

"What is it?"

"Rick's next door. What if he heard...us?"

Shit. Daryl was starting to feel a little bit Beth's embarrassed concern. The first time they'd been together, everybody had been glued to the TV downstairs. Now, now it was back to business, the new normal. He didn't know if everyone had made it back in from Abraham's fucking walker shoot at the main gates...he assumed they did. Didn't hear 'em. Wasn't really paying attention, but he'd sat on the porch for a while before he could bring himself to come back to Beth before...well, before they landed in bed together. Yep, he was sure everyone was back in the house by now.

No one wanted the room next to the newlyweds. Made Beth aware. Tyreese made it abundantly clear he wasn't sleeping next to you two. Said he'd rather sleep in the princess room...So, it looks like you're stuck with me as your neighbor. Let's keep that in mind when it's time to turn in...

Rick's words were ringing around in his head, and that stupid grin he'd had on his face that wouldn't go away...he remembered that too. It had all just been in good fun. Rick was his friend. Daryl tried to remember that.

And Daryl wasn't gonna let Beth see that he was bothered.

"Rick didn't hear nothin'. It's an old house. Walls are thick." He didn't know if that was true or not, but he didn't need Beth to be all self-conscious over it when she'd just really started to get more comfortable with him...comfortable enough to let go and enjoy.

Rick would never say anything to Beth anyway. If Rick said something, it would be to him...ribbing and teasing the hell outta him, but Daryl didn't think that was gonna happen neither. Beth sighed,
unconvinced.

"You don't gotta worry. Nobody heard nothin'. It ain't none of their business neither." Daryl assured.

She didn't say nothin' else, just relaxed on him as he stroked her bare back. The quiet came again.

Turning his head away on the pillow a little where Beth couldn't see, Daryl caught himself smiling.

He was a dick. Despite feeling intensely protective of their privacy...their entire relationship, the
gentle comedown from making love to Beth made him feel something else. It was an odd, confused
sort of thought, something she would probably hate him for if she ever knew, but just then, Daryl
didn't care if anyone heard...had that knowledge that he had so fully laid claim to Beth and at the
same time was able to please her so thoroughly. He didn't have nothin' to prove, but the fact that
there might be some proof...maybe it wasn't such a bad thing for feeling secure in his life with Beth.

This was a thought he was gonna be keeping to himself 'cause he knew he would probably regret it
in the morning if anyone even looked at him cross-eyed. Right now though, he was just content to
feel.
Chapter 66

Chapter Notes

~Author's Note: This chapter is kinda a lot of fluff...some cute, some awkward, some realistic, and NSFW. Hope you enjoy. Thanks as always.~

The earliest grays of morning were peeking in through the edges of the curtains...not quite morning yet, just the first deceptive light of false dawn. Deceptive...but still the herald of the day that was to come. Beth didn't remember falling asleep...slipping off into oblivion without even knowing, but she needed it after the stresses of the night were sated by the bliss Daryl shared with her. It didn't just seem early, it was early, but Beth knew better than to try to close her eyes again; it would be useless. She was so wide awake the moment she realized she was caught, wrapped up in his arms. She couldn't see Daryl, but she could feel the steady rise and fall of his solid chest against her back. Beth gently traced his rough, scarred knuckles where his hand rested on the bed beside her, stopping, focusing on the ring...the silver wings that held his finger captive.

And Daryl...her thoughts quickly shifted to him. He was such a possessive sleeper...but no, that was wrong, not possessive. Protective. He was a protector above all things. Maybe it was that she never imagined Daryl in love before or sleeping with someone. Not sex. Sex didn't require the vulnerability and intimacy of sleeping beside someone, and they had been there long before they were ever together that way. Beth smiled remembering that first night sleeping beside him, on the floor of that cabin in front of the hearth after she'd been attached. It had been a cool day, a definite chill in the air, and a cold night. He'd given her his blanket first, then the warmth of his body. But maybe Daryl knew that she didn't just need his warmth, intuitive enough to realize she needed the sturdy comfort and security of him by her because he didn't just lay next to her; Daryl offered to hold her. When she went to him that first time, took the comfort he was offering, Beth had never felt someone so extremely tense. He'd been frozen, not even breathing. Eventually he relaxed, loosened up, starting to breathe again. It was either that or suffocate. Maybe then, for Daryl, that seemed like the easier choice...suffocating, but he finally let go.

Let go...

Thinking those words just brought back all the images and feelings of last night, and that wasn't going to help her stay still and not bother Daryl. She forced herself to push them away...

Waking up after that first night of sleeping next to him, Daryl was still holding her when he drew her from slumber, and it was like he was just a little changed, more comfortable...like nothing about sleeping next to her fazed him the night before when that was so very far from the truth. After that, the momentum of their life...their relationship...had been so fast, but the lack of time spent getting there didn't matter when you felt, especially when you could never really know just how much time you had left. And here they were now, sharing a life...Daryl the protective sleeper, and Beth learning and loving her new role as Daryl's lover and wife, sharing the most intimate things two people could. Beth's mind was back to wandering now, nothing to do about it.

Pulling free of Daryl's muscled arms, not an easy task, Beth rolled onto her back, brushing the stray tendrils of hair out of her face and staring up at the canopy. Daryl had been different than he was the first time. He'd been more sure, more uninhibited...no hesitation on his part. Maybe she wasn't
entirely prepared for the way it had been. He wasn't rough, not by any means, and Daryl, from the way Beth could feel his restraint, the tightness in his body when her hands were on him, his muscles rippling under her touch, the way he held back, the strength and sheer power Daryl possessed...Beth had no problem imagining what Daryl was capable of...what he'd been in the past. It was just, rationally, maybe she needed another night where Daryl was exceedingly gentle with her, but Beth was learning pretty quick that rational had very little influence over love and actual need when she and Daryl fell into bed together. Gentle hadn't been what they wanted...not what they really needed. Beth's entire body was aching because of it, still not used to the way things were, Daryl's touch, his weight on her, the way he moved, but there was no way she would ever complain. Daryl was hers; she just needed to learn how to be with him. And the deeper soreness...Beth crossed her knees under the sheet, pressing her thighs tight together for the comfort of the pressure. She wouldn't trade that distant pain for anything...the memory of what caused it, that reminder...still being able to feel him there. It was the best soreness she could ever envision.

When Daryl touched her this time, it was like he owned her...knew every part of her body. Well, that really wasn't new. From the beginning, Daryl always seemed to know just what to do...knew every curve, every dip, every sensitive spot she wanted...needed him to adore. Maybe it was just Daryl's amazing instincts that made him so good at touching her. Whatever it was, Beth was happy to be owned by him, and in return, taking possession of Daryl, capturing the parts of him that no one else would ever have.

She'd been left breathless and overwhelmed by his sudden advance, the shift in him from doubtful and defeated, the way he came to her after the eventful night down at the gates to something she couldn't describe...Daryl just driven into a hedonistic existence only they inhabited after she said it...just let go. There wasn't much to remember in those fevered moments except the scarcity of breath and Daryl consumed in her, finally forcing her back on the bed. It was intimidating, but she wanted it; her body sure hadn't denied that. But Daryl backed off, and she had a moment to breathe, process, feel her lips stinging but still aching for more. Beth watched him carefully, saw him...where he was...at the edge of a place he didn't want to go.

She had thought that maybe Daryl just needed to have her, do whatever he wanted to her, but that wasn't it. Knowing enough about him, she understood that past; that part of his life was something he wanted to leave behind. They'd talked about just sex before, Daryl assuring her he didn't need just sex. He told her he hadn't been with anyone since before the turn...reminded her of that last night when he went off on her about never having sex with Carol. And it wasn't like he wouldn't have had the chance. Things got comfortable and secure at the prison, not just for their family, but others...a community. There were plenty of people there, most of them people Daryl brought in, and those people, they worshipped him. Beth was sure there were plenty of women who would've been willing to share their bed with Daryl Dixon even if it was only for an hour. But that wasn't Daryl.

He made her come to him. He wasn't making her give; Beth knew he was trying to still himself. When she went to him, she had to remind Daryl who she was...who he was. He might need something more primal, more aggressive...there was part of her that needed it too even though she had no idea what that was...but she had to remind him with soft kisses, gentle touches, fingers skimming over his skin...bringing him back from the edge, back to her, to be with her. They could go to that place of abandon...let go...but they had to do it together.

And letting go with him, she couldn't wait forever. She needed him between her legs, any sense of hesitation gone, too impatient for love play...what Daryl was willing to give her despite his pressing state. Beth took matters into her own hands without much hesitancy. His hardness, the weight of him in her grasp, the contradictory expression of pain and pleasure etched rough across his face, it all made the anticipation in Beth's tummy impossible to bear. Relief and desire, a fire burning behind his
eyes when he realized, understood what she was doing...what she wanted...

Beth had to stop her thoughts again, embarrassment burning through her cheeks. Covering her face with her palms, a tiny breathy giggle hidden behind her hands. She hadn't blinked an eye doing it...during, but now...

That action though had driven Daryl...driven him to what she wanted but somehow still wasn't expecting, maybe not fully ready. His swift thrust, that immediate sense of being filled, forced to accommodate, it was a shock, and Daryl...he realized as soon as he did. But that feeling, it made Beth not just feel Daryl, but she felt whole...complete.

*I'm sorry* was on his lips; that wasn't what she wanted to hear. She just wanted him to feel, wanted to feel with him. She needed him to be still for just that split second but not stop. He didn't need to regret or doubt himself. His face was in her hair, his lips at her neck, his ragged breath hot against her skin. And Daryl...the tightness in his body, muscles flinching under the stress of the stillness when every part of him was screaming out to move...it made her an absolute mess. Beth begged him not to stop, the desperate plea of her hands trying to pull him closer, pull him deeper even though there was nowhere left for him to go...no more of him she could possibly take. His lips...his lips that had been at her neck...it wasn't his lips anymore but his teeth pressed against her sensitive skin. It wasn't a bite, not even the threat of a bite, but just the raw knowledge of that wild inclination tempered by the restraint not to go there...

Beth didn't know what allowed for his abandon, but Daryl showed absolutely no hesitation after that moment. Maybe it was her plea, her lack of trepidation, giving herself fully with no doubt, but his confidence, his sure, natural movements, his full possession of her, it was everything Beth imagined Daryl would be as a lover...not what he was before, but what he would be with her. Strong, commanding, just aggressive enough, every inch the man in bed as he was out of...no apologies needed. This was Daryl...her Daryl, and he showed her just what it felt like to be his. She felt like a woman, clinging to his hard body, caught in the throes of raw passion, crying out Daryl's name when she tired so hard not to...tried to make sure there was no chance anyone would ever know or hear.

But as the cold light of morning crept into their room, she still felt like an inexperienced little girl, blushing and flushing at her own thoughts, embarrassed by the memories. Still so new...it was just going to take a while. She was comfortable with Daryl; maybe she just needed to be comfortable enough with herself...with letting go.

Turning over, she hadn't noticed Daryl had gone to his back. Watching him, Beth moved close again, contemplating the man beside her, whether or not she should wake him.

"What were you thinkin' about?"

That startled her. She didn't realize he was awake. His voice still sounded soft and sleepy, maybe not all the way awake, but awake enough to be coherent.

"How long have you been up?" Beth avoided his question, replacing it with one of her own...speaking softly so as not to jar him.

"Since you pulled away...the whole time you've been fidgeting over there and thinking about last night." She really couldn't protest because it was the truth, but if he knew, why was he asking?

His eyes were still closed, hadn't opened to the day yet, but he was smiling just a little, all content and sweet with just a hint of cocky. He knew because he was still feeling it too, and he asked because he just wanted to hear her say it.
The alarm clock's shrill yell was a shock to the system...a harsh wakeup call back to reality.

"Umm-err..." Daryl growled, exerting an extreme amount of morning effort, stretching across the massive bed and swatting at the clock violently, sending it flying off the nightstand.

It clattered and clanged against the floor, but the alarm persisted. Smiling to herself, Beth knew all along that Daryl's assault wouldn't silence it. She watched Daryl try to rub the sleep from his eyes, swiping his hair out of his face, groaning, flipping on the light beside him, not comprehending. He stretched and reached, leaning off the bed almost to the point of falling over trying futilely to reclaim the alarm until he realized there was no possible way he was going to get it without leaving the bed, and even if he was willing to, there was no point.

"What the hell..." Daryl righted himself on the bed, no longer teetering precariously over the edge.

"It's not ours; I think it's Rick's," Beth informed.

She never set their alarm. There hadn't been a reason to when it was just her and Daryl. They didn't need to conform to a larger schedule, consider anyone else except themselves, and Daryl was always an early riser. Then, once everyone got there, it was just a whirlwind of events...Daryl getting hurt, finally getting alone time, Daryl deciding to listen to Bob about taking it easy and healing. None of those things called for setting an alarm. But now...well, with Daryl, it was easy to forget they weren't alone, so when the world reminded them, it was a harsh realization. Time was a cruel master.

Rick apparently finally took the initiative to silence his alarm just as Daryl resituated himself next to her in bed, letting out a sigh of relief, his eyes closing, face falling back to a serene place like the alarm never went off. Propped up on the pillows, Beth reached down, brushing his bangs off his forehead, her finger tracing the line of stitches above his eye.

"Does it still hurt?" She kept her voice soft to try to preserve the reclaimed quiet of their morning, allowing Daryl to ease himself into the new day.

"Nope. Itches like crazy though."

"We'll take the stitches out in a day or two." Leaning down, kissing his hurt, smiling...

Daryl captured her fingers just as she started to move them again, caught her, seemed to know exactly where she was headed before she could get anywhere near his sewn up side. He just brought her hand to his chest, holding it there.

"I'm fine."

He might be fine, but the fact that he wouldn't let her touch it meant the wound was still tender...healing, but tender. Beth would have been more worried if he did nothing, had no reaction at all, trying to mask any pain he was feeling. But he was getting better at trying not to hide things, at least from her. After a few still moments, just resting her cheek at the side of his chest, Beth felt him loosen his grip on her hand, realizing she wasn't going to try to go there again. Instead, Beth idly trailed her fingers over his stomach, absolutely no intent of anything, just innocently exploring. Daryl had come such a long way from where they started, laying naked beside her, their clean white sheet draped below his hips, just barely covering him. Beth's hand wandered past his belly button to the lowest part of his tummy, fingertips tracing through the line of hair that started there.

"Treasure trail..."

She could feel his quiet laugh rumble in his chest at her silly whispered words, looking up at him, seeing that smile, Daryl rubbing his face to hide just a hint of embarrassment. Things were still new
for him too, no matter how much life experience he had. It was beautiful sharing...even the awkward moments. After that, her fingers didn't have any focus, any real purpose or intent, just needing contact, closeness...connection.

"Lil' Bit, you can touch me harder than that. I ain't gonna break. All you're doin' now is...tickling me."

Tickling or teasing?

He meant teasing, and something in Beth liked that, liked that reaction from him, that her touch, no matter how innocent the intent, unsettled him. It was probably the happiness in her eyes that read as mischief, as the hint that she was going to exploit that weakness. Whatever it was, Beth suddenly found herself pinned under Daryl.

"What are you gonna do now, Beth?" Voice full of grit, pressing a knee between her thighs. Daryl read her playful touch as something more.

It wasn't that she didn't want to; she did. It was just there were still other factors of the newness of it all. Beth knew if she didn't go about this carefully, she would kill Daryl's newfound confidence.

"Daryl, just be gentle..." He stopped, confused by her sudden reluctance. "It's just...I'm a little sore and..."

Daryl went from confused to self-conscious to concerned. This was exactly what she didn't want to happen.

"I hurt you? I'm sorr..."

She wasn't going to let him say it again. There were no apologies needed.

"No...I didn't say hurt, I said sore. It wasn't you; it's just how it is," Beth tried to explain.

There was a huge difference between being with Daryl and talking to him about it, especially when he was so close, over her, looking down on her, and she had absolutely no way to avoid even if she wanted to.

"I thought that would be done after the first time?"

Daryl might not be handling the reality well, but talking about it, he was handling that with more maturity and openness than she was. That seemed to make communicating a little easier.

"Maggie said...probably the first few times...that's normal..." Beth cringed inside, bringing her conversation with Maggie into their bed.

"I should've known better, Beth," Daryl sighed. At least it wasn't an apology.

There was no way he could've known...that had never been his world.

"It was what I needed...what I wanted," Beth reassured, feeling shy admitting it, but he accepted. "I'll be fine tonight."

That brought an almost smile to his lips, one she didn't get to see for long before his face was nuzzling against her neck. Where his mouth had been possessive with brutal intent in the dark of the night, now, with the light of morning, he was gentle, worshipping her.

"I got this..."
The way he said it, the way she could feel him saying it...his words vibrating on her warm flesh, it sent shivers down her spine. This she could handle, luxuriating in him adoring her body, showering her with kisses and soft touches. Lips brushing against her as light as whispers, fingertips barely grazing over her skin following the path of his lips prolonging the magical sensations, her shuddering breath testament to his effect on her. Daryl's beard scratched against the delicate skin just below her breasts where he rested his chin, taking a moment to look up at her, reaching out, caressing the side of her neck before his lips went back to work. Beth let herself relax against the pillows, closing her eyes, just enjoying...threading her fingers through his hair.

The calming effect didn't last for long...not long at all...totally banished when Daryl's lips met the tender spot of her inner thigh, a shock of lightening sending panic through her stomach. Last night she couldn't get Daryl between her legs fast enough; now, her flight response wasn't quick enough. He caught her thighs firm in his hands, steadying her, cutting off her escape. "Beth, you're fine. Just let me make it up to you."

His eyes on her, looking at her like that, how could she say no? Why would she say no now? She said no once already, but that seemed like a lifetime ago. Thinking on it, Daryl offering, asking nothing in return...it was intimacy at its purest. And more than likely, Daryl had never been here before either. It was just them...something only they would share. He was waiting, watching with those blue eyes that always burned so bright when they looked at her. Daryl wasn't going to do anything without her assent, so she nodded nervously even though her heart was beating so fast it was about to burst and the irrational panic in her wanted to cry out no.

She said yes, but Beth wasn't really all that cooperative, moving away, squirming under his touch, nervous and fearful movements she couldn't control. Daryl tried to soothe her, caressing gently down her side, but Beth still felt like she wanted to die a little on the inside. Daryl's hand spanned the distance between her hipbones, pressing gently against her abdomen, just firm enough to hold her still, thumb caressing back and forth...enough to make it feel like he wasn't forcing her, just trying to calm her. Beth had no idea what to expect, keeping her eyes shut tight, scrunched together. But that first moment Daryl's mouth found her, dipped down, tasted her for the first time, all her fear and inhibitions melted away. Her body involuntarily arching towards him...Beth clenching the sheets beside her in balled fists. Clearly, Daryl could feel there was no fight left in her, sliding his hand off her stomach, finding her hand instead, threading his fingers through hers, creating that small connection and intimacy she needed.

His tongue was hesitant...shy...barely touching and teasing...Beth chewing on her lip, trying to keep breathing. But when his tongue curled around her sensitive nub...so much contact, so alive with intense shattering sensations, she didn't have the power to try to do anything anymore. It wasn't just the butterflies beating in her tummy...the fluttery feeling was at her very core. Tiny pulses of concentrated pleasure started tingling...

"Daryl..." Rick's drawl preceded his soft knock on their bedroom door.

Both Beth and Daryl froze, caught in a compromising situation. The knock was louder the second time.

"Daryl, you awake? Daylight's burning. Need to go handle that situation at the gates and get those fences fixed."

Beth was mortified. This was almost as bad as the idea of Daddy coming to knock on her bedroom door while...it was an awful feeling. Daryl was sitting up now, shaking his head and smiling wryly at the irony of it all.
"Daryl?"

"Yeah...I'm up. Be down in a minute," Daryl called back after contemplating, maybe thinking if he didn't answer, Rick would just go away.

But that alarm clock went off, the sun was up, and reality was firmly in place. Rick left with his answer, leaving them to their last precious moments together. Daryl sighed, pushing away from her...but...

"Daryl..." Her voice was soft and pleading. "You're going...?"

He stopped, face spread with half a smile...a smile like he won something...well, he did. She fought him hard on this one...about letting him...and now, once she got a taste, Beth was desperate for him to stay.

"I'll stay if you wanna tell Rick why I'm making him wait." Daryl said it all playful, but Beth knew it was a serious matter. He wouldn't go if it wasn't.

Daryl leaned down placing a chaste kiss on her forehead.

"I'll come back to you, Li'l Bit. You rest. Get some sleep."

Yeah, like that was gonna happen.

Beth just sat there, sheet pulled tight over her breasts, watching Daryl throw on his clothes straight off the floor. He stopped by the side of the bed after he secured his crossbow over his shoulder, resting his hand on her bare leg where it was peeking out from under the white linen. Seeing something, Daryl narrowed his eyes, Beth seeing too, his gaze focused on the shadow of light bruises forming on her thigh. Noticing them now, Beth blushed and smiled soft, remembering how they got there, Daryl's hand gripping tight in the last instant when he spilled his warmth into her...the imprint of his fingers. He saw her reaction, realizing it was nothing for him to be worried about, even smiling a little too when hers didn't go away. His lips pressed soft against her thigh before he turned to leave, not in apology, just in acknowledgement. Beth stayed sitting for a moment in the bed after the door closed behind him, wrapping her arms tight around one of Daryl's pillows and drawing it close. Letting out a sigh, Beth fell back into her own pillows, exasperated and alone.
Bacon. It didn't make leaving Beth in bed or the shitty reality he faced this morning any easier, but it did dull some of the pain. Smelling it from all the way in the hallway, hearing it sizzle, his stomach started rumbling and aching. Daryl made a beeline for the stove, barely acknowledging the 'good mornings' from Bob and Sasha at the table. He grabbed for the crispy, fatty goodness...

"Son of a..."

...the searing hot bacon burning his fingers 'til he dropped them back on the plate, sucking the grease off his skin.

"It's hot," Michonne smiled and scoffed at him, piling more straight from the skillet onto the platter.

"Could've told me that before I went and burned myself."

"You'll live."

He had no will power this morning, grabbing another piece, just one this time, popping it in his mouth quick, hot grease dripping down his chin.

"You're a disgusting eater, you know that, right?" Michonne's playful scolding was welcome in preparing for the day.

Daryl stole another slice, shoving it in his mouth, licking off his fingers all dramatic like directed at her just to make a point. She scowled back.

"Give me some nice soy bacon over this greasy mess any day." Michonne exaggerated her wistfulness.

"Soy bacon?" Was that even a real thing? His disgust was genuine.

"Don't knock it until you've tried it. It's good."

"Yeah...it might be good for you, but I know it ain't good. I need protein." Thank God for the apocalypse. There was never a chance he was ever going to have to eat soy bacon.

"Soy is protein."

"Whatever...meat. I need meat, not that vegan vegetarian bullshit." Daryl went to grab for the rest of his breakfast, but Michonne blocked him with her turning fork, as quick and almost as deadly as she was with her sword.

"Get a plate, Daryl."

"Don't got time for a plate."

"Then wrap your heart attack’s worth of bacon in a of slice bread so you don't keep burning your hands and get grease all in your beard."

Daryl reluctantly gave in, folding his handful of greasy goodness in some toast.

"I think I might just take my protein...meat out on the porch and have a smoke with it."
Michonne just shook her head, throwing him a feigned glare of disapproval.

Leaning up against the counter, taking a bite of his makeshift sandwich, he caught Carl coming into the kitchen with Judith.

"Hey, where's your dad?"

"He said he was going to the barn for the wire and stuff to fix the fences while he waited for you to crawl out of bed." Well, everybody was having a good natured go at him this morning.

"Why are you all up so early anyway?" Daryl directed towards Bob and Sasha.

He was kinda hoping to have some private time to talk to Rick about everything that was going on, hoping that Rick hadn't recruited extra help to go out on a two man job.

"Bacon." Bob grinned. "I'm just here for the bacon." It was an honest answer at least, one Daryl could appreciate. "But how are you feeling? I haven't had much a chance to check in on you."

Daryl's free hand went instinctively to the sore place on his side. "I'm right as rain."

"You should let me take a look at it later, make sure you're healing up okay."

Daryl hated doctors in the first place, could usually take care of himself. And now he had a doctor...well, Bob...living under the same roof, could be on his case 24/7.

"Beth's been looking after me just fine." Bob cocked his eyebrow at Daryl's less than satisfactory answer. "Fine, if I got time later."

He caved, if that's what Bob needed to hear.

"You'll make time. Don't make me get Beth involved."

Now Bob was just playing dirty. But Judith started fussing in Carl's arms drawing the attention off of him. It only took a few seconds for the kid to quiet her...yep, she did it just for him. At least somebody was on his side this morning, even if it was just Judith.

"Hey, are you and Beth gonna have one of these?"

Daryl froze, like deer in the headlights frozen, so caught off guard by Carl's question. The bacon plate clattered on the table when it slipped out of Michonne's usually steady hands. She caught his expression, then flipped her attention to Carl, reprimanding.

"It's too early in the morning for that kind of question, and that isn't any of your business to start with."

The kid got all awkward and abashed with Michonne scolding him.

"I hope so..." Holy shit. Everyone looking at him was surprised by what they heard...they had no idea what he was feeling on the inside having said it. But there was no taking it back now.

It wasn't that it wasn't true, that he didn't eventually want that future with Beth, but answering...telling everyone that, spilling his guts...it was a shock to the system.

Michonne's expression went from stern in dealing with Carl to head cocked, processing what he said with a hint of a soft smile, not really smiling at him, but just smiling.
"Well, when you do have one, it needs to be a boy 'cause Judith needs to get married someday." Carl was taking a lot of liberty with Daryl's openness.

Sasha was all smiles. "Hmmph, Judith's going to be a cougar before she's even out of diapers."

He heard Sasha's laugh, heard what she said, but then he started thinking...really thinking...and feeling...nervous, worried, maybe a little bit irrationally excited, but most of all just scared shitless...all of those emotions mixed up inside.

He and Beth, they weren't trying or nothin', but they sure in the hell weren't doing nothin' to prevent it. Children one day, yes...a baby now though? But Beth said something before they ever slept together about not having...not being regular, and if that wasn't happening, if she wasn't...then that meant she couldn't get pregnant. That was the gist of it, right? Well, shit, he'd never been so irresponsible in his entire life...never took the chance of leaving behind a kid he'd never know, but this was so much more serious...a life with Beth...the possibility of another life. This was something they needed to sit down and have an honest conversation about, especially since it would be Beth's life on the line if something happened. Daryl's heart sank at that thought. How had he never considered that in the scope of things...in the lingering fantasy of his perfect life? Something could happen to Beth. Would the chance of a child even be worth it?

They needed to live in reality.

"Daryl?"

"Hmmm?" Snapping back to present, he hadn't even realized Rick showed up on scene.

"You good? Ready to go?"

"Yeah..." Daryl dropped his breakfast, forgotten, on the counter, suddenly feeling too queasy to eat anything.

"Sasha, before you do anything else today, I want you to make out a night watch schedule for down at the main gates. I don't want Abraham or his people on watch either." At least Rick was thinking clear, actually thinking about things that needed to get done and doing them. That's why Rick was a good leader.

"Got it. Daryl, you want to take the watch tonight, get it over with quick?"

Was Sasha talking to him? Yeah, she said his name; that meant she was talking to him.

"That's fine. I'll take it."

"I got tonight," Rick stepped up, offering to take his place, maybe sensing something was off, just hearing it in his voice.

"No, really, I'm fine. I got it," Daryl asserted.

Maybe it was a godsend. Just because he wanted Beth every second of every day didn't mean he could have her whenever he wanted. Even if she wanted him too...they didn't seem to be having a problem there...but Beth said she was sore. She still needed time to get used to everything. The only way he could make sure he gave her that time was to not be with her at night, at least not tonight. Then, there was this new revelation about what probably wasn't but what could be...pregnancy. Daryl didn't know if he could face Beth just yet, fessing up to how irresponsible he'd been.

The back door clattering closed behind them, effectively cutting them off from everyone in the
house, seemed to make Rick comfortable enough to talk about anything.

"I'll take the watch. You and Beth, you still deserve your nights together."

"I think I need to take watch tonight." It was all he could really say without saying everything, going into too much detail. But now Rick was all concerned, side-eyeing him as they headed down to the gates.

"Everything okay with Beth?"

Daryl started to close himself off to Rick's inquiry, but then he remembered he was the one who first drug Rick into his relationship with Beth, asking for advice. And Rick had gone there despite how uncomfortable he'd been, offering up the help he could. Was it any wonder that Rick was doing a follow-up? Daryl opened the door to this conversation a long time ago.

"Yeah...it's just...well, still new for Beth. She needs some time...to rest..." Well fucking hell, his face was burning hot, and he couldn't put a coherent thought together for nothin'. "And to give her that, I need to stay away...distance...actual distance."

"Hmmph." Rick tried to hide his grin, looking down at the road. "So, it all worked its way out...everything you were worried about?"

"Mmm-hmm. We're good...more than good." And Daryl said too much, trying to fight the smile on his lips, Rick clapping him on the back.

* * * * *

Daryl's head was mostly clear by the time they got to the main gates, clear enough of all his other worries that his head was in the right place to deal with the issues at hand. Glenn and Tyreese were already down there with Abe and his crew, waiting, and the pile of walkers...it got bigger.

"More? You gotta be shitting me?" Daryl growled.

But what in the hell did he expect after all the gunfire last night?

At least the walkers were dead and whoever took 'em out took 'em out nice and quiet through the gates. Glancing over at Abraham, his arms crossed, face stern and unreadable, Daryl saw he was spattered with blood and so was the girl, Rosita, standing close beside him. He wondered briefly if they were together, noticing how Abe seemed calmer, more centered when she was near. And she was always the one who got up in his face when he was behaving badly.

"How many more?" Rick, to anyone else, sounded like take charge, get shit done Rick, but there was something else...the shadow of concern in his voice. He was looking straight at Glenn and Tyreese, but they didn't seem to have the answers, Glenn just shrugging.

"Twelve." Abe stepped up, closer to the conversation.

Twelve plus the ten from earlier in the night...twenty-two walkers in one day when before there had been none...not one. And it wasn't like he and Beth just shut themselves up in the house. They made noise, they were outside, they both rode that entire fence line outside the stone wall checking for breaches and weak points, but there hadn't been one walker. This was unreal. No, not just twenty-
two...twenty-four. There'd been the two caught up in the fence when they went out looking for the Christmas tree. Daryl thought they were just a good reminder of what was still outside those gates, but instead, they'd been the harbingers of something bigger.

"Did they all come at once?"

Daryl tuned back in knowing everything Rick was asking was important.

"The bulk of them. Some were straggling behind, but they were all together by the time they got up here." Abe offered up like he was reporting an incident to a superior officer, void of emotion.

At least tempers had calmed. Daryl was still fuming inside about Abe being a fucking idiot, firing off a barrage to take out ten walkers, but Beth worked a calming magic over him. He might not want Abraham here, but while he was still around, they needed to find common ground, at least not be at each others throats unless there was a sound reason.

"What direction did they come from?" Daryl was thinking, trying to put it all together.

"All from straight down the road. None of them came out of the woods. They were all headed straight here like they were pointed right for the mess hall at chow time. And don't go blaming that all on us for discharging our weapons. It was the same with the first group last night, like they knew exactly where they were going." Abe uncrossed his arms, running a hand over the top of his flame red head.

Was he showing concern? Was he worried? Well, they were all in it together...all holed up behind the same set of gates...and there seemed to be a reason. It wasn't so strange that the second group of walkers knew exactly where they were headed. The gunfire was their compass...but the first group, what made them hone in on their location? What drew them in?

"First things first. We need to get rid of the corpses. Daryl and I need to get some fences mended out there. Once those critical things are handled, we can try to figure this out," Rick prioritized.

"You want us to burn them?" Glenn offered.

"That's the only way to go."

"We could bring the truck down here, load them up, take them up the road a ways to burn," Tyreese suggested. It was as sound plan, but no.

Turning, Daryl looked back towards the house, further still past it to where the stone wall closed off the perimeter in the far distance behind them.

"Yeah, why don't you do that. You, Glenn, Abe..."

"No. Load 'em up, bring 'em in, go back there...see there, the far corner, the furthest point from the house and the front gates, but inside." Daryl pointed. He was starting to think too. "Burn them there. If the fire draws any more walkers, it'll keep any herds away from the main gates. They can't get through that wall. It'll stand for another hundred years."

"Wouldn't it be better to take them totally away from the house. We'll be fine," Glenn insisted.

Daryl had faith in him...knew he'd be fine, but he didn't feel like dealing with bigger consequences. And there was something else...

"It ain't that. I don't want anyone down our drive anywhere near the main road. If there's a bigger
herd out there, I don't want anyone to go doing something to get noticed, drawing more to our location." Daryl paused, narrowing his eyes, turning them on Abraham. "And no one goes off site. After Rick and I get back, those gates are gonna close, and nobody goes out unless there's no choice."

Abe nodded at him, not just nodding his understanding, but he agreed. For some reason, that wasn't the reaction Daryl expected.

While the gates were still closed, Rick went up, appraising the ornate wrought iron, inspecting the chain wrapped around it, the only things that stood between them and the outside. Daryl knew what Rick had to be thinking. They had fences and gates before, and they fell. Both of them were hoping this time it would be different.

"It's not there you gotta worry about. That iron is strong. Forged back when they made those things to last forever. Here...here's where you gotta worry." Abe approached one of the massive stone pillars that supported the gate. "These anchors, if these pull free or the rock and mortar give, just on one side, this gate goes down."

He was running his fingers over the stone, feeling around the anchor and hinges with knowing hands. Everyone was quiet as Abraham paused, waiting for him to say what they all knew.

"That timber stockade around the house, that will hold them back for a while...but if a herd comes through here big enough to take out these gates...we've gotta hold these gates. No one off site unless there's no choice," Abe closed, repeating Daryl's words.

We've gotta hold these gates...

It sent shivers down his spine.

*                      *                      *                      *                      *

There wasn't much talking while they walked down the road. Rick looked like he was still contemplating, bearing the weight of the barbed wire he carried, but the burden of keeping his group safe was much heavier than the fencing could ever be. Daryl understood. Rick just came from a place...out there...where they'd been desperate, on the verge of breaking. That was still very much with him. Daryl had concerns too...Beth, but just now he had to turn the emotions off to sense...to be aware. Something caught him as odd in the worn gravel drive, setting their tools down, crouching low, dusting away at a set of prints.

"You see something?" Rick rested the roll of wire on the road.

Moving forward, Daryl followed the prints with his eyes and fingers, measuring, assessing...thinking. "Daryl?"

"Just tracks."

"Walkers?"

"Mmm..." They were just strange, an anomaly. So straight and even, but they didn't go back very far before they were either lost or covered over by the sporadic limping, dragging, and hitching
characteristic of walker tracks.

It was nothing. Daryl straightened.

"Come on...the break in the fence is just up ahead."

*                      *                      *                      *                      *

Once they freed the two walker corpses from the fence, disposing of them in a gully at the tree line...they weren't gonna risk it just to burn two...going to fix the fence almost felt normal. He hadn't really had the chance to talk much with Rick since they all found each other, not about much more than Beth, and there was unfortunately some heavy stuff they needed to talk about today.

"A cure. You were chasing a cure?"

When Rick stopped, letting the barbed wire go slack in his glove, it was like the first time someone asked him that, a question that put doubt in that possibility...like he just realized there was a chance it wasn't true.

"Eugene, he's some sort of virologist...scientist or something. A doctor of some sorts anyway. He was working with a team of scientists out in Texas on a cure when things went south for them. He was the only one who survived, but he's been in recent contact with the government in Washington D.C.. He figured out the cure. He just needs to get to Washington, to the labs, supplies, and equipment. Abraham and Rosita were trying to get him there when they met up with Glenn. We all met up sometime later, and we've been headed there...at least trying...ever since."

\textit{How do you know all that? How do you know it's true? You're just taking a stranger on his word?}

Those were the questions that needed to be asked. That story, it was constructed so beautifully, painting the perfect picture of hope. A cure. A working government. Infrastructure. Modern technology. Sounded like it fit nicely into the category of \textit{if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is}, but it was exactly the kind of thing desperate people who were looking for a direction...a reason to fight...needed to hear. If somebody had pitched that BS to Rick back while the prison was still standing, he would've laughed it off...not given it a second thought.

"A cure? Like bringing those things back from the dead...undead...back to life?" Daryl would question it, but he couldn't just go in and rip it to pieces when it was all Rick had, the only thing that had been driving him forward.

"No...just a cure..." Rick stopped, brow furrowing, thinking, realizing that \textit{cure} meant exactly what Daryl described, the reanimated dead brought back to life.

"Maybe they mean a solution, or a vaccine for the living, or even a way to wipe out all of the walkers for good?" Daryl offered up some alternatives, but Rick shook his head.

"No, they said \textit{cure}.

"Did Eugene tell you anything about it, how it's gonna work, or what this actually all is?"

"Just that it's classified."
"Pfft..." His cynicism wasn't helping nothing, trying to get Rick to think by ridiculing the thing that had been keeping him going, giving him the will to survive, but it was who he was.

Daryl had never really been a fan of the whole government thing in the first place. They took money people didn't have, never did shit for him, lied about everything, and when they didn't want to fess up to something and needed to cover it up, they had those two magical words, *It's classified.*

Now...now one person, Pork Chop, the scientist, the one man who said he had a way to fix the whole shit storm that consumed the world, got people to follow him, fight for him, and protect him by telling a pretty story and stopping any complicating questions by saying *It's classified.* It wasn't sitting well with him. Because of Beth's influence, he was more willing now to take things on faith, but there were limits to that especially when he hadn't been inclined to believe in the first place. And there was no reason for anything to be classified anymore, even more so with a *cure.* Wouldn't this person out to save the world, the only one who had the supposed solution, want a backup copy somewhere incase he bit it? Daryl was calling bullshit.

Rick pulled the wire tight again, hammering in the clip, focusing on his work, maybe buying time to think on what he said. Gather his thoughts. Daryl wasn't gonna push him. It took less than fifteen minutes to repair the damaged portion of the fence, but even with it done, Rick wasn't ready to go back in. He slid down, back against a tree, sitting on the ground, and Daryl followed suit.

"It's a good place. Strong walls. Good land for planting. It's quiet...beautiful. Calm."

"It is." It felt like Rick was getting ready to throw a *but* in there to try to convince him to leave, tell him the group was gonna go, but Daryl was gonna make his position clear before Rick got the chance to go there. "I can see my life here with Beth, clearer than I've ever seen anything before. My future is here with her. Yours can be here too. Can't you see Judith growing up in that princess room, playing outside with the horses and you teaching Carl how to hunt in these woods? Inside those walls, they can be kids for a little while longer. If you risk your future...that future for your family, what's the world really worth when you don't got nothin' left?"

If Rick couldn't be swayed by the possibility of that simple life for his children, he should go. Out of all of 'em, Daryl would be most upset to see Rick and his family leave, but he was more than content to spend his life with just Beth. No regrets.

"Michonne and I, we stayed up late last night..." It was Daryl's turn to raise an eyebrow. He had no idea...but Rick was quick to clarify. "Talking. We want to stay...the four of us want to stay if you'll have us."

"That ain't even a question that's gotta be asked."

Rick nodded looking just a little bit relieved, not that he doubted what Daryl's answer would be but that it was done and settled.

"What about the rest?" That was the real question.

The rest of the group was divided, the ones who were gonna cause pain and conflict, especially Maggie and Glenn...pain for Beth, and Carol, she was gonna cause the conflict.

"I haven't really had the chance to talk to everyone. Truthfully, I've been trying to just let it lie, avoid the mess for a while." But the conflict found Rick whether he wanted to avoid it or not. "Abe, Rosita, and Eugene are going to go, that's a given, and they're going to try to take whoever they can with them. Carol...she..."

Rick didn't want to share it with him, but Daryl already knew what went down with Carol.
"You ain't weak for making this decision. I ain't weak neither. People are gonna use that to try to sway you when you don't make the decision they want. It ain't nothin' but manipulation." Rick got it, that Daryl knew what Carol said. "Beth heard you and Carol arguing. Made her all sorts of self-conscious. She questions herself more than she should ever have to."

That last part was unnecessary, but they were just talking.

"I..."

"No, you don't gotta explain nothing. I got your back. I've had it since before you probably even knew it."

"I know..."

"And I ain't trying to change your mind about nothin'...I don't know what happened between you and Carol after the prison fell, how you all met up after you sent her away. It ain't my business..."

What he was getting ready to tell Rick, did it make him any better than Carol? The thing was, he wasn't trying to manipulate Rick. Rick already made his decision. This was just full disclosure...

"Carol tried to turn me against you once. It was a long time ago, but she did. I didn't say nothin' 'cause after that, well, a lot of sh*t happened. It was the night after the farm fell when we all found out what you'd known since the CDC, that we're all infected...that we're all gonna turn someday. Sitting around the fire that night, Carol told me that we weren't safe with you, that I didn't need you, you were just gonna pull me down. She tried to tell me I was just your...henchman I think. Told me I deserved better. That I was a man of honor. She tried to tell me what she thought I needed to hear to get me to do something, but she didn't know me as good as she thought."

Sometimes things that you forgot or put behind you, you didn't know how much they bothered you until something in your life happened to force them all bubbling back to the surface again.

"You were never my henchman. You were my right hand back at the farm even when Shane was still alive. I didn't know you all that much, but I knew who you were. And after Dale...that's when you became my brother." Rick was affected just then, and Daryl was feeling it too.

Daryl remembered just how staggering it was when he heard Rick call him his brother the first time. Rick had been standing up for him, defending him to Abraham that snowy day back in town when they'd all found each other again. Brother...it went back that far for Rick...all the way to Dale? But it went back that far for Daryl too. He'd believed in Rick, stood for him, back when he'd barely stood for anything in his life.

"I'm not really sure what Carol wanted or expected from me...to try to take the group from you or just leave with her, but neither of those were ever gonna happen. I told her that you'd done alright by me, that you had honor, and that was the end of it. The same goes for now."

* * * * * * *

Crouching close to the dirt again, the tracks were much clearer out this far from the gate. He thought the prints earlier were just an anomaly, a walker that had stumbled along straight and even for a few steps, but he was wrong. Daryl measured the length of the print with his hand, gauged the stride. What made these tracks so different? They were made by the same feet as the ones that caught him
earlier, but those had been traveling in the same direction as the other walkers. These...these were going against the herd...heading away from the gates. A sense of unease washed over him.

"Daryl, what are you seeing?" This time it didn't sound like Rick was gonna settle for a vague answer.

"These prints, they're going opposite the direction of the herd. They ain't walker tracks neither." Rick squatted beside him, Daryl pointing, Rick seeing what he was seeing. "Those could've walked the white line at any sobriety test and passed."

"You sure?" Rick's tone said he knew, but he wasn't the tracker.

"Yep. Thing that made those is still breathing." It was hard to swallow, what it meant, but that didn't make it any less real.

"They're small prints...smaller feet." The cop in Rick was kicking in. He followed the tracks for a little ways just to make sure he was seeing right. To verify everything Daryl was telling him with his own eyes.

"Woman's prints or an older kid," Daryl confirmed.

Someone out there was leading the walkers right to their gates.
Chapter 68

Now Beth really understood...knew the full value of a long, cold shower. The house was warm, but the chill of the water was still clinging to her skin, forcing Beth to cuddle her fuzzy sweater closer around her. Coming down the stairs, Beth felt like maybe there should be a spring in her step, but she wasn't capable of any sort of spring or hop or exaggerated movement. She'd been learning the value and joy of nice, long...other things...but realizing it wasn't without its consequences. The morning after...there was a cost, even if it was sweet. Beth smiled wryly to herself, at both that knowledge and the memories of what put her in such a contradictory state. She almost bowled into Maggie in the hallway, so lost in her own little world.

"Morning, Beth. I was just coming to check in on you," Maggie was all bright and cheery, taking Beth's arm, changing her course for the kitchen.

"I'm fine," Beth replied quick, her sister side-eying her.

_Darn it._ Maggie didn't ask her anything.

"You're all smiles this morning." She was just stating the obvious now.

"It smells good," Beth redirected, seeing the source, the plate of bacon left on the counter.

Everyone else was already up and moving around for the day. She could hear Carl off in the living room with Judith. Bob and Sasha were at the back door looking like they were waiting for someone or something.

"You're lucky there's any left." Sasha moved into the center of the kitchen where the conversation was happening.

"Yeah, I had to beat Daryl back with a fork," Michonne smiled over the refrigerator door. "He was all cheerful this morning...well, cheerful for Daryl."

"How was Daryl last night?" Maggie asked, looking at her all normal, waiting for her answer like it was nothing.

_How was Daryl last night?!_

"Uh...ummm..." Beth was stammering with sounds, not even getting close to using words.

And Sasha and Michonne were just looking at her like she was an idiot. Maggie grinned just then like she suddenly realized something.
"How was Daryl last night after what happened down at the gates?" Maggie clarified, and Beth felt the blush rising on her cheeks.

This was on her...she'd been the one with her mind on...private things, and because of it, she opened herself up. The only thing she could do was try to recover.

"He was fine...after a bit. I got him settled down...about the walkers." Yeah, that wasn't much of a save or recovery, and Beth knew Maggie was going to exploit it.

"Calmed down about walkers but worked up about you...other things..."

Beth just rolled her eyes a little and shook her head ambiguously. There was nothing she could say; it was the truth, and Maggie would likely call her on it if she denied.

"So, was there anything else down at the gates this morning?" Avoiding seemed like her safest bet at this point.

"I don't know. Glenn went down there with Tyreese before Rick and Daryl headed out. We haven't heard anything since."

"I'm going to head down there and see what the boys are up to in a little while...see what else is going on," Michonne added.

"But I want to hear about this how 'Daryl was last night' that you were getting ready to tell me," Maggie pried. Maggie always had a way of trying to wheedle things out of her.

Beth caught Bob glancing over from where he stood at the back door, looking horrified, face all scrunched up at hearing that, looking almost as horrified as she felt. He finally turned away to stare out the window and focus really hard on something...anything besides the conversation at hand.

"Come on, it's time to spill it."

_God Maggie, let up_!

Beth wanted nothing more than to go back to bed and hide under the covers, biding her time until she and Daryl weren't the center of attention. It wasn't bad enough that they’d been separated from the group for so long...now they were newlyweds in a world where the chance for celebration was so rare. But that thought stopped Beth’s urge to retreat, helped her move beyond the embarrassment. This was what they were all fighting for...life, joy, celebration, happiness. If she wouldn't share anything, what was it all worth? And it was her sister, and the other women, they were as close as she was ever going to have to friends. Beth wasn't going to give away much, nothing really private or intimate, but she could share something, tell them a little piece of beautiful about her life with Daryl, share part of her happiness. One small thing couldn't hurt her, but it might make a difference for them.

"Daryl...he's just so..." Beth was feeling all fluttery all of a sudden, having an impossible time finding the perfect words, so she just went simple. "...so much..."

As soon as she said it, as soon as she saw the other women go wide-eyed, Maggie and Sasha laughing, Michonne smiling big, Beth realized it wasn't what she meant at all and felt herself turning five shades of red.

"No...that's not...not what I'm saying...but..." They were all being so awful!

"'But it's true?' _Darn it Maggie!_
"Well maybe...I don't know...yeah..." Why was she still even talking? Daryl would die if he knew. Beth buried her face in her hands, almost to tears in embarrassment but giggling quietly too.

Hearing the back door clatter open through the laughter, Beth prayed it wasn't Daryl coming in, but peering over her hands, she saw it was Carol.

"What's going on down at the gates?" Bob questioned as Carol assessed the room and everyone in it.

"I wasn't down at the gates."

Michonne, Sasha, and Maggie were all still wrapped up in her poor choice of words, but as soon as Carol came in, Beth's attention was drawn to her.

"I was hoping you'd seen Eugene. Rick and Daryl wanted me to go with him to check out the solar panels. I don't know if I'm supposed to be security for the solar grid or babysitting Eugene, but I don't know shit about solar power," Bob admitted. "Daryl sure doesn't seem to trust Abe and his crew, but then Abe and Daryl didn't start out so great."

"He's just being cautious. It will get better once we're all back out on the road again, fighting for the same thing instead of being penned up in here, milling around with no purpose."

"Is that even happening anymore, the whole D.C. thing? I kinda figured..." Carol wouldn't even let Bob get off his whole sentence.

"Why wouldn't it. Washington has been the mission all along." She didn't just sound sure, she went a little aggressive in her assertion.

"No wonder you haven't been out of bed in days," Sasha grinned all suggestive as the laughter started to die down and they could all breathe again.

"Stop..." Beth was burning bright now and losing her grasp on what Carol was saying.

"What's going on with them?" By the time she was able to tune back into Carol's conversation, she'd moved past what Beth needed to hear.

"I don't even wanna know...just the women cackling over Beth. As soon as I heard Maggie say 'spill it' about Daryl, I went to my happy place." Poor Bob.

"You've been locked away together for most of a week. Shouldn't that blush be gone by now?" At least Michonne's brand of torture was sweeter...more delicate.

"I...well..." Beth just stopped, knowing Michonne's question wasn't looking for an answer.

"Awww, look at you, so sweet and young, blushing so pretty." Carol caught her off guard; it made her feel weak. Was Carol trying to shame her for being new to something...blushing about it?

As bitter as it may have been, Carol was the last person she wanted to share any of the joy she found in Daryl with.

"Daryl's such a boy, but you see him as a man." Sweet as sugar, Carol tried to join the game of teasing her.

The others didn't know it wasn't just that. Carol’s tone and smile could never be judged as anything other than good natured, but Beth knew better. She was being condescending. Beth wasn't stupid. She could take that-Carol questioning her experience, saying she wasn't as much of a woman as
everyone else...her. But her attack on Daryl, putting him down, questioning his manhood after everything he'd done for all of them, putting his life on the line time and time again...Beth wasn't going to stand for it.

"Daryl's more of a man than you know." Beth said it without hesitation, without shame, firm, making eye contact with Carol while the others laughed and giggled and smiled bright at Beth's newfound boldness.

She knew how they took it in the context of their conversation...sex, but Beth was willing to sacrifice that little piece of herself, let them laugh and enjoy what sounded like a very private admission for the sake of defending Daryl. Daryl would never let anyone insult her, put her down, and she wouldn't let anyone even allude to the idea that Daryl wasn't a man. She might not be as old or assertive as Carol, but Beth narrowed her eyes and held Carol's for a moment, standing her ground. Carol read her and read her right, lips pinched tight and sour for just a split second before she recovered, smiled, and let out an odd snorty giggle, joining in the merriment.

"But Beth, all joking aside, I need to talk to you for a minute, seeing you're the lady of the house."

Beth had to stop herself from rolling her eyes. Carol made another jab at her, and she expected her to have a conversation, talk to her about whatever now? This day was just getting better and better. Michonne and Sasha both went their own ways, and Carol headed down the hall, not even waiting for Beth to give an answer. It was like a summons, not a request. Well, whatever it was, it was best just to get it over with.

"Hey, Beth..." Maggie called out before she got too far, grabbing her arm gently to stop her.

Beth was grateful, relieved to have a reason to hang back and not follow right on Carol's heels.

"Yeah?" Beth turned to her sister, pushing down the anger she was feeling. There was no reason to be that way with Maggie.

"It's just...I haven't had any private time to talk to you since..." 

"Oh..." This was gonna be about the virginity talk they had...and this was the first time Maggie asked since...well, since that wasn't an issue anymore.

Beth blushed, looking away. At least Maggie was being delicate about it.

"Is Daryl being good to you...was he..." Maggie's tone was soft, quiet, keeping this just between them even though there was no one else near.

And the hesitant way she was asking, Beth remembered back to her talk with her sister, a talk that probably made her more nervous than she needed to be. Did Maggie really have such strong concerns about how Daryl would be with her...what he would do to her? All of Beth's shyness and awkwardness about this very intimate topic melted away out of her love for Daryl. She loved Maggie for being so concerned about her, but Maggie had to know the truth, and that truth had to come from a grown woman, not an embarrassed little girl.

"Daryl was gentle with me, as slow and gentle as he could ever be. And so loving." Beth smiled up at her sister, watching the worry fade from her eyes.

Maggie pulled her close, hugging her tight, sighing like she thought Beth just dodged the biggest bullet. Beth reflected on Daryl, on the sweet moments they’d shared together in each other's arms, as few as they were. That first time, Daryl had been more than any other man could have been in that moment for her, everything she needed, and not just what he did, but what he felt, how he fought
himself for her, what he didn't let himself do. And he might have taken...it had to be done, but he gave so much more. Maybe Beth should tell Maggie all that, but before she ever opened up and shared all those special things, she had to make something clear to her sister, about Daryl from here on out. Maggie finally set her free, smiling a little now too.

"He's more than good to me. You don't have to judge him so hard. Daryl's a better man than anyone gives him credit for." Beth was fervent in that belief.

Maggie touched her cheek softly, listening to her little sister defend Daryl...her husband...maybe for the first time seeing her as grown.

Carol was turning a little crystal horse figurine in her hand when Beth found her standing alone in the room. Carol didn't say anything right away, Beth abiding the silence by tracing the empty frame with jagged remnants of mirror still clinging here and there. This was where Abraham attacked Daryl, where they had their throw down, where Daryl got hurt, and where he told everyone they were married. It was a bittersweet memory. Beth had been so afraid seeing that huge shard of broken mirror embedded in Daryl's side.

"I bet Daryl was a catastrophe in this house when you first got here." Carol broke the silence, setting the little horse back on its mirrored stand on the shelf.

Beth smiled to herself, remembering. *It's my freakin' nightmare. Just a bunch of stuff for me to break, get dirty, or ruin.*

"He was worried, but he hasn't broken anything yet," Beth offered, trying to remain calm and neutral, gauging Carol carefully.

"Of all the houses Daryl could've found and broken into, he ended up in the pages of a Southern gothic novel." Carol moved close to the window, drawing back the curtain, looking outside instead of at her.

"He didn't break in. The owner...he gave it to us. Daryl...well, Daryl did him a kindness." That was a pretty universal concept; she didn't have to go into detail with Carol. She didn't even know the detail herself, just what it meant.

"A cure. Can you believe it? After these hard years, after everything we lost, there's finally a cure." Carol was still staring out the window.

"No."

Beth didn't believe it. She stopped believing anything like that a long time ago. Daddy believed, and Beth wanted to believe then too when he locked Mama and Shawn away in the barn. Nothing made sense in her very small world when it happened, so she needed to believe there was a cure, that Mama would get better, and Shawn, and they'd all just pick up right where they left off. Mama would be sitting on the porch by Daddy while Shawn was his usual stupid self, being overprotective of her while torturing and teasing her himself. But that all changed; that belief was shattered pretty quick when her Mama came stumbling out of the barn, was shot, didn't die, and tried to kill her. Beth could still feel her Mama grabbing at her ponytail, ripping at her hair, pulling her down trying to bite her, teeth snapping mercilessly, while Rick and Shane fought to break her free. Beth stopped
believing then and started living in the real world. They could survive, even live, but they couldn't be delusional. There wasn't a cure...

"All we have to do is get Eugene to the Capital. He's got the cure." Carol clearly didn't hear or was just plain ignoring her answer. "And in Washington D.C., there is still a life for us, a life like we remember. Government, schools, hospitals, churches, community, protection for everybody."

Beth was never cynical, but she wasn't delusional either. Carol couldn't really believe that, could she? Her little girl stumbled out of the barn that day too, and that...losing a child...was the worst loss a person could ever suffer. After that, how could she ever believe they could come back from this so easily...a cure? They could have hope, but it wasn't ever going to be that simple. Beth paced around the perimeter of the room, knowing she would eventually come face to face with Carol.

"It's beautiful here." Carol finally turned away from the window, officially marking the end of the pleasantries to get to the point.

"It is." Beth wondered what she wanted...how it was going to go.

"I need your help, Beth."

She was just a few feet away from Carol now.

"We need Rick and Daryl both to make sure Eugene survives and we make it to D.C., but Rick doesn't want to split the group. I don't think he'll go without Daryl. Those two are like brothers."

"Daryl doesn't..."

"I know he doesn't want to go, but Beth, you have the power to change his mind. You're the only one who can. Take him to bed. Keep him there as long as you need. I'll make sure no one bothers you. Give him everything he could ever desire, and then tell him you want to go. In this, you aren't weak. You're stronger than Daryl."

Wow...so this was what it was coming to? And she wasn't weak to start with. Not anymore. Carol was trying to manipulate her to influence Daryl. Beth wasn't going to let it get any further than it had to. Why? It was just a waste of everyone's time.

"We're not going. Daryl and I, we already talked about it. We made the decision together." She was concrete, firm, trying to make it clear there was no room for negotiation.

"You talked about it?" She seemed so surprised.

"Yeah, we do talk to each other sometimes." That came out snappier than she wanted. Beth didn't want to give Carol any sort of emotion besides the resolute stance that they weren't leaving, that her mind couldn't be changed.

"Beth, you really need to rethink this. I don't mean to scare you, but you need to think about yourself."

"Scared? I'm not scared." That was just ridiculous. There was nothing to be afraid of.

"Daryl's a good man, but he isn't made for this kind of life. I think you know that. He might be happy playing house right now, but the wild calls to him."

"What?" Beth shouldn't have said it out loud...shouldn't have raised her voice.
It made her seem weak, and this was exactly what Carol was trying to do, rattle her. But here she was again, claiming that Daryl was just playing house with her...she said that to Rick too, and it burned, acting like what they had wasn't real, like it didn't matter when it did. It was everything.

"Daryl is eventually going to leave. It might not be today or tomorrow, maybe not even next year, but one day Daryl's just going to head out into those woods and never come back. I know you want him to yourself, but if you go to Washington, you won't be losing Daryl, you'll just have your family too, your group, and the community we find there. We all need other people to survive. There's no shame in that."

"No...Daryl's not going to..."

Carol had no intention of letting her finish. She already had her mind made up. Maybe she thought if she kept talking, she would eventually hit the right nerve, Beth would break under the pressure and start believing what she said.

"No, Beth, you need to listen, wake up to reality, and be an adult. I feel sorry for you..."

"Don't feel sorry for me...there's nothing to..." Beth retorted, but again to no avail.

"I feel sorry for you because you had to grow up so quick. You lost your mom, your brother, the only home you ever knew, the prison, your dad. Then, what you had to learn to become...what you had to give Daryl to survive..."

"That's not how it is..."

"But you're grown now, and this is the way the world works. I know you think this would never happen, that Daryl would never leave you, but Daryl left me at the prison for Merle. You were upset too, right after Judith was born. He left us when we were at our weakest against the Governor. I tried to be strong for you when you were upset, but I was hurt. I was falling apart, but I told you what you needed to hear to help you...make you feel better. Daryl left me, and we were closer than anyone. We were closer than you could ever know, and he left without a goodbye, a go to hell, or anything. The difference was, I had all of you to lean on..."

"Carol, stop...just stop..."

Maybe Beth was getting a little shaken even if she knew Daryl was never going to leave her. Beth knew that, but emotions were running high.

"What happens if that ends up being you? And what if it isn't just you he leaves, but a child? God forbid Daryl should have a child to leave behind..."

That was it. That was the one thing she said that went too far, the one thing that centered Beth, made her go to the place she needed to be. All Carol was doing was resorting to scare tactics now. She wasn't succeeding with the sweet I need your help approach, so just like Carol turned aggressive and berating with Rick, she turned to fear to try to move Beth.

God forbid Daryl should have a child?

That was the one thing Carol should have known better than to touch on. And she had to know that, know that she picked the worst argument possible. Daryl searched for Carol's lost little girl while Carol did nothing. God forbid Daryl should never have a child. He was the kind of man the world needed to have as a father...strong, fierce, protective... and out of any man she'd ever met, Daryl was the one who most deserved the joy of holding his child in his arms.
God forbid Daryl should have a child to leave behind?

Daryl would die before he abandoned what was his. Beth was his; she knew that and had no qualms about the fact that Daryl felt that ownership...that possession of her. And his child...his blood, Beth didn't even want to imagine what lengths he would go to, what he would do, what he would suffer to protect and save his family. Carol hadn't been there to see Daryl with Judith on the day she was born, after Lori died, going on the formula run with Maggie, taking Judith in his arms, talking all sweet and soft to her. He was the first person to ever feed her, bond with her in that way, and that...what he did for Judith...even then on a dark day of sadness and loss, it stirred something deep and maternal in Beth. Carol hadn't seen it. She'd been lost to them, lost in the tombs of the prison and everyone thought she was dead, but ironically, Beth had been the one who told Carol all about it after Daryl left...

She wouldn't have made it if Daryl hadn't been here. He couldn't stand to lose anyone else.

And Judith wasn't even his own child. Beth smiled to herself remembering, knowing that she and Daryl...maybe they weren't ready yet, but hoping eventually, they would get there.

"Beth, are you listening? This is serious." Now Carol was scolding her...pretending to be her mom? "You need to be strong."

I am strong.

"Daryl and I promised a long time ago that we weren't going to leave each other." Beth let herself be whisked away from the unpleasantness of the moment to remember that beautiful morning in the woods, after Daryl found her...after that impossible night, the herd, thinking she lost him, making those promises...

"A long time ago? You mean a couple months ago when you ran away into the woods together? Or was Daryl messing with you at the prison behind Hershel's back? Because if that's the case, don't think you were the only one." Carol's voice was raised as she started to lose a little bit of her composure.

It hurt Beth. What she was hearing hurt even though she knew it wasn't true. Carol was losing, and now she was resorting to lies. It was painful, but like Daryl told her...what he taught her about survival...dying animals were the most dangerous because they had nothing left to lose. That's where Carol was now. Her plan to maneuver Beth into compliance was dying, and in the death throes of her cause, Carol was doing whatever she could to make Beth afraid...make her doubt Daryl. But Beth knew Daryl. He had no reason to lie to her about his past. He told her what he thought were the most horrible things about himself...that he was nobody, nothing...things that still haunted him even though they shouldn't, things that made him think he wasn't good enough. Daryl had no reason to lie about who he had sex with. He talked about the kind of women he'd been with before, what kind of arrangements they had if they could even be called arrangements. Beth didn't know if Carol was just speaking in general terms or if Carol wanted her to believe that Daryl had sex with her. It didn't matter either way; it was a lie, and Beth was really and truly done...but Carol wasn't.

"Whatever Daryl promised you, Beth, you've got to know that men will say whatever they think you need to hear...whatever it takes to get you to spread your legs. But you have to protect yourself."

"Daryl didn't have to say anything to get me to spread my legs for him." It wasn't vulgar, but it was the most intimate thing she'd ever told anyone besides Daryl or Maggie. She didn't want to share it with Carol...but she wasn't really sharing anything. She was telling Carol what was between them, how it was with her and Daryl whether or not she could ever understand. "He married me. He didn't have to, but he did. He wanted to. The only things he's ever told me while he's making love to me is
Carol furrowed her brow when Beth said *making love* like it was an impossible idea, something Daryl wasn't capable of. Carol was probably right in doubting that because Daryl wouldn't make love to anyone else.

"And I think you know that's the truth."

"If you think you've got Daryl tamed, you're not as smart as I gave you credit for," Carol barked.

They were past conversing if they had ever been there in the first place. Carol was beyond trying to convince, manipulate, or scare her. They were beyond all that, now just two people who had reached the peak of tension that Beth had tried so hard to be better than. She tried to hold herself above all of it, but now, she was going to say what she had to say, and then it would be over.

"I'm not trying to tame him. I don't want him tamed. That wouldn't be Daryl. His heart might be wild, but it belongs to me."

"You don't know Daryl. He can't belong to anyone." Carol stepped in just a little bit closer, but Beth didn't back down. She wouldn't be intimidated.

"No, you don't know Daryl, and that scares you. You know you can't control him, and that scares you too!" Beth was getting emotional now, but the emotion driving her was grounded in love and truth, and that didn't take her edge away. It gave her strength.

"I..."

"No, Carol, it's your turn to listen now. You don't know Daryl, and you don't know us. You want me to manipulate him with the only thing you think I have to offer. But that's not it. We're a family, and that's so much more...so much stronger than sex. I do, however, take great joy in that fact that Daryl finds comfort, pleasure, and release between my thighs, and I will give him whatever I can because he deserves that...he deserves my love and devotion...my faith."

Carol opened her mouth, tried to talk over her, but Beth wasn't going to have it.

"I'm not afraid..."

"I'm not afraid..." Carol's words pressed through clenched teeth, a hint of something...in her strained
But she was. Beth could read people, and she knew what fear looked like, what it sounded like, even when people were trying their best to hide it.

"I'm sorry you're afraid, but I'm not anymore." Beth walked away, not really knowing what she should be feeling but knowing she did her job as Daryl's wife, defending him, defending them, standing her ground, taking pride in that.

She might not be as strong as Daryl, but she was no less fierce in her love. Beth wasn't weak. Turning back at the doorway, seeing Carol frozen in the same spot, there was just one thing left she had to say.

"And you're wrong about Daryl, about him being weak, and that makes me sad for you because you don't know what true strength is."
Chapter 69

It was near dark by the time home was in his sights, the time of day when the light fucked with people's senses...not dark, but not light either. The sky wasn't pink anymore, but the dying day was taking its last stand in the endless war against the imposing night. This time of day, it blinded people to what was really out there and caused 'em to see things that weren't there at all, making them afraid of their own shadows and not afraid enough of what was really laying in wait. For Daryl, it just made him sharpen his senses so he could see the truth, forced him to think critically, not just about what was right in front of him now-just the glow of the porch light Beth left on for him, but what he needed to realize about what he saw outside the gates on their road that morning. That truth...he didn't like it one bit.

Daryl meant to make it back to Beth during the day, at least before dark, but somehow it just didn't happen. After coming in with Rick and chaining those gates tight behind 'em, they both went down to check on the walkers being burned at the far corner of the wall. Climbing up on top, he had a good vantage point, an opportunity he wasn't gonna waste. He walked that wall around their entire perimeter until the light started to fade, until he could see everyone headed to their places for the night...the main house, the guest house. He was the only one left outside, alone with his thoughts. The fire burning the corpses only drew four walkers the entire day. Pfft! Only four walkers. That was a shitload of walkers where before there had been none, and add those to the rest of the walkers...close to thirty in a little over twenty-four hours. Daryl shot each one clean through the skull all nice and quiet like. Had to fight himself from climbing down and getting his bolts back. Abe was still standing there with Tyreese, Glenn, and Rick watching the fire burn, and Daryl couldn't go against his own word with Abraham around if he even remotely expected the man to abide by it. And no one goes off site. After Rick and I get back, those gates are gonna close, and nobody goes out unless there's no choice.

Still, it tore at him a little to leave those bolts behind. Sure it was just four bolts, and he had enough now to last a good long while...even longer than that, but his life, his experience taught him that you never left anything behind that you could use or eventually need if you could help it. He'd just sneak over the wall for them later when he was absolutely sure no one could catch him.

"You seen Beth?" Daryl caught Maggie as soon as he came through the front doors, not having the patience to comb the house for Beth before he went on watch.

"Ummm...she's been pretty scarce today. Check upstairs. The last time I saw her, I think she was taking Judith up for her nap."

Nap. He could use one of those right now...he was feeling it. Even better if Beth was the one putting him down for his nap, but it was a luxury he couldn't afford. It was just gonna be a long night sitting out there alone in the dark, his first night apart from Beth since the prison fell, so far away that he wouldn't even be able to see her. Bounding up the stairs two at a time, he wasn't willing to waste a second with her. He needed her if just for a moment. But he found Beth sleeping in their bed, cuddling Judith close. There were things he needed to...wanted to tell her, had to talk to her about-what he saw outside the gates, sharing the happiness and relief that Rick, Michonne, Carl, and Judith were all gonna stay, hoping she'd feel the same way...lots of things he had on his mind, but he couldn't bear waking her. She looked so peaceful, in a world with no worries, oblivious to their realities, what was outside, if only in her dreams. He would let her hold onto that innocence, but that didn't mean the truth wasn't tearing away at him...about those prints.
It seemed that Judith just noticed him standing there in the dim light from the bedside table, or maybe he just saw that she noticed him. She was clearly over her nap, reaching out her little arms to him, grabbing at the air with her perfect, tiny hands, eyes all wide and sparkling. Daryl just shook his head no, grinning at her cuteness, but there was no way he was going in for the rescue, absolutely no way he was wrestling Beth's living doll out of her arms. Judith was persistent, reaching even harder, tryin’ out a pout to see if that would move him. But Judith didn't cry, gurgle, make any noise at all. She was like a baby animal in the woods that knew it had to keep quiet to survive. Judith was a first generation survivor. If they could get her to be an adult, maybe humanity had a chance...a chance in the bigger picture.

"They're beautiful, aren't they?"

For a split second, before his brain registered it was Rick, Daryl's heart seized in his chest. Rick startled him, took his words away, Daryl just glancing over his shoulder in reply. Rick must've read it as a glare.

"Sorry...didn't mean to intrude. I just came to check on Beth and Judith. I haven't seen them most of the day, and I wanted to make sure Judith wasn't causing Beth too much trouble."

"No...you didn't. Just surprised me is all." He didn't have a problem admitting it to Rick, just had a problem with himself for letting it happen.

It meant he was going soft, if Rick was able to catch him off guard like this. But thinking on it, this place, where he bedded down with Beth, it was the one place where he was willing to lose that edge. It was his place.

"You can come in." There was no reason for Rick to be hanging back in the doorway. "They are beautiful."

It was a belated reply, but it didn't make it any less true.

"This is what we're fighting for, if it comes to that...fighting."

"Mmm-hmm." Daryl wished it didn't have to be that way but was always willing to go there...fight for her, kill for her...die for her. "It always comes to that. I was just hoping me and Beth would have a little more time before we had to fight again."

They were both silent a moment, looking at their reasons to fight...reasons to live.

"I'm going to bring everyone together tomorrow, get this thing all sorted out. Let everyone know who's already decided to stay so they can make their decisions of whether or not they want to go. No reason to put it off and let the tension have us at each others’ throats."

Daryl felt sorry for Rick. For Daryl, decisions came easy. He just had to keep one person safe...Beth, and just the two of them alive. Rick had to think for everyone, and even though the rest would be making their own decisions, anyone who decided to leave, Rick would still feel the weight of that responsibility.

"It's the right call. I got your back," trying to give Rick what little support he could.

"I know."

"But when the decision's made, we'll give 'em some guns and supplies, then they need to get on their way sooner rather than later." It sounded cruel, but that's the way it had to be. Nobody needed an extended goodbye and the tensions or complications that could bring.
Rick nodded, but he was hesitating about something…not the decision but something else.

"We're probably going to lose a good number of us. Even if it is just Abe, Rosita, Eugene, and Carol, that's a quarter of the group, and this new threat outside the gates, we're going to have to figure out how to hold this place."

"It ain't about our numbers this time…it's holding what's ours."

Rick cocked his head, not seeming to getting it.

"What?"

"We just gotta make sure whoever wants to leave leaves quick like I said." It was a hard truth, one Daryl saw and didn't want to have to believe, one Rick should've seen too but didn't 'cause he didn't want to. Same thing happened with Rick not seeing Shane for who he was, letting himself believe that bullshit story Shane fed everyone about Otis sacrificing himself back at the farm. Except this time, Daryl wasn't gonna let Rick be blind to the truth. It was hard though…hard to vocalize...find the right words to get that truth out. "You know, those tracks on the road went both ways. They could've gone out first, then come back in, leading the walkers back to us just as easily as the other way around."

But Daryl lied just a little. Maybe he needed to lie to himself because the full truth of it was too hard to stomach. There were no two options here, no could'ves. If someone on the outside lead the walkers to their gates, they wouldn't just turn around and walk down that road straight back the way they came through a ravenous herd looking to rip apart their next meal. They would head off into the woods once they got to the wall, and that in itself was problematic 'cause the walkers would still follow their prey, not all gang up on a gate. Someone leaving out from their gates would, however, leave two sets of tracks, one going out and one coming back home, leading the danger right to where everyone slept. And the walkers would pile against the barrier that stopped them from getting their Grade A human steak, all bloody and rare. The group that wanted to leave needed to get going before they ruined everything he and Beth had. Whoever it was...they made their point already, all nice and clear. Walkers could find them here too. They were never really going to be safe.

"You think it could be one of us?" It wasn't a very convincing question...sounded more like a statement than anything.

Daryl didn't have to answer or even nod; Rick got him because he already knew.

Us...one of us. Whoever was doing this, they might be living inside the perimeter, they may have been one of the group, but this betrayal kinda took the us factor out of the equation.

"Anyone in particular?"

"All I know is who it isn't. It ain't a man. Prints are too small. You saw that. It ain't Carl, it ain't Michonne, and it sure in the hell ain't Beth." Beth stirred a little, and Daryl knew he had to quiet down. He was getting too worked up, and worked up wasn't gonna do nobody any good. "Rosita, is she with Abraham? Are they together?"

"Yeah." Rick looked at him, waiting for his explanation.

"I think Abraham knows I'm watching him like a hawk. I don't know if he's really worried about holding the gates until they leave or if he's just saying that to keep me off his back. Either way, if Rosita cares about him, that means she's gonna do whatever it takes to make him happy, even if that means putting herself at risk. And we know Abe wants nothing more than to get Pork Chop to DC.
What better way to get everyone onboard than showing them they're not safe here."

"Hmmm..." Rick's face tightened, contemplating the floor, hand going to rest idly on his Python, just out of habit for security. Daryl did the same thing with his crossbow sometimes when he was thinking on something deep. It was comforting.

All in all, Rick didn't seem too convinced by the Rosita Abraham theory...looked like Rick the cop already had another suspect in mind.

"Who are you thinking?"

Rick hesitated...not long, but enough that Daryl picked up on it.

"Just thinking on who it could be." Well if that wasn't a non-committal answer, Daryl didn't know what was.

But standing there pondering on who it could be wasn't doing any good. They just needed to figure out who it was and why, although at the end of the day, the reason kinda didn't mean shit.

"Nothing's gonna happen tonight if it's one of us. Too much went on today. People are too alert. Even if it's not one of us, they know better. If they're watching, they saw. But tomorrow night I'm gonna go out hunting, see what I see."

Rick looked a little thrown. "Hunting what?"

"Whoever I find." Rick got that real quick. It wasn't a what, it was a who.

"I'm coming with you."

"No, you'll just slow me down. They'll hear us coming a mile a way. I can track and hunt all night just fine on my own." He wasn't saying it to make Rick feel shitty; it was just the truth, and truth had to be the priority now, not ego. "And if it's one of us I'm hunting, I need you here...to watch out for Beth for me...keep her safe. If anything happened to her..."

Daryl couldn't finish. It stung so bad that he had to even consider worrying under his own roof...in their home...the idea that someone inside their walls might hurt Beth. He might be overreacting, but he wasn't gonna take a chance. His gut told him he had to keep her safe. Rick saw that, rested a hand on his shoulder, comforting and understanding. He had family too.

"If one of us is on watch or outside this house at night, the other should be here with our families."

Rick agreed, nodding solemnly.

"What are you going to do, out there hunting, if you find someone?"

"Put a bolt through 'em." It was an automatic response...didn't even have to think on it. And it wasn't even a question that needed answering. It wasn't just implied. He said it plain as day, hunting, not inviting for Sunday brunch. Hunting meant killing.

"Even if it's one of us?" Rick's voice was much quieter, going a bit hesitant.

But Daryl wasn't...hesitant...Hell, especially if it's one of us. That's what he was saying to himself, that was the answer, but he thought better of showing that rage, just looking Rick square in the eye instead.

They were in an odd situation. Beth was his, his to love and protect, and the best way he could do
that...keep her safe...was to secure their home and eliminate any threat to them, no matter who it was. But it was Rick's group, always had been...it had always been his call, and this time, more likely than not, the threat was from within. Maybe he had to make Rick part of the decision.

"Any exemptions?" It was the best he could do.

Rick contemplated, went more serious if that was possible, not making a quick call, and that worried Daryl a little. But Rick finally shook his head, giving Daryl the answer he needed, knowing his faith in Rick wasn't misplaced.

"Eliminate the threat." Words went unspoken as they both thought on what it had come to. "Can you do it, if it's one of us...any of us?"

Daryl narrowed his eyes Rick's way. That question, was Rick judging him, thinking he was a monster if he would kill one of their own, or was Rick doubting his ability to pull the trigger if he had to...thinking he didn't have the balls to do what needed to be done? It had to be one of those two. But Rick knew better, didn't he? Rick wouldn't be standing beside him, leaving the group to stay behind with him and Beth if he questioned Daryl's ability to survive or who he was...the code he lived by. And he sure in the hell knew Daryl could pull that trigger when he had to. He stood up...ended Dale's suffering...took that responsibility. Rick had been there too. He killed Shane, had the courage to kill his best friend because he was a threat, even though his family and part of his group hated him for it. Seeing Rick now, Daryl understood, Rick's face drawn tight, grave. The question really wasn't about him at all, it was about Rick checking to make sure they were on the same page and that there were no reservations about who they killed, because in the end, it had to be done.

*Can you do it if it's one of us...any of us?*

"Especially if it's one of us." This time he said it because it was necessary.

Daryl thought back on the night he and Beth sat at their campfire, when he opened himself up, telling her that she could ask him whatever she wanted to know...and what she wanted to know, it was ironic just how relevant it was in this moment in their lives.

"Is it harder for you to kill people than walkers?" She'd asked it so innocently with such hesitation that even though he was always quick to think people were judging him, that never even crossed his mind. There had been no judgment in Beth's voice.

"With people, the things that make 'em human, their abilities and whatnot, their decisions, make 'em easy to kill." Daryl had more of an explanation then, better, more introspective thoughts on human nature, but that was the gist of it.

"Like how they choose to live and what they choose to do makes them deserve to die?"

"Yeah, Lil' Bit. Especially in this world where there's no law to keep you safe. Only each other."

Beth got it then, and she certainly got it now, after everything they'd been through. He couldn't have summed it up better than she did. *How they choose to live and what they choose to do makes them deserve to die.* Whoever was betraying them, just to make a point or not, they were putting everyone at risk. Maybe he didn't give a shit about everyone, but that woman sleeping in his bed, he would slaughter the entire world for her. And the man standing beside him-his brother, the baby in Beth's arms, and Rick's son...they were family too...he'd fight for them. Leading the walkers in was a choice. All choices had consequences. They might not see it coming, but it was. He would deal them their death without a second thought. The warrant was already signed.
Daryl went to the edge of the bed, having to climb into it, kneeling in its softness to get anywhere near Beth. He wanted to rake his fingers through her hair, wanted to tell her he loved her and missed her today, wanted to kiss her like he meant it, but instead he settled on softly brushing the wild wisps of hair out of her face and kissing her on the cheek. He was a hard man, no one ever doubted that, never said otherwise if they wanted to come away with their teeth, but with Beth, he didn't have to be. Daryl tousled Judith's fine, soft hair, smiling down on her too before pulling back.

"What?" It came out all defensive when he saw Rick watching him, lips turned up just a little. Shit, he shouldn't have done that, gone to Beth, showed her affection with Rick standing there. That made him look like...what, like he was in love? Not like Rick didn't know too much already. Why in the hell did it even matter anymore? Still, Daryl's jaw was tight, feeling all defensive and protective of what he had with Beth...what he shared with her...but he forced himself to push it back the best he could. It was Rick.

"We can't tell no one about what's going on...about me going out hunting. I'm gonna tell Beth, and you can probably tell Michonne if you got to, but we need to keep it quiet."

"I know."

Daryl just realized that being on watch tonight and going hunting the next meant that he was leaving Beth alone two nights in a row. He wasn't happy about that, and she wasn't gonna be neither. But it couldn't always be about making her happy; it always had to be about keeping her safe. If he wanted to keep her protected and comfortable in their nice, warm bed, in their house, the place she deserved in the world, where they could be happy, he had to man up, go out, and do his job.

"Tell Beth I'm on watch, will you?" Daryl paused briefly beside Rick, readjusting his crossbow over his shoulder.

"Is she going to kill the messenger?" It was good there was still lightness in Rick's voice despite what they were facing.

"Mmm-hmmm. There's probably a pretty good chance." Daryl grinned big, rubbing at his eyes with his palms, trying to cover the thought that just popped in his head.

Rick had been the one who interrupted their...morning in bed together. Shit, it'd been a long day. Was that just this morning? He'd started to forget what long days were like. Anyway, now he was sending Rick to tell Beth that she would be sleeping alone. He hoped Beth didn't try out any of those fighting skills he'd been teaching her and face punch Rick. And he was gonna have to make it up to her, telling Beth he'd come back to her today and he never did...but that would make it all the sweeter.

"What? What is it?" Rick was trying to get a hold on his sudden awkwardness.

"Nothin'...just..." He really needed to cover. "Just be careful. She's little, but she can be vicious."

"Hmmph," Rick scoffed, looking down, shaking his head.

"Go ahead, laugh. I ain't kidding." He was though, in this case, but Beth, she was fierce when she needed to be.
Chapter 70

Chapter Summary

~Author's Note: Hey everyone! Happy Saturday. Just a tiny note. There may be a little sensuality in the chapter that may not be entirely safe for work. Just a little warning. Hope you enjoy! Thank you for reading.~

"Rick..." Beth tapped softly on his door again, Judith's tiny hand twirling in her ponytail pulled over her shoulder. She didn't want to wake him up if he was napping.

She'd had a nap of her own. Beth just laid down in bed with Judith, closed her eyes for a second, and when she opened them again it was full dark. Judith was wide awake when she woke up, Beth couldn't tell for how long, but she had the sneaking suspicion the little girl would be keeping Rick up all night. Smiling, stroking Judith's fine hair, Beth knew there were far worse things in their world than a happy, healthy baby interrupting your sleep. And overall Beth was just feeling content and satisfied with herself despite the day's earlier events. Sure things were a little unsettled with the walkers and the division caused by the need some of their group felt to leave their safe haven, even if not everyone was talking about it openly, but Beth knew where she stood in all of it. She knew where Daryl stood, and that was right beside her. She’d defended that position like it was her religion, defended Daryl and who he was like it was her right...and it was.

Spending the day with Judith on her hip, going about everything she needed to do, Beth had lots of time to think. Even though her Daddy and Mama taught her not to be prideful, this was different...taking a stance to protect and defend her family, something Daddy had always instilled in his children. Beth never understood the full value of that until now. Then there were thoughts of the intrinsic rewards that came with having that family...Daryl. Being apart from him all day, just to hug him and hold him and feel small in his arms...it was what she was living for. The day, the group, and responsibility might separate them, but their nights were theirs.

"Rick?" Knocking again.

"Gah..." Judith squealed, spotting Rick coming down the hall before she did, fresh from the shower, working at the last buttons on his shirt.

"What did she say?" Rick's voice lit up at Judith's almost word.

"Gah," Beth dictated.

Judith wasn't talking, not there yet, just a noise...baby babble...but Beth didn’t have the heart to ruin Rick's excitement.

"It was almost 'Da'. Judith, 'Da', say 'Da, Dada'." Beth tried, but all she got in response was a giggle and a sputter while Rick ushered them into his room so she could put Judith in her crib.

Looking up, destroyed, reaching out like she'd just been sentenced to hard time behind bars, Judith started to fuss. Beth leaned down kissing her on the head, realizing just how spoiled she was. But that was okay.
"Have you seen Daryl?"

Beth came to Rick for two things, to return Judith and hopefully have Daryl returned to her.

"Yeah." Rick went a little sheepish, well, sheepish for Rick, and what he said...it wasn't really an answer at all.

"Where is he?" Crossing the room to get closer and pin Rick on his answer.

"He was up here a while ago..." Well, that didn't help her situation any, and why was he dancing around the issue? Rick looked half like he was toying with her and half like he was avoiding. "He didn't want to wake you up. Asked me to tell you he's on watch."

"Watch?" Just blurt ing it out, Beth came off as being so needy. She could see that realization in the grin Rick was fighting. "Watch until when, dinner?"

"Until morning. Daryl took watch...has watch tonight," Rick stuttered over his words a bit. Daryl was leaving her alone...left wanting with only the memories of what was almost started...what he almost did this morning? The world was conspiring against her. Beth felt the fire burning behind her eyes as they narrowed, not at Rick, but they were on him...pointed in his direction. He was gauging her reaction, being the bearer of bad news.

"Let's not kill the messenger," he spread his hands out in surrender, taking a step back in jest. He knew what it was like. Rick had been there, hadn't he...young, in love, newly married, at the point where everything else around you ceased to exist? An apocalypse didn't change those things between two people. And for Beth, and maybe Daryl too, those feelings of need and desire were all the stronger. The normal things...what people normally experienced, didn't come to them in stages; it all happened at once. Intense earth shattering love and loyalty, marriage, and sex all conquered their world...engulfed them in the blink of an eye. Beth smiled soft and shy, shaking it off.

"He'll come back to you. Nothing's going to keep Daryl away from you." Rick laid a big, comforting hand on her shoulder.

But there was something keeping him away. Watch. Rick was covering for him too. He said Daryl took watch, then he corrected, changed it and said he had watch. They were just two simple words that maybe meant nothing...she would have never thought much about it, but the meaning was enough that Rick changed what he said.

"Took watch..." Beth whispered it to herself, not really meaning to say it, but the words filled the awkward silent moment while she was thinking it through, letting it roll around in her mind.

Had watch indicated an imposed or scheduled duty. Took watch suggested volunteering. Either way, it meant a night of solitude, except took meant Daryl chose to leave her cold and alone in their bed.

"Are you okay? Beth?" Now Rick was reading her like an open book, pensive in watching her, everything else washing from his face.

The truth was, it had been a long time since she actually had a chance to just talk to someone like Rick. She might be an adult, married, caring for an infant, but she missed her Daddy...that love and comfort of a father. And Rick...he was as close to that as she was ever going to get again. He was the father of their group, and not just that, he was someone who cared about her. Just Rick asking...Beth let out a shaky breath.
"It's been hectic," Rick reassured, not judging her emotional shift but telling her it was okay to be overwhelmed.

He was right. It had gone from Christmas trees to chaos, making love with Daryl to fighting personal wars with Carol, a morning wrapped up in Daryl to a night sentenced to solitude. Beth nodded to Rick knowing there hadn't been a question, but she didn't know what else to do, feeling the weight of it all fall heavy on her shoulders. It was easier for her to be strong with Daryl...for Daryl when he was near, but now...Rick was right. He normally was. It had been a long day. Maybe she would skip dinner and just curl up in bed and try to sleep...try to make morning come faster. Things would look better in the light of day...but he still saw her looking all defeated.

"We're going to start getting this all worked out tomorrow, deciding who's staying and who's heading out to Washington D.C. It's going to get more stressful before it gets better, but at least it will be settled soon." It was small comfort, but Rick was trying, providing comfort within the bounds of truth.

It was bothering him though, she could see it in his eyes, the way he was looking at her...the knowledge that there would be a divide. It meant more goodbyes...more tears. Beth hadn't had time to talk to Maggie about much of anything, so neither of them knew where the other one stood. Beth was more than happy to stay and live her life with Daryl. That was who she was...who they were; it wasn't even a choice...her home was wherever Daryl was. But was Maggie operating under the assumption that they were going to leave their life and home behind to follow Abraham to D.C. like Moses to the Land of Milk and Honey? Were Maggie and Glenn still planning on going like she'd heard Carol insist to Rick? It would be a heartbreaking and tearful goodbye, but Beth could handle it, finding comfort and closure in knowing that the last time she saw her sister, she was alive and well...not like the uncertainty after the prison. She wasn't worried about herself, but she was worried about Maggie...Maggie had always been the protective big sister; she didn't have to go, but she might, and Maggie would have to live with her own choice.

"I've already told Daryl this, talked to him about it, but it's your home too. We want to stay..." Was she hearing right? Maybe she was just hallucinating. "...Carl, Judith, Michonne and me..."

No...not a hallucination. Beth squeaked in joy, throwing her arms around Rick's neck as he staggered back, thrown off balance by the unexpected force. He wrapped a sturdy arm around her, hugging her back.

"That is, if you'll have us."

She could hear in his words that he was smiling, that he already knew that last bit was ridiculous. Instead of saying something that didn't need to be said, Beth kissed his whiskered cheek.

"Rick, are you in here? You can't keep avoiding..." Stern, commanding, and annoyed, Carol's voice preceded her entrance without so much as a knock.

Beth saw her over Rick's shoulder, still caught in their hug. Carol standing there, words forgotten...

"Oh..." She was quick to switch from confrontational to exaggerated surprise as Rick let Beth go and turned to her.

"What is it, Carol. I'm not in the mood."

Beth was glad she wasn't the only one going tense around Carol, and Rick apparently didn't feel the need to play nice. He was sharp with her to start. Maybe Carol had been on Rick much more about leaving than just the conversation she had overheard.
"You're not in the mood for what, dinner? Because dinner is ready."

There was no way Beth was buying her excuse...her cover. Not after today. Beth was starting to figure out what she was about.

"We'll be down."

"Looking out for Beth while Daryl's on watch?" It was directed to Rick, but Beth knew it was meant for her...like Carol was accusing her of doing something wrong.

"It's what we do; we're family," Rick answered definitively.

Carol clearly didn't get the chance to confront Rick like she had been planning, but when she walked away, it didn't seem like she was retreating. She made a point to push the door open all the way until the knob banged against the wall, glancing back over her shoulder disapprovingly before she made her final exit.

Sighing, brushing her hair back, hand swiping it away from her forehead, for a minute Beth wished she and Daryl could just run away from it all.

"Why don't you make sure to steer clear of Carol."

How did Rick know something had happened...about her talk with Carol this morning? Maybe someone heard and told. He was just looking out for her, being protective...

"It wasn't really a fight...just a bit of a confrontation..." Then Beth realized, snapping her mouth shut...she offered up something that Rick hadn't even questioned or known about.

Her mind was a million places at once. Why couldn't she just keep her wits about her and think before she talked? Things were tense enough as it was without her adding to the drama.

"Just keep your head down. This isn't your fight...who stays and who goes. It's best if you…" But Rick stopped his thought, cocked his head, finally catching what she said. "What wasn't a fight? What confrontation?"

Beth turned away, trying to avoid, just gather her thoughts, wishing it would all go away.

"What happened?" Rick was stern and was going to be just as unrelenting as Daryl would have been in this situation. She knew if she turned around, he would be standing squarely between her and the door...between her and retreat.

"It was nothing, really..."

"Beth." Taking her by the arm, Rick guided her to a chair, indicating for her to sit.

No matter how she went about telling Rick, was she going to come off as jealous and possessive? Because that wasn't it. She just wished Rick wouldn't judge...would understand that she had just been standing up for her family...for herself and Daryl.

"It's just...well, Carol came to me this morning and tried to get me to convince Daryl to go to Washington D.C.. She said some things...things about Daryl that I know aren't true to try to get me to when just talking to me wasn't working...and I might have called her on it." Beth was just trying to keep it to the short version, to the generalities. "She kinda got aggressive..."

Rick raised his eyebrow, jaw shifting back and forth under his beard like he was waiting to snap and
head out after Carol.

"No...not aggressive aggressive, not like that..." Beth corrected, knowing she was making the situation worse than it already was. This was why she didn't want to tell. "She got aggressive and mean in the things she was saying to me, and I said some hurtful things...but they were true...and I had to, for Daryl. That's not what he is...not who she was saying he was."

Combing his fingers through his hair, Rick looked far more serious and contemplative about this little spat than he should’ve been. Maybe he just sensed the emotion in her, but was that really it? Rick...his demeanor was stiff and protective...and he'd said to stay away from Carol before she even slipped up and mentioned what happened.

"Rick?" Beth didn't know what kind of question that was or even the answer she expected, but she needed something. She needed to know what Rick had on his mind.

"Beth, you're fine. Just stay away from her." Now he was starting to sound like Daryl. "Things will be settled for good soon, one way or another. When Daryl's not here, you have a problem, you need something, you come to me."

*                      *                      *                      *                      *

Their bed was so big. No matter which way she laid, there was no way she could ever reach from edge to edge. And the curtains and canopy...the shadows they cast, it was like being engulfed by darkness. There was dark, then there was pitch black...their embrace was just that...the black world of night closing in on her. Beth couldn't sleep for anything. Closing her eyes, every other sense intensified...hearing the incessant tick of the alarm clock keeping the beat of every solitary second; feeling the void in the bed beside her where even if Daryl wasn't touching her, she would still have been able to feel his sturdy presence; smelling him, his familiar and comforting scent on his pillow...on her pillow...everywhere, reminding her of just how close he always was and just how far away he was tonight. It was her first night alone in their bed, and she felt it as intimately as the feel of Daryl when he was over her.

Giving up on sleep, Beth just laid there, thought, tried to play a little game of pretend to help herself cope...a little game of what if?. What if she'd met Daryl and fell in love with him before? What if they got married or lived together?

I always knew that whatever I did in life, I would never make a lot of money...

Daryl told her that about his life before, a precursor to telling her what he wished for...what he wanted. As sad as it was, that was probably true. Society hadn't been kind to men like Daryl. He thrived in his role in the new world, would have fit perfectly in a time in some prior history, but his place in the time where they were born and raised...his place in the world had been marginal at best. But that would’ve never stopped that man from providing for her, from giving her the best life he could manage. That would mean Daryl would probably be working long hours at two jobs, one of them at night, so her nights would be lonely. She would more than likely be working at a little all-night diner somewhere, waiting tables, maybe trying to go to community college, so they would barely see each other at all. They were lucky now; that thought fortified her a little.

Still, despite what she believed...what she knew...insomnia mixed with exhaustion and stress could break anyone. Sitting up in the middle of the bed, drawing her knees close to her chest, Beth started
to feel it...the sudden flood of emotion; the tears came. It was like those moments Beth could still remember so clearly, when she was little, sleeping over with her friends. Everything was fine...happy, but staying up so late, trying to make sure the perfect day never came to an end, there was that point where one little girl started crying, then everyone fell apart, no stopping it when they all burst into tears. She felt like all of those little girls at once, and the worst part was, there was no one there to comfort or assure her. Daryl wasn't going to be walking through that door to wipe her tears away. But she did have Maggie. Maggie was still there. Beth could go to her sister, go to Maggie before she might lose the chance, sit up with her all night talking like they did when they were young or even later when Maggie came home from college for the summer. They didn't even have to talk about her worries or anything deep like Washington or walkers...just talk, share some secrets. It seemed now that she had Daryl, she had so much more in common with Maggie, being in similar places in life. That was what stopped her though. They were both grown...both married. Her sister was sleeping beside Glenn...there was no more chance to share secrets with her, giggle into pillows, and talk until the sun came up. She could never ask that of Maggie...pull her away from the man she loved...because Beth knew first hand how empty that was making her feel.

I'm lonely...

Sighing, the tears started to abate, but the emptiness in the pit of her stomach was still there.

Daryl is eventually going to leave. It might not be today or tomorrow, maybe not even next year, but one day Daryl's just going to head out into those woods and never come back...

"Stop it...just stop..." Beth whispered, chastising herself. How was she letting this...what Carol said...get to her now? She was stronger than that.

...he isn't made for this kind of life. I think you know that. He might be happy playing house right now, but the wild calls to him...

Was the wild calling to Daryl now? Daryl took watch.

Beth refused to sit and cry and worry anymore, climbing out of their empty bed. There was only one person who could fill that void and ease her fears.

*                      *                      *                      *                      *

"Whatchya doin'?" Beth's eyes shot skyward at his rough growl, having to take a step back away from the gate to find him up on the wall, able to make out his shape only because of the moonlight and the glowing ember at the end of the cigarette hanging between his lips.

"Rick told me you took watch..." She couldn't see his face, not wanting to blind him with her flashlight, but he looked stiff. "...and I...

"That don't mean you got watch." He was gruff, but the question was, was he being gruff with her or because of something else?

He had been away all day, wasn't he the least bit happy to see her? Maybe she was the reason he took watch...he wanted to stay away from her. Maybe he needed space...time alone. Maybe they had been spending too much time together. Was she smothering him? And he had been so cooped up after getting hurt. Did she need to back off? Beth shook her head, telling herself that wasn't true, trying not to let the events of the day get to her.
"Phhh..." She watched Daryl throw his crossbow over his shoulder, take a long drag off his cigarette before he dropped it and killed it with his booted foot. "Okay, come on up, Lil' Bit."

**Lil' Bit.** That was so much better. His entire demeanor changed, crouching down low to the edge of the wall waiting for her.

"How?" What, was she just supposed to scale it?

"The supports...the pillars, they're easy to climb."

He was right. Before she knew it, she was able to reach out, close enough for Daryl to grab her arm in his stone solid grip.

"Come on, I got you." Helping her onto the ledge and holding her steady while she got to her feet. "Easy, careful now..."

Daryl started to release her, hand just cupping her elbow, but he was still being overprotective.

"It's not that far." Beth looked down, the ground no more than ten feet away, the lightness in her voice writing off his worry.

"Far enough you fall the wrong way..." Daryl's large, calloused hand caught her by surprise...caught her slender neck in his grasp, forcing her chin up so he could see her, Beth gasping, "...it'll break your pretty little neck."

His thumb caressed the sensitive skin just below her ear, a stark contrast to the surprise of his hand on her throat. Beth bit at her lip, still feeling so awkward at how quickly Daryl could make her want him...need him so badly, and how that need...that desire could overwhelm everything that made the day difficult, made her forget anything and everything she might have needed to talk to him about, all the actual things she should be concerned with, if just for that moment. Daryl leaned in close, so close...breathing her in deep. His smell filled her...wood smoke and tobacco, all dark and musky with a hint of danger. Beth couldn't help wonder if her scent did the same magical things to him as his did to her, reaching out and grabbing his side to steady herself...and not from falling. But Daryl, he sighed and growled all in one, releasing her and stepping back, putting distance between them. Distance.

"Did I do something wrong?"

"What?" Why did he seem so surprised? "What's this about, Beth? Why are you out here?"

"Rick said you took watch." Rick tried to correct it, said after that Daryl had watch, but he said took first. There was a big difference between had and took. It was still bothering her, and she needed to know why.

"Mmm-hmm. I came to tell you myself, but you were sleepin'. I didn't wanna bother you." Well, that was an honest explanation, one she already knew, but not what she was looking for.

"Mmm-hmm. I came to tell you myself, but you were sleepin'. I didn't wanna bother you." Well, that was an honest explanation, one she already knew, but not what she was looking for.

"Did I do something wrong...I mean did I not do something right...last night...when we..." That was immediately what her mind went to after having him so close, having his hand on her neck, smelling him...wanting him, but he was the one who pulled away. That had to be it. Something she did wrong or didn't do. Why was it still so painfully awkward to talk about? "If I did, you have to tell me because I don't know...and I don't want you to avoid me because of it...you just have to tell me."

She would be lucky if he understood half of what she was trying to get out. It was just so confusing because he'd seemed content and satisfied, even wanted her again in the morning, but now, the
distance was killing her. Rubbing at the stitches in his forehead with the back of his hand, what little of his face she could see in the moon's light...it looked like he was thinking on something deep, and it wasn't something awkward like sex; it was something else.

"What kind of man would I be...what kind of husband...if I'm not willing to take that first watch and guard our home...protect you?"

Beth's heart went all pitter-patter and fluttery when he said that...that word, husband. It was the first time she'd ever heard that word pass his lips, the first time he had ever referred to himself as such. Daryl was taking that title...who he was...as seriously as any man ever could.

"And there ain't nothin' more important than that...being that husband to you."

Eyes following his hand to where he found his wedding ring, Daryl twisting it back and forth over the top of his finger, head bowed, there was no way Beth could ever question his sincerity or dedication to the promises he made to her. That wasn't all of it though...what he said...there was more to it...what he was protecting her from, what made him need to take watch, but Daryl's stance didn't seem like he was going to let himself be pushed for more.

Beth sometimes hated that he was so fiercely proud in this...because it was keeping them apart now. And she couldn't help be upset about how their life had been turned upside-down. There had been no need to guard their home before...before when? When everyone reunited? She didn't regret coming back together with their family...just all the drama it brought, but there'd been no walkers before that, that and Abraham and his people deciding to shoot at the ones that ganged up on their gate. Why did Daryl have to take this watch? She knew why...but still...

Carol had been right about one thing; she wanted Daryl all to herself...at least their nights together. Maybe it was just a matter of time all along...just a matter of time before the walkers showed up, but everything still caught up with them too quickly.

"Rick's gonna stay, and the kids...Michonne too."

Daryl was trying to give her something. She just nodded.

"You okay with that?" The news didn't elicit enough of a response, and it worried him.

"No...yeah...I mean yes, I'm so happy. Rick told me earlier." If Daryl had seen her reaction, he wouldn't be doubting. "And he said tomorrow that everyone was going to have to start deciding whether or not they are going to stay..." Beth trailed off, not because she was questioning it but because there were people she wanted to leave...knew had to leave for her and Daryl to have a chance at peace, but those people...that person...they weren't going to leave without a fight.

She was carefully weighing whether or not to tell Daryl about how Carol confronted her. At this point, with Rick putting everyone on the fast track to leaving and Rick having an idea what was going on, did it even matter? Daryl had so much on his mind already.

"Mmm-hmmm. Does that make you upset...worried?"

"No...not that at least...not people leaving..." It was her turn to sigh discontentedly now. She didn't mean to, but it came out.

"Hell, Beth...I want you all the time. I feel fucking cheated outta you with all the shit that's been going on..." He caught her hand, angling his head down closer to her level.

Daryl misread her current worry but jumped back to something maybe just as important...her
insecurities. Cussing...that meant he was dead serious. Realizing what he said, even though his tone hadn't been harsh or the words directed at her, Daryl softened, going all intimate, just between the two of them even though there wasn't another soul who could've heard.

"I need you...I need you even if you're just standing beside me..." Pulling her close then, his palm pressing urgently at the small of her back, bringing her to him...there was no hiding the truth, and he wanted her to feel. "And you gotta stop doubting yourself. You can't do nothin' wrong. How many times I gotta tell you...?"

When Daryl was the one who did all the talking...Daryl who was never one for words, how could Beth doubt, just soaking in, listening to the soothing tenor of his voice...his voice just for her.

"And last night, hell, I didn't give you a chance to do nothin'. I did all the taking." That was making him self-conscious; she could hear it in the way his voice went raspy.

Beth couldn't help herself from nuzzling into his body. The night was chilly, but Daryl was keeping her warm now, and the memory of him still fresh between her thighs would be enough to keep her warm through the lonely night she'd been sentenced to in their bed when he sent her back.

"And I ain't gonna lie...I needed that..."

That sent a shiver down her spine. She was the one who stepped back now, just in the slightest bit so she could look up at him even though she couldn't see him very well, resting her hand over his heart.

"Maybe I needed it too..." Beth hadn't meant for it to come out seductive, but it did.

"You can't be out here...you shouldn't be out here..." Daryl's heart started beating just a little bit quicker as she drew her fingers down the center of his chest.

"Shhh..." Silencing him...at least trying...

He caught her hand, stopping her before she even got to his navel.

"Don't start somethin' you ain't gonna finish." It was a warning and a desperate plea, Daryl sounding more animal than man.

Maybe she'd been a little pissed when Rick told her Daryl took watch...hated that he didn't come back to her. But standing so near, feeling him close to her, knowing what Daryl stood for and how everything he did, in the end, came back to her...now there was nothing but the need to give him what comfort and joy she could.

"I'm going to finish you, Daryl Dixon." Her quietly confident words were so bold Beth brought the blush to her own cheeks.

It crossed Beth's mind, wanting to taste Daryl, take him into her mouth, but it wouldn't work, not on top the wall no matter how wide the ledge was. He would probably say no anyway, especially being out in the open, so close to the guesthouse...he wasn't going to let her go to her knees with the chance of getting caught, even if she wanted to. So Beth settled on just touching him, watching Daryl chew at his bottom lip, anticipating her next move as she toyed idly with his belt buckle. He was trying so hard to hold it together. Cupping his hard length through his pants, feeling him jerk against her hand, Beth contemplated the point where strength and weakness between two people in love melted way. Daryl fought a groan he was trying to hold back, but he lost the battle, threading his fingers through the hair at the base of her neck; she felt his desperation. Beth had a struggle of her own, trying to fight back the satisfied smile attempting to capture her lips...she felt so possessive of him, and knowing that she pleased him, that he wanted her, and that she had been strong...stood up
for them and their relationship, holding her ground...it was everything. Unzipping his pants and
taking him in her hand, Beth was confident although part of her was still overwhelmed by the feel of
a man...but Daryl, he was hers...no one else could ever try to lay claim.

There was something about bringing Daryl to that point of release, him coming because of her...how
easily her small hands could bring him pleasure that made Beth know that everything was right
between them, overriding every doubt that tried to conquer her in her emotional moments before she
came to him. And it wasn't about Daryl coming. He could get himself off as simply as she just did if
he wanted; she wasn't stupid enough not to know that...not to realize that she wasn't necessary, at
least in this. It wasn't about power either, and it sure wasn't about control or manipulation as some
people made it out to be. It was about a beautiful thing called vulnerability...a place Daryl let himself
go with her just now.

Beth had no idea what was going on inside their home or what was outside those gates, but
after...when Daryl pulled her close, his chest shuddering against her...it was because he needed her,
and in this moment, she was the steady one. He was a protector, and he had to know what he was
fighting for...that was them...her. When his mouth sought hers, it was out of need...lips soft and
trembling...maybe just from that one stunning moment of pure ecstasy, but it felt more than anything
like he was asking her to tell him everything was going to be okay. She couldn't promise him that in
words...she couldn't know, but she could let her lips take away the sting of that uncertainty in a kiss
that wasn't a lie. So Beth caught his lips...promised him the only promise she could...that no matter
what happened, she would stand with him...even to their last moment. Even if they were alive
together the night the world died, Beth would hold him and love him...and that would be enough...
Chapter 71

Chapter Summary

Author's Note: Hey guys! Sorry it took me so long to post this one. Life got in the way. The tension comes to a point in this chapter for some characters, but I don't think that is unexpected. I hope that you all enjoy and that those of you in the US have a great Labor Day weekend!~

He sat longer on the wall than he needed to or even should've, far past sunrise, just sitting there, not really thinking...just being. If he went back to the house too early, he'd bother Beth, and the next few days were gonna be hell...he had no doubt about that. She needed whatever peace and quiet she could get even if it was in sleep. Taking the porch steps two at a time, knowing that Rick was probably gonna want to call everyone together first thing, Daryl was just hoping to have a moment to kiss Beth in private, splash some cold water on his face, and grab a bite to eat. But that didn't seem to be in his cards.

"See any walkers at the gates last night?"

Well shit, had she been standing there waiting for him? It was no cosmic coincidence she was in the foyer at the exact moment he came through the doors.

"Was quiet enough." All he wanted was to brush right past her, but Carol wasn't giving him the option of avoiding, so he just stood, feet planted firmly.

"Rick called a meeting for us to work out all the details of getting ready to head out to D.C."

That was an interesting take on the gathering. She didn't really believe that, did she?

"Mmm-hmmm." Wasn't nothin' new to him.

"He's just waiting for us."

He knew Rick was probably waiting for the both of them, but there was no us. The way she was making it out to be, Rick sent her after him, and Daryl knew that sure in the hell wasn't the case. Rick knew there was tension there even if Carol didn't know the full extent of it...the full extent of what he knew.

"I know it's hard for you because of Beth and her wanting to stay, but you know it's the right choice. It's the right thing for everyone, and especially for her. Once we all get back out on the road and we're fighting together for a common purpose, not trapped behind these walls, but actually fighting to make a difference, it'll be better. People will figure out where they belong again...remember who they are." She was playing it so casual, but it was there...she was trying to convince him.

There was no reason to let her waste her breath.

"We're not going." It was as simple as that.

"We are all going," Carol asserted, Daryl raising his eyebrow at the stance she was taking. "You are as much of a leader of our group as Rick. You kept the prison going when Rick decided he didn't
want to lead anymore...kept us safe, hunted, led supply runs, sat on the council..."

If there was anyone who wanted to lead less than Rick, it was him. Didn't mind protecting and providing, but leading...people might want him to make decisions for whatever ridiculous reason, but that wasn't him. Split second decisions, making a choice in the heat of the moment, even leading if he had to...he could do it, but if Carol was trying to stroke his ego by shoving him into Rick's place...well, they'd been here before...and she still didn't know him at all.

_We're not safe with him. Keeping something like that from us. Why do you need him? He's just gonna pull you down._

_No. Rick's done all right by me._

_You're his henchman, and I'm a burden. You deserve better._

_What do you want?_  
_A man of honor._  
_Rick has honor._

Those words stuck with him.

And Daryl was running low on tolerance for this game...short on patience, diplomacy, and civility, all things necessary in a leader for where Carol wanted to go.

"Rick stepped up again, but he needs you. Your place is beside Rick."

That would’ve hit the right nerve...touched him more than all the other shit she said, banking on his loyalty to Rick. She was bringing up his loyalty to the group too, but she knew that his devotion to Beth came before his loyalty to them. If he had been willing to die...to sacrifice for them, she understood the extent of his love for Beth...his wife...his family. His love and loyalty to Rick, his brother closer than blood, would come only second to Beth. And she was right about that; his place was beside Rick. Clearly she had no idea Rick was staying, but it wasn't his place to tell.

"Mmm-hmm. We're staying."

Daryl was so over the conversation, Carol looking at him, trying to figure out her next approach. He made to go around her, but she countered his move, blocking. Daryl wouldn't touch a woman in aggression unless she was a threat, but that...that defiance to let him pass sparked his anger, lips twitching pressed tight together.

"Daryl, you've got to understand that Beth...I know she wants to stay..."

"I wanna stay..."

"...but she's a child. She doesn't really know what she wants or what is good for her, but she does have what you want, and that's okay. I'm not judging you for that. You just can't let her childish notions rule you because she's just woman enough to give you what you need..." The fury was burning in his chest, but he was biting it...holding it back. "You need to be the man in your relationship...be the man she needs, the man who makes the right decisions to protect her...keep her safe. I know you, Daryl..."

"You don't know nothin'..." Voice low and sharp...Daryl was ready to snap.
"I know you. I know who you are...who you can be. You need to start thinking with your head again like you used to...not with the parts that Beth appeals to..."

"No..." If Carol knew him at all, she would see how close to the edge he was...that it was time to back off.

"It's fine. I don't care who you sleep with. You deserve it, but don't let it cloud your judgment...don't let her manipu..." Breaking off just then, realizing maybe for the first time the hole she was digging and thinking better of saying manipulate...but it was too late. Had been for a long time.

"You need to leave." Daryl would be lying to himself if he tried to pretend that there wasn't emotion and anger throwing those words outta his mouth, but that didn't make them any less true.

"I'm not leaving until you hear me out...until we're on the same page. You don't get to dismiss me just because you don't like what I'm saying and don't want to listen to reason."

She didn't get it. Maybe she couldn't, so driven by her cause.

"No, you need to leave, walk out those gates and never come back."

Daryl knew something like this might happen all along, remembering back to the day they were all reunited. He told himself then that if anyone caused conflict in his home, even gave him the slightest hint that they were a threat to their life or Beth's happiness...those things that were his...he had no problem putting them out on their asses...any one of 'em. He kinda broke that promise to himself. So much had been going on...so much happened, he let Beth down and let some of these people make her doubt what they had together...doubt what he felt. Now, he was manning up. It wasn't going to be too little too late.

"Even if you wanted to stay, that's not an option. I don't want you here." It had to be the truth now. He could only care about his family.

"You don't want me here...or Beth doesn't?"

"No, this is all me. What I want." Daryl tried to curb his temper, grinding his jaw. But did she even hear him...did she even care?

Maybe this was the moment she decided to take her rage out...'cause what Carol spat served no other purpose.

"You need to teach Beth the way the of world...teach her some respect for the people who've known and experienced more than she ever can." She'd moved way past gentle persuasion to all out war against Beth, and he didn't know why. Beth had been nothing but kind and gracious, holding her tongue more than he ever could've.

"Stay the fuck away from Beth." That's what it was all coming down to. Trust...or the lack of.

"And you should know, she's getting possessive too..."

Hell, that was supposed to be a bad thing? He was the possessive one...knew that about himself, and where they came from...what they went through together, that was kinda how it had to be. They were all they had. Love, possession, protection...those things were all he really had to offer.

"We're done!" There was no question at all that Daryl was severing any small thread of a tie that they might've still had.
It hit her then, her stern face going shocked...realizing she pushed too far.

"Daryl..." Desperation marked her voice.

Carol reached out to him, almost touched his chest with her fingertips, but he jerked back.

"Keep your hands off me..." He'd gone feral...teeth sharp and ready to bite.

She didn't pull her hand back, but now it was more like she was holding him at bay...stopping him from leaving because once he walked away, he was really and truly gone.

"Let me by..." It wasn't a request; it was a warning.

"Hey...you two, stop dickin' around! Tuck your cocks away; the measuring contest is over..."
Daryl's focus snapped to Abraham standing in the hallway just off the foyer. "...and I'm pretty sure he's got you beat, sweetheart."

Was that supposed to be humor from Red...sent to fetch them... attempting to diffuse the situation? Wasn't workin'. At least he was quick to sense the seriousness of the conversation and the tension cracking in the room around them, still and alert, not too concerned with what he came for anymore.

"Daryl..." Rick's voice brought him back to center.

"Comin'." He brushed past both Carol and Abraham, no one making a move to stop him as he stalked away.

"You good?" Rick's question wasn't asking him about his feelings but checking to make sure he wasn't gonna put a bolt between someone's eyes.

"I'm fine..."

Beth saw him as soon as he stepped through the archway into the living room from where she was sitting all nice and safe on the couch between Maggie and Glenn. She made to move in that instant, but he shook his head at her, stopping her in her tracks before she could even stand. Her eyes...was she hurt...of course she was...concerned too...and more than that. Daryl didn't have the capacity to read everything she was feeling, couldn't even begin to try. All he could do was shake his head again to try to assure her of something...that he wasn't rejecting her, but he couldn't even force his face to soften for her. He couldn't give Beth what she deserved, what he wanted to give her...wasn't capable of that. And Daryl couldn't let Beth give him what he needed, not now...not even a soft touch or a quiet loving word. And he wasn't gonna let a situation happen where it seemed like he was cold to her, so she had to stay where she was. If she was hurt, it would only be for a little while. He couldn't let her come to him. Distance. He needed the distance.

This wasn't even his place...well, it was his home, but it wasn't his fight. He should just go and grab Beth, drag her away, go crash in bed...get the sleep his body was aching for, but he couldn't. He had to be here to support Rick. Rick had his back, and Daryl would stand with Rick; it was probably best he didn't say nothin' though. Instead, he found the Christmas tree, focused on its twinkling lights, half thought about what Christmas morning was gonna be like. Were they all gonna come down in pjs and eat pancakes? He'd never had homemade pancakes before... But the other half of him was thinking about hunting...what he had to do to make sure there was a Christmas morning. Focus...he needed focus...not internal turmoil. Instinct, not emotion. Daryl only half heard Rick's preface to the meeting, something about how it seemed like they'd been trying to get to DC for years, that the mission was one of the only things that they had to hold onto, their only hope...

"You're going to kill Beth if you stay..." That was Carol. That one was directed at him...a last
desperate attempt to hit him where it hurt.

"Wanna say that to me again?!" Lunging forward out of instinct...Rick's arm thrown across his chest from the same impulse.

He knew after a night on watch, with everything he had on his mind, that his fuse was gonna be fucking short. He just didn't know how short 'til now. Beth stood up like she was gonna defend herself or him, Daryl pointing sharp for her to sit back down between her sister and brother-in-law. This wasn't her fight. Glenn was on his feet however, and Daryl was glad he was willing to make a stand for his family.

"Go to Beth." Rick wasn't really giving him an option, shoving him back.

Didn't stop him from sneering and growling at his brother like a fucking animal.

"Go." It was Rick's final word, standing his ground, and Daryl backed down...this time.

He'd said his peace...anyone saying shit about Beth was his fight, but it was time to let Rick handle the group.

"I don't know why you're so obsessed with him. We knew he wasn't going to come all along. If Daryl and his girl want to stay, let 'em. We started out without him, don't need him now. Nothing worse than having someone fighting beside you, someone watching your back who doesn't believe in your cause. It makes you weak and vulnerable." Red was really starting to make sense. Who knew he would've been the sound of reason.

Daryl didn't believe in their cause…wasn't willing to risk his life for it. He sure in the hell wasn't going to risk Beth's life. Standing by the couch where Beth was sitting, his arms crossed, Daryl just waited for everything to explode.

"You're not going?" Maggie questioned Beth, finally realizing...hearing what was being said, like she'd never considered that a possibility.

Daryl turned his attention to the more intimate conversation, Beth shaking her head no, but not looking sad or regretful doing it.

"If you're not going...I can't leave you...I won't..." She pulled Beth into a death grip hug like she was never gonna let go.

Maggie's immediate reaction made Daryl's heart warm, for Beth's sake. Glenn caught his eye, questioning, asking without words if it was okay if they stayed, looking like he didn't know how he was gonna handle Maggie if Daryl said no.

"You're family." It was the only answer that was needed.

Things had been tense, but it all boiled down to that. They were family. Once Abe and his crew plus Carol hit the road, everything would get settled down and they could start living.

"Thank you..." Maggie mouthed over Beth's shoulder where she still held her tight.

"Maggie and I, we're going to stay. Family's family." Glenn spoke for them.

"That's why I'm 'obsessed'. Everything is hinging on Daryl and Beth, so without them, your cause is as good as dead."
Daryl heard what Carol was saying even though it wasn't meant for him, but he didn't care anymore. It didn't matter what she said. It was as good as settled...almost.

"We all just need to focus...stop this bickering. And you...you need to leave Beth and Daryl out of this," Rick finally spoke up, that last bit directed at Carol. "They've made their decision to stay. You've got nothing to say about it."

"And whoever's going needs to get goin’ soon. No reason to prolong it." Before, Daryl would’ve stood back and let the idiots go round and round, but not anymore...not in this.

"Yep, we've got no intention of staying on longer than we have to," Red promised.

It was strange since the morning walker clean up at the gate, him and Abraham were really starting to see eye to eye. Maybe it was because they were headed in different directions.

"Perhaps we should take care not to be too hasty in our decision or overzealous about our estimated time of departure." It seemed like the first time Daryl heard Eugene open his trap...since when? That sex comment at their dinner when he was ready to smash Pork Chop's teeth in. There was something about they way he talked...even the sound of his voice that rubbed Daryl the wrong way. And this...this was his mission...Eugene's whole point of existence, and he was balking? "The road has been long and arduous since Texas, and we have lost a fair few of our traveling companions. That was while wandering through subtropical climes. We should not compare our sojourn in Lone Star and the Peach State to the conditions we will likely face heading up the Eastern Seaboard where winter is unforgiving and could be the fatal mistake that kills us all and extinguishes the chance for the cure to reach Washington D.C."

"No!" Abe and Daryl both spat out at once, equally fervent, but Daryl backed off to let Abraham handle his own people.

"Those things out there...those eating dead...they don't wait for anyone. Every second we wait, we waste another second that they move closer to total domination of our species. The dead are recruiting, and business is good. This is fucking time sensitive people! What about that don't you get?" That speech was clearly meant for the entire group, but Abe narrowed his eyes at Eugene, fiery even for a ginger. "Yeah, we've lost a 'fair few traveling companions'. I've watched my friends and comrades fall, left them behind to get your ass out...keep you alive. That's what happens in war. The flag bearer falls, and the soldier behind doesn't let that flag hit the ground...picks it up and carries on. Your job is to stay alive. Our mission is to keep you alive. More of us are gonna die carrying out that mission. If the last of us falls delivering you to the steps of the Capitol, so be it. Mission's over and humanity will have its chance. Winter don't matter. Nothing else matters."

Abraham's tone softened in those last words, like it was the only thing keeping him breathing. Daryl could understand that...respect that conviction.

"We're taking our world back..." He finished.

Everyone was still and silent for a moment, letting what Abe said sink in.

"So what it all boils down to is that we all have a decision to make, whether to stay or go..." Rick stepped back up into control, but he held no passion in his role.

"And it's a decision that we need to make together. We might not all agree, but the majority of us know what we need to do. Some of us made it out of the CDC together, more of us ran from the farm, so many of us knew each other from before the Governor. We may not all have agreed on the decisions that were made, but we're alive because we're together." Carol usurped Rick's control on
the situation, much more passionate than he was. When Rick tried to interject, she didn't just ignore..."No. We have to go. That's the decision. It can't just be a Rick decision, or a Daryl decision, or a Beth decision, it's what has to be done. We can't split up. You all know I'm right."

No one was saying nothin' after Carol's appeal ended, but Daryl could feel the tension...the divide growing.

"This is a decision that each of you have to make, each person for himself. I can't tell you what's right or wrong anymore." Rick ran his hand through his hair, sighing...Daryl knew what was coming. Rick was abdicating. "I can't lead anymore. All I can do is make the decision that's right for me and my kids...you're my family too, but my decision is that we're staying."

Carol looked equal parts betrayed and pissed. Abraham's mouth was agape like he was trying to process. But most of the others didn't seem all that surprised, just looking resigned, a little tired, ready to make their decisions, whatever they were going to be.

"Well fuck me sideways twice..." Abraham finally let it sink in and offered his colorful commentary.

Daryl watched carefully as Rosita moved in close, laying a hand on his hip, trying to calm him.

"Abe...don't...just, we'll find a way...we'll figure it out, make it work..." She was all soft and quiet with her volatile mate, but Daryl heard every word. Was there anything she wouldn't do for him?

There was too much going on at once for Daryl to focus on any one thing too long. He was tired...his focus was shot, but then it really didn't have to be sharp, not yet at least. Michonne stepped close to Rick, clear in her stance that she was aligning herself with him without saying nothin'.

"Michonne?" Carol was feeling the full extent of the divide now. Her world...everything was unraveling around her.

"I can't. You can be out there too long. I've been out there too long...I almost lost myself after the prison. I just...can't lose myself." Michonne was concrete in her answer, not without her demons.

Scanning the room, he saw people coming together and pulling apart, Rick with Michonne; Abraham, Rosita, and Eugene talking with Bob and Sasha who seemed to be going; Tyreese standing behind his sister, not looking entirely comfortable with the decision, but he wasn't gonna separate from Sasha. Blood was blood. Then there was him near Beth and his sister-in-law and brother-in-law, an odd family they made...but it was his. Carol...she was standing out there in the middle of the room by herself, like a lone island...but everyone knew where she stood. That was leaving just one person he somehow always seemed to overlook...to forget...the girl who wouldn't fight, the girl he knew but couldn't place...Tara standing all awkward by herself. He was gonna have to ask Rick about her. The girl seemed to be tight with Maggie, Beth seemed to be taking a liking to her, and if there was even a remote possibility that she was going to stay, Daryl was gonna figure her out. Something about what he knew about her but couldn't remember made him wary of her, but he tried to shake it off. He was just being suspicious now...

"Tara," Maggie called out to the girl who was hesitantly edging closer and closer to the couch, turning her attention for the first time away from her sister.

Tara eyed him then avoided his gaze when she noticed he was watching her, went to Maggie and Beth, Glenn relinquishing his spot on the couch to make room for her, the girls not needing him or paying him any mind at all.

"You're going to stay, right?"
"I...I don't know. I mean...this isn't my...Beth and Daryl...they don't really know me or anything. And it's their house." The girl tripped over her words.

"You should stay," Beth and her big heart, voice all melodic, welcomed Tara into their home, taking the girl's hand.

Daryl's suspicion was in overdrive, not just about Tara, but Rosita too and their damned small feet...the little tracks they would've left. There was Sasha too...she was leaving, and he hadn't known she was planning to. He needed to beat that suspicion back; it wasn't doing no good or serving no purpose. This meeting and the divide it was causing...the way it was looking with more than half their number choosing to stay behind...Daryl's gut was telling him that whoever was leading those walkers to the gates would be at it again, especially with the conditions he set for them needing to leave soon. There was no more need for suspicion. The threat would be ended, no use on thinking on who he might be...eliminating.

*Can you do it if it's one of us...any of us?*

*Especially if it's one of us.*

Beth was still caught up with Maggie and Tara, no room for him to cut in and say a word to her.

"Tell her to come upstairs when she's done," Daryl barked at Glenn.

He didn't mean for it to come out that way, like and order. He was just tired and confrontational now, hoping that when Glenn passed it on to Beth, he would soften it for her.

"Sure...you okay?" Glenn didn't take his aggressiveness to heart, seemed more concerned than anything.

"Mmm-hmm..." Wasn't nothin’ more he could tell Glenn.

Daryl just needed to talk to Beth, tell her what was goin’ on tonight...what he was gonna have to do. Well, maybe not that part, but she deserved to hear where he was gonna be from him this time. Passing Rick, he tilted his head back over his shoulder toward Beth, not even having to say *watch her.* Rick knew, nodding, face just a little less grim since everything that needed to be said was out in the open, but still solemn. He also didn't ask where Daryl was going. He knew...knew he needed to rest if he was gonna go out and do what needed to be done and be sharp about it. Daryl was not fit to be company, not today...not even for Beth, but she signed up for the good times and the bad.
Chapter 72

Chapter Notes

~Author's Note: Sorry this chapter took so long to be posted! Warning, there is some NSFW content. I really hope you all enjoy! Thank you for reading!~

As soon as that bedroom door shut, Daryl became unsettled. He'd needed food but passed up the kitchen because he needed something more...sleep. Now that his bed was in front of him and he could crash into the darkness, there was something gnawing at him...something he needed more than anything...his mate. He kept Beth away from him around the others...the distance he needed, but now he just needed her where he could see her, know she was okay...near, even though he had absolutely nothin' to offer her. He just needed her. Yep...fucking possessive...that seemed to go hand in hand with the most basic instinct. Keep your mate close unless you have to distance yourself to keep her safe.

And that was what he planned to do...keep her safe. But what was he supposed to tell Beth about leaving her again tonight...what he was going to do to protect what was his...to protect her...their life together? Oh, by the way, Beth, I'm gonna go on a little moonlit stroll tonight, probably put a bolt through someone's brain...through one of our friends 'cause they're leadin' walkers to our gate. He knew it wasn't like that. Whoever it was, they weren't a friend...weren't even human to him anymore...just became a threat that needed to be eliminated. It was so much easier to talk to Rick about this. Rick understood. Would Beth? Would what he went to do tonight...kill...change how she saw him...loved him? She'd seen him kill when there was no choice...and she'd killed too...but this...this was hunting. He just wanted to protect Beth from all this ugliness and brutality. She'd experienced too much of that already.

Maybe he just shouldn't tell her anything...just disappear.

No, was he a fucking idiot...thinking she wouldn't notice?

Just tell her he had watch again?

But that was a lie, and she'd see right through it.

No lies...he couldn't have a lie weighing on him out there when emotion...thinking about Beth...could get him killed. He had to be clear.

Was he prowling the room like a fucking caged animal? Yep...that too.

Beth...

This was feeling almost as torturous as their wedding night that never happened, when he brought their family back and waited for her, thinking she wasn't gonna come. But this time...how long was she gonna make him...

No. He wasn't gonna wait for her. Throwing open the door, so intent on reclaiming her from Maggie and the rest of 'em, Daryl almost bowled right over Beth, sending her stumbling backwards...startled.

"Oh..." She gasped, but he caught her behind the back, reflexes so quick at this point, steadying her.
"I got you." And he always would. "Come on..."

Pulling her into their room, shutting and locking the door quick before anyone could see her and try to steal her away, Daryl stopped, getting just a little bitter.

"Glenn send you?" He went defensive...a question that made him sound angry about Beth coming to him because Glenn told her to...did what Daryl asked him...sent Beth where she belonged.

But Beth looked confused..."You left..."

He was a fucking prick, even doubting Beth in the smallest way. You left. That was all she had to say. He left, and she followed him. She must've been pretty much on his heels the whole time. If he would've just stopped and looked back, waited a moment, he would've seen that, and they could've come up together. But he didn't have nothin' to give her...not even a kind word...didn't deserve her. Beth...she saw that though, and on some level, she understood. Sometimes she understood him better than he understood himself. She knew there was something wrong. She had no idea what it was, but she knew. She wasn't doubting herself despite his hostile behavior, and for once she finally wasn't doubting herself in a time he would expect her to. Daryl was thankful because he wouldn't have been able to deal with it the right way. And Beth didn't ask him what was wrong because she could sense it was crucial but that he needed to tell her on his own time.

"You should sleep." Beth's voice was whisper soft as she stepped in close, Daryl nodding the truth of it.

She looked like she wanted to touch him, and he wanted her to, but Daryl wasn't sure how he was gonna react. Instead, her fingers just went to work on the buttons of his shirt, and he could handle that, letting his wife take care of him. Her hands, so small and soft, brushed over his shoulders when she pushed his shirt off him...such a contrast to the world he faced outside...but he was stiff and unyielding.

"This one too?" Tugging at the bottom hem of his wife-beater.

"Mmm-hmmm. I got it." He drug it off from behind his head, stopping to scratch at the stitches in his forehead. They were itching like crazy.

"Do you want me to take them out? I think they're ready."

Nodding, they needed to come out...and Beth...she would be close to him, and he could let her...

"Go on, go sit down."

Daryl perched himself in bed, back against the headboard watching her fish a pair of clippers out of the nightstand drawer before she came to him in their bed and crossed his lap. She was smart...intuitive. She offered to tend to him, sensing his state and testing the waters with something necessary, knowing him and knowing he might not be receptive to her touch otherwise. Beth knew how to handle him, and was trying to warm him up.

Carefully clipping each little silk thread, she pulled them out of his skin, and they tickled and itched all at once, his senses so heightened. Daryl dared to rest his broad hand on her, cupping her ribs while she worked...to steady Beth. At least that's what he told himself, but Beth was pretty damned steady on her own.

"It looks good. I don't think it's going to scar." He felt the warm pad of her finger running just above his eyebrow.
There wouldn't be a scar because of her, because she did such a good job of stitching up his sorry ass, but that scar...he would've bore that scar happily...a wound sustained standing up for him and Beth. For a second, he thought Beth was gonna lean in and kiss his hurt, maybe even wanted it against his better judgment to stay unemotional, but she didn't, instead turning her attention to the bandage at his side, tentative fingertips going to its edges.

"No. It's fine." Daryl snapped just a little 'cause that one was still sore.

Those stitches weren't nowhere near ready to come out, and Beth didn't need to go and see the mess that it still was...getting herself all worried sick when there was nothin' to worry about. She didn't push, going somewhere different entirely, curling up on him, laying against his chest, and sighing deep. He knew the feeling. It'd been a long day already, and it was just mid morning. It was gonna be an even longer night. Beth nuzzled closer to him, Daryl telling himself to wrap his arms around her. He might not be in a place where he could be affectionate to her now, but he could give her his protection...comfort. And just because he wasn't able to love on her, he wasn't gonna push her away...wasn't gonna stop her from loving on him, because that's what she needed. It was the least she deserved.

"I'm tired, Li'l Bit." Maybe he hadn't actually meant to say it...admit his weakness...just think it instead, but he spoke it anyway.

He'd been trying so hard to be strong. Been doing a pretty damned good job at it. She pulled away, but that wasn't what he wanted at all...until he got something even better. Beth went to sit on their bed instead of him, drawing his head down into her lap, and Daryl went willingly. He had nothing to offer, but fuck it...he needed her to be there for him. He was fighting himself, the lines being blurred between who he was because of her and who he had to be to protect her now.

"Stay here...stay with me...'til I go to sleep..." Asking, finally going all soft for Beth.

Looking up at her pretty face, she nodded, smiling down on him, stroking his hair all gentle to soothe him as he willingly let his eyes close. And Beth started humming, so quiet he could barely hear, but it was for him. It reminded him of that night in the trailer, the night before he told her he loved her, not knowing that the Governor's leftovers surrounded them, when everything seemed so much simpler. Beth sang to him that night while the rains pinged angrily against the metal roof.

"What're the words to that song..." Mumbling as exhaustion started to get the better of him...

For some reason, he couldn't ask her to sing to him, but that's what he needed...what he wanted. That was all he could manage to ask though...and Beth, she understood, singing softly...

"And I might lose my way for a while 'til it's clear...And I might lose my way..."

Daryl started to slip into the soft embrace of sleep so quickly, maybe because his body knew he needed it...

"So I walk alone, searching for the truth..."

...maybe 'cause things were gonna be settled soon...

"...the reasons still unknown..."

And even if it had been a shitty day, he knew it...the conflict was almost over...

"...the road I'm on, it leads me back to you..."
But it wasn't that...

When he felt the warm drowsiness carrying him away, soaking in the sweet melody of Beth's voice even if he could no longer make out all the words she sang...

"...searching for the truth. The reasons still unknown..."

...sleep, when he was so vulnerable, came so softly because...

"...the road I'm on, it leads me back to you..."

...because he was safe with her...and loved...

*                      *                      *                      *                      *

Daryl's eyes popped open as soon as he felt Beth's lips at his neck. Wide awake in an instant, feeling her draw the covers away from him, crossing over him...her soft thighs pressed against his hips, wishing his pants were off...wishing they were just skin to skin. Maybe it was just a dream, but when Beth leaned down to catch his lips...it was real...the long waves of her hair tickling his shoulders and chest, his body stiffening at the contact...that was real too. Sleep slowed Daryl's kiss, but everything else was workin' just fine. She'd changed, wearing a little nightgown now, too big for her slender frame...leaning over him, her small breasts were bare as the material dipped away from her body. Fingers trailing down his chest, Beth was sitting up straighter now, her hair falling over her shoulders, covering her where her nightgown was failing, but Daryl wanted to see...didn't want her hiding behind nothin'.

And it was new...made him a little awkward, this woman on top thing. It was Beth...that made it different...maybe he'd be okay with it...and right now they were just playing, not doin', but today, if he was gonna have her, he was gonna have her. Couldn't change that now. After, when everyone left and things got settled down, Daryl was gonna make good on that promise he made to Beth that he wasn't able to keep yet, that when they got their house in order, she could have him as much as she wanted, however she wanted. They were gonna get that time alone together they deserved...needed, and fuck anyone who tried to stop 'em. Maybe he'd take her down to that guesthouse once it was vacated, hole up there for a while, forget the world and the rest of everyone else even existed...the way they'd started. He wasn't gonna be cheated out of her anymore.

Daryl grabbed Beth's hips tight in his grasp when she started to rub against him all seductive like, throwing her on the bed under him. Today it had to be his way; that was the only way. Beth gasped, looking up at him partly surprised, partly nervous, but mostly expectant and wanting. That last part...wanting...that scared him seeing Beth like that, wanting him like this when he was the worst possible version of himself for her...running on instinct. She shouldn't want that, that animal he was...what he could be. Beth went to chewing her bottom lip...those lips...the lips he wouldn't let himself taste now. Pushing her head and hair to the side so he could have unrestricted access, Daryl dove into the flesh of Beth's neck, assaulting the delicate skin with his mouth, not giving a fuck if he marked her...not this time. Shit, he wanted that. He couldn't kiss her lips though. That was where he would lose himself to emotion, but he could take comfort from...take what he needed...almost everything he wanted from the rest of Beth's body, what she was offering.

Her hands at his belt weren't working quick enough, but when Daryl sought her out to distract himself, he was delighted to find that it was just Beth underneath her nightgown, no other barrier to
block him. Finding her, she let out a soft moan she tried to bite back, and her hands fell away from his pants, gripping his sides. It was okay. Daryl could make a quicker job of his pants on his own, and maybe he needed that safety on for just a few more minutes. Beth's teeth raked lightly against his tense shoulder; something deep and primal inside him wished she would bite harder...she was so slick, so hot under his fingers that he couldn't want anything more than to thrust into her, relieving all his tension. She was willing to give him everything...everything without thinking about the consequences...

Consequences. Fucking hell. Of course that had to burst into his head right then. Consequences. The one thing that could end their life before it even fully started...could kill Beth and take him down right along with her.

A baby...pregnancy.

But shit, what did it even matter? Beth could be pregnant already; what was one more time? Hadn't done nothin' to stop it before. And instinct wasn't working all that great for him this time neither...especially a choice like this...the need for immediate release, not thinking about the future...and even maybe the instinctual need to procreate. Something else though...the man in him, the very human part of him...in this moment...wanted that too. Wanted Beth pregnant, wanted to see her grow heavy with his child in her, that pride...waiting impatiently to hold that baby, that new blood of his in his arms...the chance to do right by someone all his. But protect overruled everything else. Even if he wasn't scared shitless of losing Beth or losing a child...which he was...Beth, she was too young to be thrust into that world of responsibility, a child of their own. They weren't ready yet. He just couldn't go there...couldn't chance it.

He was gonna have to enlist Rick or Glenn to go on a condom run with him when this shit was all done and over with. He would never hear the end of it, neither Rick or Glenn were like to let that go...especially Glenn. But today, Daryl knew himself enough to know...knew how he was with Beth, that there was no way he would be able to stop himself...no way he would be able to pull out if his life depended on it. Stilling himself and shaking his head...Daryl was just too much in his mind for his own good. Just needed to let Beth do what she was good at...calm him, settle that storm raging inside.

"You want to..." Her voice drew him...his attention to her.

Fuck yeah he did. Looking down on Beth, Daryl knew Beth knew...knew him. His dick was rock hard, fighting a war against the fly of his pants trying to break free, needing nothing more than to get at her...and she wanted that too...would welcome him. Who was he to deny her? Beth wasn't questioning any of that; she wasn't even asking a question, just stating what she knew, not understanding...confused at his reluctance, why he was stopping...all things that had absolutely nothing to do with want. It had to do with protecting his mate...protecting Beth. Daryl wasn't sure if in the end he was going to be able to say no...to protect her from himself...but there was something else he'd been aching to do. He couldn't wipe the seriousness off his face looking down on Beth, and his voice came out raspy and commanding.

"I aim to do somethin' else. I'm gonna taste you, and you ain't gonna say no."

* * * * * *

Daryl was so conflicted. Beth knew it when she first came to him and sang him to sleep, and she
could see it now in the way he looked at her, so torn up inside. So few words passed between them, but she knew. He wasn't ready to talk, but what could it be that weighed so heavily on him? Everything was settled. There would be no more conflict in their house, but he was keeping himself distanced. Even her body wasn't enough to distract him...so willing...but not enough to ease his troubled mind.

*Just make love to me and forget...*

Beth needed that. She needed that simple world of life and love and home that finally seemed just within her reach with Daryl...but not today.

"You want to..." It was the closest she could get to saying what she was thinking, but even that came out awkward, pinned under Daryl, Daryl's face so serious and firm that she couldn't even begin to read him.

"I aim to do somethin' else. I'm gonna taste you, and you ain't gonna say no."

That wasn't what she expected to come out of his mouth at all. It sent shivers through her entire body, and he felt it, pressed close to her...and his voice, rusty...his words...he wasn't really giving her a choice, but he was right. She wasn't going to say no.

Daryl didn't even bother to undress her, just forcing the top of her nightgown down, capturing her breast in his calloused hand, thumb running over the soft skin just below it. He watched her for a split second before he covered the other with his mouth, teasing until her nipple was hard and aching. All Beth could think about was knowing where his mouth was going...knowing where he was headed...what he was going to do. Daryl dragged the slip of a gown up with a firm palm pressed to her body as he went, everything feeling so deliciously wicked and wrong with her clothes still on...so very urgent, but oh so right. Beth couldn't help gripping her fingers in his tangled hair, feeling his beard scuff against her sensitive flesh, kissing down. Being with Daryl, a smooth face could never do it for her...he was a man.

Wrapping his whole arm around her waist, muscles bulging rough and hard against the small of her back, Daryl pulled her up to him, dipping his tongue into her navel so suggestively. He teased...sucking at the skin below her belly button before he assaulted her raised hip with long, slow, torturous kisses. The way he held Beth, the way he handled her body, she felt like a little doll in his arms. Daryl seemed to get distracted for just a moment, fingers going soft, brushing lightly over the darkening bruises on her thigh from the last time they fell in bed together...a memory she was more than willing to bring back to life. The kisses he pressed against those bruises were the gentlest he'd been with her all day, sighing against her skin, his hot breath making her nerves stand on end. But whatever was going through Daryl's head in that quiet moment didn't dissuade him from where he wanted to go. Raising up on his knees, looming large beside her, maybe expecting her to give and she didn't realize fast enough...

"Spread your legs, Beth." So direct...so demanding...that growl...and the intensity in his eyes...

Beth was caught somewhere between awkward, nervous girl and Daryl's woman...between the anxiety in her tummy and knowing exactly what she wanted to feel Daryl's tongue doing...the tongue off which her name rolled so smoothly. He gentled his demeanor though, hand going between her thighs to coax her, and it didn't take much coaxing at all. It made her more shy than it should've, the way Daryl looked up at her from between her legs just before his lips brushed across the top of her thigh...just a hint of a smile at the corners of his mouth at her reaction...the only smile she'd seen from him today. Beth had started to forget that there was a time when Daryl's smiles were rare.

It was strange...she was in virgin territory again, no idea what she was supposed to be doing, but
what was there to do except lay back and enjoy? Let Daryl's touch lavish her in his attention...attention she was starving for. His hands encompassing both her thighs urged them further apart, leaving her so vulnerable...having so much trust in him, but still she trembled...couldn't help it. It was new. Daryl placed warm kisses on the innermost part of her thigh, his shaggy hair tickling the sensitive skin unused to the touch of lips, the whispers of those sensations standing in stark contrast to the power and brute strength of the man perched between her legs. When he found her, not teasing her but possessing her with his mouth, Beth had to force herself to go still, to adjust to the strangeness...allow herself to enjoy the intense, focused contact from his lips...his tongue curling around her bud. He seized her being...possessive just as in every other part of their life, providing greater comfort and assurance to her in that possession than she could ever imagine. How was it that Daryl was doing this for her...getting nothing pleasurable out of it for himself, but still he owned her...possessed everything she was?

But Beth stopped thinking to enjoy the moments that were all too fleeting, allowing her worries and stress to melt way. Focusing on herself and the feel of Daryl, Beth allowed her own hand to caress her sensitive breast, still fresh with the memory of Daryl's lips there...her own fingers gently gliding down the line of her stomach before threading them again through his dark, messy hair. The rock solid mass of muscle and steel of bone in his shoulder where her leg rested pressed unforgivingly against the silken underside of her thigh. He found her hand with his...her hand clenching the sheet beside her in a balled fist...found her hand, coaxing her to take his. Daryl's hand engulfed hers, fingers entwined, allowing her...asking her to grasp his as tightly as she needed to.

Self-consciousness took her briefly when the intense flutters started building in the deepest part of her...feeling so vulnerable. She couldn't help writhing, his hand gripping her hip to stop her from moving away. Daryl was so close...right there. But then she couldn't care...couldn't hold on, allowing the pleasure to sweep over her, giving herself over to the shudders that wracked her body, not even trying to bite back the soft moans. Daryl's name escaped her lips in that exquisite moment...and he deserved that, to hear his name uttered in ecstasy. And Beth deserved that too...not to be ashamed or shy of this act of love...to be free in her love of Daryl.

Still taking care of her...still loving her, Daryl went gentle, kissing up her stomach, tasting the fine sheen of sweat that covered her skin, hand cupping her heaving side still captured by the frantic breaths of the moment. Beth needed him...needed Daryl to make his way up to where he was supposed to be, with her...weight heavy on her. She needed Daryl inside her...

*                      *                      *                      *                      *

Pressing whispering kisses back up Beth's body while she was still coming down...the way her skin and the muscles in her tummy quivered under his lips...it was just as good for him as it was for her. He tried to keep his touch and mouth soft, knowing how sensitive everything must be feeling. Seeing Beth's crooked little smile that turned all shy and awkward when she saw he was looking, it broke his resolve not to get emotional, broke his resolve not to kiss her...just once...once before he went out hunting...that was all, and he was gonna make it good...worth it. There were times for sweet kisses, but this wasn't one of them. That wasn't what either of them wanted...not careful at all, tongues battling, lips bitten. And Daryl must've been delusional thinking that he had a little more time before he had to make a decision, before Beth would want to go there, but her hands were on him, gripping his cock through his pants...and it didn't need any stroking to get where she wanted to go...didn't need it in the first place. Now it was just hurting having to fight it. He was strong enough that he pulled away from her...distanced himself from Beth...it was just he didn't want to.
Finally stopping everything, Daryl felt like a huge prick, seeing the small smear of blood on Beth's lip. When he reached out and gently wiped it away with his thumb, he realized it wasn't hers, tasting the blood in his mouth, his tongue feeling the inside of his lip. He probed it with his finger just to make sure, pulling it back, seeing that bright red mixed with his spit...taking a deep breath, trying to settle himself. Beth looked ashamed, coming up to her knees, scooting closer to him...

"Sorry..."

If only she knew how fucking unnecessary that apology was...

And this little love bite...as long as it was him doin' the bleeding...that wasn't what stopped him...made him pull away. Now he barely remembered what the reason was...why he stopped...his fire so lit. And Beth could see that desire burning behind his eyes, going from sorry to seductive in her own innocent way. The soft pads of her fingertips made tentative contact with his taut skin, drawing them down his bare back as she moved onto his lap.

"I'm going to make it up to you..." Voice all breathy...

She sure in the hell was 'cause he was about to snap and do the taking.

But he remembered...catching Beth's wrists gentle in his hand, making her stop before he couldn't stop himself.

"Beth, we need to talk." That was a pretty universal mood killer, but come to think about it, with all the shit that had been going on, and with the way he'd been acting, Beth knew there was something wrong...had to know this was coming.

She moved a fair distance away, readjusting her nightgown to cover everything, Daryl happy he'd left her dressed because he wouldn't have been able to talk to her if she was naked. She was still flushed and beautiful and glowing from his attention, and that was distraction enough, Daryl feeling just a little pride that he did that...made her this way...did something right for her. He couldn't just bask in Beth though; he had to be serious, waiting until he had her full attention to start talking.

"I have to go tonight. I've gotta go out there...hunting." Daryl hesitated at the last, not really having decided yet how much he was willing to tell her.

Beth furrowed her brow, thinking on it before she spoke.

"But why? The walls are high, and the gates are strong. You could get hurt out there going after them when you can just take out the walkers from the wall."

There was fear in her eyes, but she was trying to hide it, trying to be calm to convince him, and if it had just been walkers, she would've been right. The next part, it was the hard part...

"I found tracks. They weren't walker tracks...they were human."

She waited, looking down, picking at the hem of her nightgown, trying to comprehend, knowing somehow he wasn't finished, that he hadn't told her the worst of it.

"Someone's leading the walkers to the gates."

"A person..." Beth knew, she just asked to fill the silence that followed.

"I gotta go, Beth. I gotta take care of the threat before..." Before what? All the possibilities running through his head weren't anything he'd wanna share with her though.
It all really started to sink in. Beth seemed to tie the concepts of person and hunting together, realizing it was the most dangerous prey he'd ever gone after. The hunter, if he wasn't smart, could quickly turn into the hunted.

"No...if they're doing this...leading walkers...you don't know who they are...how many they are...what they're capable of..." She went frantic, reaching for him, but he put a hand up stopping her.

Daryl just stared at her gravely, waiting for her to calm down. He might not know who it was, but he had a good idea, his options narrowed. And he knew what they were capable of, all of 'em...killing. That's all he needed to know, and whoever it was was gonna meet their maker before anyone he loved. There was nothing more to explain, but he had to make sure that he got it all across and they both ended on the same page.

"I'm goin'. I have to. And you can't say nothin' to no one."

Beth went to object, and that's when Daryl realized he couldn't stay with her. He had to leave now, and looking out the window, he was glad he did...it was getting close to sunset. He'd slept the day away. Better to head out before everyone got back in for the night and people started milling around the house, stopping to ask questions. And he couldn't let her have the time to try to convince him to stay. Blowing out a long breath, leaving their bed, Daryl reclaimed his wife-beater and pulled it over his head.

"You're leaving...now?" Beth moved to the edge of the mattress, knees sinking deep in the down.

This was where it was gonna hurt, where he had to push her away.

"Yep." Too brusque. Daryl tried to give her something more. "Get out there early, see what I see, get the advantage.

Throwing his shirt on, he didn't bother to button it...needed to get out quick before she tried to stop him. Coat next. Gun in his waistband. Extra mag. Crossbow thrown across his back.

"What are you going to do?" Beth finally asked all hesitant.

Shit, was she gonna make him say it, tell her the cold, hard truth so he could watch the love die in her eyes because of who he had to be...who he was?

"Eliminate the threat." He spat it out. Not harsh words for her...harsh words because of what he had to do. "You need somethin', you go to Rick, no one else. He knows."

Rick watching out for Beth was the only reason that Daryl was going to be able to detach himself from her...stop thinking about Beth, worrying about her until this business was all done with. Rick would take care of her while he took care of whatever threat was out there.

"And keep a gun with you just in case."

Daryl wasn't ready to tell her he was hunting someone they knew...wouldn't ever be ready to tell her that, but he was gonna cover all the bases he could without destroying her trust in everyone around her. Beth wasn't answering. He needed an answer.

"You hear me?"

She finally nodded.
"It's gonna be okay. We're gonna be okay, Lil' Bit."

He had to turn away now, but he was delusional if he thought she was gonna let him off that easy. Beth called out to him...he couldn't see her now, but he knew...knew she wanted to come to him but didn't know how because he was being so uncompromising.

"Come here." Against his better judgment, he turned back.

Daryl let Beth hug him tight, wrapped his arm around her, but it was a cold and stiff embrace...not what she deserved.

She looked up at him, pleadingly...not understanding why he was denying her his lips, but she didn't even try. There was no way she could reach his mouth if he didn't give, and Daryl didn't plan to.

"I can't, Beth. I have to...kill someone..." There it was. He said it. He finally said it to her. The truth, plain 'n simple. "And I can't kiss you and go to the place I need to be to do it."

He wasn't sorry for it. That's just how it had to be. To Beth's credit, she didn't cling. She was the one who stepped back, putting distance between them on her own, her hand lingering at his chest just a moment longer before she drew it away. Her last words before he turned to leave staid him...everything he needed to hear.

"Aim true, hunter..."
It wasn't that she didn't have faith in Daryl and what he planned to do...what he had to do to keep them safe, it was just that Beth didn't really feel like being alone with her thoughts. There were so many of them...worried thoughts...and she needed someone, so she sought out Maggie. She didn't have to go very far, catching Glenn in the hall kind of thankful she wasn't forced to search all over the house and risk running into anyone else after how tense the morning had been.

"Have you seen Maggie?"

"Yeah, she's unpacking in our room." Glenn looked a little worn, but the slight smile that spread across his face reminded her of the Glenn she met what seemed like a lifetime ago.

"Unpacking sounds nice." And it did. Beth had been ready to let go of Maggie, the last of her blood, but she was glad Maggie and Glenn were staying.

"It feels good. Michonne was right. You can be out there too long. After today, I kinda think some of us were. I don't know if they can give it up...come back from that I mean." Glenn turned solemn briefly in his observation, and a thought that crossed Beth's mind made her stomach sink.

If someone couldn't let go of that world out there, what if they tried to bring that world inside to them?

*I found tracks. They weren't walker tracks...they were human...Someone's leading the walkers to the gates.*

What if...what if it was one of them? Could it be...one of them who was leaving, someone who wouldn't let it go? No...no one they knew would do that, would they? Beth shook it off quickly; it was too horrible to even think.

"Hey, why so serious?" Glenn gently squeezed her arm, drawing her back to the moment. "Pretty soon life's going to get normal, well, as normal as it can be living in a Southern palace. Come spring, it'll be croquet in the back yard, Parcheesi in the parlor, brandy in the drawing room..."

Beth smiled at the humorous fantasy Glenn was painting of their future to cheer up her sudden melancholy, genuinely amused trying to imagine Daryl handling a croquet mallet. It would be a bloodbath!

"But we can't let you drink like that; you'd probably be like a gremlin after midnight." Glenn finished teasing.

"I wouldn't bet on it. I learned from Daryl." Beth countered, allowing herself to just be normal even though she knew the serious reality of what was going on outside tonight...Glenn couldn't know that.
She was still unwilling to share the entirety of that story with anyone...learning to drink from Daryl. It was so sacred to them, but her stomach cringed just at the thought of moonshine and the consequences the following morning.

"You should know better, Beth." Glenn played all serious, pretending to scold her, like he was above that.

"I know, right?" Beth forced herself to go abashed. "I mean, I remember this story that Daryl told me, something about being at the CDC...Daryl getting you drunk for the first time? I'm pretty sure he said that you were a hilarious drunk, but that you had to crawl to breakfast the next morning because you had, how did he say it...oh yeah, 'the mother of all hangovers'."

"He told you that?" Glenn got all embarrassed, going red in the face.

"Daryl and I, we do talk sometimes you know," laughing a little at his reaction.

"Mmm-hmm...talk. Sure looks like it." Glenn gave her a skeptical but playful side-eye.

Beth blushed, self-consciously fixing her mussed hair, realizing she'd just thrown clothes on after Daryl left. She hadn't even looked in the mirror.

"Where have you been all afternoon, Beth?" Glenn grinned from ear to ear when he turned, walking away the victor this time.

*                 *                 *                 *                 *

She found Maggie with Tara helping her unpack what little she had.

"...but I mean...I feel weird because I don't think he wants me to stay around. He looks at me like he wants to eat me alive. I think I might be better off out there with the walkers."

What time Beth had spent with Tara, she liked her and how she always found a way to inject humor into any situation, but this didn't sound like she was joking.

"That's just Daryl. He's cautious, always has been. It takes him a long time to warm up to people." Maggie offered insight into her brother-in-law. "He's a good guy." She sounded like she was reflecting, pausing for a second.

"Judith's mother...Lori...she died while I was...when I delivered Judith. That day, everything was falling apart around us. We lost two of our own, thought we lost Carol too, and Daryl was close to Carol. Rick lost it after he found out Lori died...couldn't even look at Judith. Rick was in bad shape. Carl was in bad shape. I was breaking. But Daryl, he held it together...held all of us together. He kept a level head, refused to let us stop, refused to let that baby die. He took me on a run for formula, and when we got back, Daryl fed Judith...the first one to feed her. You should've seen it, Tara. I've never seen anything like it in my life."

Maggie stood up for Daryl, and it made Beth feel all warm inside.

"Do you remember him talking all sweet and soft to her..." Beth made her presence known, joining the other girls on the floor. "...rocking her, practically cooing at her?"
"Calling her 'Sweetheart'..." Maggie added, both smiling, and Tara listening, kind of looking like she didn't know if she should believe it. "If it hadn't been such a traumatic day, and if I hadn't been so worried about Judith dying, I might have melted into a pile of goo."

"Even 'Lil' Asskicker' somehow sounded so endearing coming out of Daryl's mouth with that voice he used with her." For a minute, all the bad and all the danger faded away talking to her sister about life instead of death. But then Beth felt bad for ignoring Tara who could never really understand those moments without having been there. "Daryl will like you just fine once he sees who you really are."

Tara looked terrified at the prospect of getting to know Daryl. He could be intimidating, but once everything was settled down, it was going to be okay. If Daryl really didn't like her or had any real reservations about her, he would've said something to Beth by now.

"Hey...here. I forgot I had this!" Just the excitement in Maggie's voice was enough to snap Beth's attention away from Tara.

Seeing Daryl's poncho in Maggie's hands was better than a birthday present. Beth gasped, reaching out for it, her sister glowing, seeing Beth's happiness, more than willing to hand it over.

"Give it back to Daryl for me, will you?"

Pulling it to her cheek, it smelled a little like Maggie, but Daryl's scent was still heavy on it, dark and earthy. Daryl was never all about material things, but his poncho...it seemed like part of him, like his crossbow and his winged vest. He would be so happy to have it back. Holding it close, it just felt like such an impossibility, a piece of their past that no longer existed returning to them.

"Where did you..." Well, that was the start to a ridiculous question. The prison...that's where everyone left everything behind. "How?" Beth corrected.

Did that mean that they all...they went back to the prison after everything happened...they went back?

"Glenn...we were separated during...after the Governor..." Maggie was breaking up a little. There was so much they hadn't had time to catch up on, things like this that were bound to tear at their hearts. "After the Governor and his people..."

"Hey, you two have some catching up to do," Tara popped up off the floor, probably looking to make a quick exit before the tears started to rain down. Beth didn't know how long Tara had been with the group, but she seemed close enough to Maggie and Glenn that there was a good possibility Tara knew more about what happened to her family after the prison than Beth did. "I apparently drew watch tonight. I'm gonna go see if the chow line's open before I head out to man the wall."

Despite her attempt to lighten the mood, which felt a little forced and awkward, Tara seemed smart enough to know that she was standing dead center in an emotional mine field. She slid out of the room expeditiously as soon as she made her excuses, not expecting anything from them. Maggie waited for the door to shut behind Tara before she continued.

"After...Glenn and I were separated. Glenn woke up at the prison; he'd been knocked unconscious. Before he left, he went and grabbed some of our things. That's Glenn you know, always hopeful, picking up stuff he thought we would want when we all met back up...he knew we would all find each other. He got Daryl's poncho..." Maggie wiped a tear from her cheek with the back of her hand.
Beth didn't know if she could...if any of them could bear losing another home, another safe place again, and in her heart, she hated whoever was out there trying to put all they had in jeopardy. They all just needed a safe place to be, not just hanging by a thread. But Glenn being at the prison after brought up all those fears...all that loss...made her feel sick, but there was something she had to ask...something she had to know, and since there were already tears...

"Did he...did Glenn see what happened to Daddy after?" Maggie looked at her all broken, and Beth's question hadn't come out at all like it was supposed to. The truth of the question was just too heartbreaking.

The Governor hacked Daddy's head off. It wasn't even a clean cut...not a quick death, and that's probably what the Governor wanted. Suffering.

"Did Glenn find Daddy...stop him from...from..." Beth was crying right along with Maggie now. She couldn't say it.

Maggie shook her head before she found her voice.

"I didn't...I couldn't ever bear to ask."

Beth went to her sister, hugged her tight. They both needed it, Beth with the images of Daddy's death flashing in her head. That first swing, that first cut hadn't killed him, but in that moment, he was already dead. Then, they all just left Daddy there like that, alone...to turn, Beth remembering Daryl pinning that walker to the tree with his crossbow bolts outside the shack, torturing it, trying to get her to shoot at it before she finally broke away from him, driving her own knife deep in its skull. In those moments of anger, all the tension and emotion broken open...that walker...she thought about her Daddy.

Just kill it!

Come here, Greene. Let's pull these out. Get a little more target practice...What the hell you do that for? I was having fun. Daryl had been so pissed after she killed it...but in the end, it wasn't really anger. He'd just been broken too.

No, you were being a jackass...what if...if anyone found my dad...

Don't. That ain't remotely the same. That thought, that reminder of Daddy hurt Daryl too because Daryl blamed himself.

In the end, there had been no one there to see to Daddy, and even if no one found him and tortured him, maybe no one finding him was just as bad. He was left alone...like that forever.

"We have to be strong, Beth. Dad would want us to be strong and protect our family." Maggie loosened her grip, letting Beth breathe again and wipe the wetness off her cheeks.

Beth was strong, maybe not in the same way as Maggie or Michonne, clearly not as strong as Daryl, but she would fight to protect her family just like any of them would. She had her own strength. Tonight she had to put the sadness for Daddy aside to be strong for Daryl and whatever followed.
It was one of the first things that crossed his mind when his boots hit the ground on the other side of that wall. He'd made a point to stay away from the front gates, sneaking over the stone perimeter at the side of the property at dark to go undetected, to make his way around the border 'til he got close to the road, to find himself a nice, secure, camouflaged spot out in those woods beside it. He wasn't thinking how? out of an emotional place or out of curiosity, but from a survival standpoint. Did whoever was doin' this have walkers trapped somewhere? Was she drawing them somehow, using bait? Was it just dumb luck finding the walkers? Curiosity would've driven Daryl to go out and search for their mechanism, but survival just cautioned him to be aware and observant so he didn't get caught up in whatever system was being used. They could find it later, in the light of day with more than just him, and take care of that situation, but tonight it was about eliminating the threat to his family...his home, and Beth. The how only mattered to the extent that it didn't get him killed.

It was strange, moving quietly through the woods, stopping every few steps to listen and not be heard as a human, that there was no emotion or anxiety weighing on him at his task. Did that make him less than human too? No...Beth absolved him of that burden, of that weight...

Aim true, hunter...

And there was justification. That was another reason Daryl wasn't planning on finding out how his target was drawing and collecting their walkers, because he wasn't gonna stray too far from home base. He was gonna catch them leadin' those walkers straight up to their gates so there would be no doubt whatsoever in anyone's mind, even though there were no doubts in his to start with. Daryl had never hunted without a reason...without justification before. Hunger. Danger. Survival at its core. Tonight was no different. He was hunting the worst kind of animal there was, the human animal, the kind that could think, and this one was set on a path of destruction. There was more than enough justification, even if, in the end, he killed out of anger instead of just necessity. He was justified.

He was having to use all his senses, all his focus to navigate the woods. Didn't wanna have to flip on his flashlight; it would just give away his position to anyone anywhere, but it was a clear night, and if he went slow, he'd be just fine. There was enough light for him at least. It was so quiet though. The woods felt dead, until he heard it, the only other living thing that seemed to be moving about in the shadows. Daryl trained his crossbow on the silhouette, but it wasn't paying attention to him, crashing into his legs. Neither of them made a noise. Neither Daryl or the coyote yelping or growling, they just looked at each other before the coyote shied and slunk off into the darkness. He didn't bother with the coyote and the coyote wasn't much afraid of him 'cause there were far worse things out in the night...far worse dangers that they both had to deal with. But the quiet and the coyote both told him that his instincts were still sharp; fuck anyone who wanted to claim he'd gone soft. His gut was right. Whatever was going to go down was gonna go down tonight.

It was just that it was happening a lot faster than Daryl anticipated. He'd barely made it to the side of their road a couple hundred yards away from the gates when he spotted a lone figure...well, a lone breathing figure...leading a group of walkers towards their home...their safety. He knew this was happening, knew as soon as he saw those tracks in the dusty gravel the other day with Rick, but seeing it...seeing it first hand sparked anger and disbelief...emotions he needed to purge. She must've headed out right at dark, hoping maybe to catch everyone off guard when they were sitting down eating dinner, feeling all nice and safe and comfortable. And there were more of them. Daryl couldn't get a good headcount of the walkers from his position on the wrong side of the barbed wire fence, but there were more than before...more than twenty he would say. Apparently, she'd upped her game. The person leading them...the person at the head of their own monster brigade was calm and collected, turning back every so often and making sure they were all following like eager little puppies.
Not wanting to cross the fence, not willing to chance making any noise or quick movements that might draw the walkers' attention or clue in the dead man...dead woman walking to his presence, Daryl melted back into the woods, sliding behind a tree to hold his position. He would wait until the mini herd and its master passed to hop the fence when the walkers moaning and stumbling on forward would disguise his movements. Then he was gonna follow in the shadows, wait until that bitch caught sight of his home...Beth's home, before he fired the bolt the would put her down like the rabid animal she was. The last thing that she would see, whoever she was, was the sanctuary she wasn't able to tear apart. It was a morbid thought that crossed his mind as he lay in wait for the herd to pass his position, but he'd thought on it before, just didn't know how to ask Rick or even what he was gonna do. What happened with the body once he put a bolt through its brain? The thing was, he didn't have to worry 'bout that anymore. The walkers would be tearing into it as soon as it crumpled to the ground. Circle of life...well, death, and an odd sort of poetic justice at that.

Daryl's adrenaline was starting to ramp up, coursing through his veins as the figure was almost close enough for him to distinguish who it was, his breath heaving, but steady, the night cool enough that he was starting to be able to see his own breath. They were close enough now that he could see her breath too, but not who it was. She had a hood drawn up over her head, big enough that it concealed the sides of her face, even clothes indistinguishable in the dark from his vantage point. Everything was just shadow play. Not knowing who he was hunting, who he was gonna kill didn't make it any better or worse, any easier or harder. It just was what it was. He was just hunting a phantom in the night. That's all she was...all she would ever be, just another monster.

Yep, counting as they scraped on by, there were twenty-two walkers. Whoever that hooded figure was felt cocky enough that they thought they could control that many flesh eating corpses when one wrong step...one stumble...would mean their gruesome death, eaten alive...skin and flesh ripped away, screaming for the end to take them. Or maybe she was delusional enough to believe that her cause was worth it; even if it meant death, it was for the greater good.

Didn't matter either way.

They were far enough ahead now that Daryl went to go over the fence, the strands strung too close together to go through instead of climbing it. He stepped, carefully testing the fence to make sure it could hold his weight, but when he was halfway over, he twisted back, hearing them. So intent on the group that passed by on the road, Daryl didn't focus on what was behind him, sneaking up through the woods. The first was just a few feet away from him, reaching out hungrily, Daryl falling back, the top strand of ancient wire breaking when he fell, wrapping around his legs. He didn't make a noise except for his body colliding with the ground, trying to keep as silent as possible in his deadly situation. He was caught up, the barbs of the wire biting through his pants, frantically trying to free himself. Jerking up, he could see the moonlight pouring through the dark tree cover...saw the truth of what was coming for them...

The walker that first had him in its sights flipped over the fence, crashing hard on top of him just as he got the wire unraveled, almost knocking the air outta his lungs. In this position, pinned, there was no way he could get to his bow or even his knife. Working with the only thing he had, Daryl forced the snapping, snarling jaws away from his face, getting the rusted length of barbed wire wrapped around its neck. Jerking and pulling, Daryl sawed away at the decaying flesh and rotting bone until the head plopped heavy to the ground beside him and the body was just dead weight on him. Throwing it off and scrambling to his feet...this herd...it was so damned eerily quiet in its gruesome march. Daryl stomped the skull still biting at his boot, watching the brains explode through the crumbling eye sockets, kept still only long enough to see the front line of the advancing herd ping the fence, pushing forward. The rusted, severed strands curled around them, cutting into 'em, trapping them and shredding through flesh straight to the bone. The harder they fought, the tighter they were caught and cut, but that front line...that walker canon fodder, created a funnel point for the
encroaching herd to pour through and head straight to his home. There was nothin’ he could do...absolutely helpless.

Backing up towards the road, crossbow in hand, Daryl remembered his original objective, his purpose out in the dark tonight, and now more than ever, it couldn't change, not with them bringing hell's army to their gates. Out on the gravel drive, the breather up ahead paused and turned back, must've heard the fence snap and ping. Daryl couldn't say if she noticed him, but she saw the others spilling out of the dark recesses of the tree line...was smart enough to know that was something no one could control. Apparently any grand delusions she might've had about her greater good weren't good enough anymore. She took off, running straight for home, having got so much more than she bargained for, and she didn’t realize the full extent of it yet...him. Daryl took off too...fight or flight kicking in, sprinting down the grassy expanse beside the road still trying to avoid detection, walkers normally pretty focused on what was right in front of 'em. There was no fight here, not one that he could win at least; he had to prioritize. He had to make it back to that wall at any point and get over it...catch whoever it was coming in. He was a strong runner, a better climber, could make up the distance that was between 'em. Daryl was gonna take her down no matter what side of the wall she was on. There would be no sanctuary, no quarter given.

Then...then they had to hold the gate.

*                      *                      *                      *                      *

Beth snuggled closer under Daryl's poncho. It engulfed her much like he did, the next best thing to having his arms around her. She couldn't help smiling and sighing, thinking they both might fit under it together in each other's embrace. His poncho and her wandering thoughts of the sweetness in life were enough to keep Beth warm during the long night's watch she was going to be spending on the wall. It had been no problem getting Tara to trade her watches, Beth only having to say that Daryl was tired, and she wanted to get her watch over with, insinuating the newlywed thing. She probably didn't even have to use that. Tara more than likely wanted to get settled and unpacked; then there was the fact that Beth didn't even know when her watch was that she was trying to trade. That meant, if just for the night, Tara could live in a happy delusion, pretending that she would never have watch at all.

There was no way Beth was going to leave Daryl out there on his hunt without being on that wall waiting for him to come back home to her. And to be fair, Daryl didn't tell her that she had to stay put in the house, even though she knew, without a doubt, that he would have if he had stopped to consider it...he'd just had too much consuming him to think about it. Beth did, however, avoid Rick at all costs when she left, feeling like a kid sneaking out of the house, trying to avoid her...well, Rick was the closest she had to a father figure anymore...a super overprotective, pretty intimidating big brother who she knew would be so much worse than Shawn ever was.

In the midst of her thoughts, movement caught Beth's eye on the road, sending her to her feet. She could barely see through the dark, but they were coming, a small group of...

*No*...

Beth looked further, and there were more...more pouring out of the darkness...more than she could count. Panic flooded her. Daryl was out there somewhere...

What if he was already dead...?
Beth could barely breathe...couldn't decide whether to climb down from her position and get Abe...find Rick, or yell, hoping someone in the guesthouse would come to help, but all her decisions were staid, hearing something distinctly human crashing through the woods, tripping through the underbrush towards the wall. If she called out...screamed for help...that would just draw the walkers to his position, and there was no way she was going to climb down to go find anyone when Daryl was coming...wouldn't leave him out there alone. She heard the barbed wire fence snap, looking back to the road, saw some of the walkers were falling into the woods, following his path.

*Daryl...hurry, please...*

A dark shape emerged from the tree line, bent at the waist to catch his breath before taking the grassy expanse between the woods and the stone wall. Beth couldn't make him out, could barely even see his shape...everything distorted by the darkness...couldn't see if he was hurt; the faint moonlight had no jurisdiction there in the shadow of the woods and the wall. And she couldn't see the outline of his crossbow either. Did he lose his bow in the fight? It was an odd thing for her to focus on in this deadly situation, that he wasn't carrying his bow, because it didn't matter. He was alive. Beth made her way to the point of the wall where Daryl was climbing, throwing her hand down to help him over. He hesitated, but struggling to get up...how bad was he hurt?...he finally gripped her wrist in an awkward grasp that just felt so...off. Beth had to use the force of all her weight to drag Daryl onto the ledge...

He was always so strong, but not tonight...

"Beth!" Daryl shouted, frantic, despite the walkers.

*Wait...what...?*

Twisting back to try to see what she didn't understand, Beth finally realized Daryl's voice was coming from the ground...the road...not beside her. Precariously off balance now, the hand gripping her wrist was the only thing holding her steady, Beth turning back and actually seeing. It wasn't Daryl...it was betrayal made flesh.

For a split second, Beth thought she was going to be able to regain her footing, until they saw the recognition in her eyes, saw that Beth knew, made their decision...opening their hand and letting go...letting Beth's wrist slip free. Beth didn't have time to scream...the fall was too short, but terror seized her heart...

*It's not that far...* Beth remembered insisting, climbing the wall to stand beside Daryl.

*Far enough you fall the wrong way, it'll break your pretty little neck...*

The fear didn't last long, the blackness stealing her the instant she hit the ground...
Gunshots...

So loud...reverberating between her temples...they were going to draw the walkers.

Head pulsating...pounding...her world spinning.

Was she falling...she thought she hit the ground already, didn't she? She couldn't remember.

It was a dream...maybe a dream...

If you fell in a dream, you never hit the ground...

Queasiness...her stomach flipping over on itself, and something hard and massive dug into her tender tummy where she was bent. So much jostling...

Breathing...heavy labored breathing. She heard it...felt it, but was it hers? She couldn't even suck in a breath deep enough to quell the nausea in her stomach.

The only things that existed in Beth's world that she understood were the pain she was feeling and the sickness she was fighting roiling inside her.

"Stop...just please...stop..." Soft words eeked out, begging the universe to have mercy on her.

It was worse than after the moonshine.

The vertigo was too much.

"We've got to circle back. We're too far..."

"We can't, Rick. Three sides...they got us on three sides."

Her world eased a bit...slowed down, and they were there...Rick and Daryl...Daryl. She couldn't make out everything they were saying...everything around her, but they were with her.

"Please..." This time, Beth knew she was trying to talk to someone.

"Girl's awake."

Movement stopped altogether, Abraham's gruff voice booming close to her, making her crash back into reality. Letting her body slide off his shoulder, Beth went all wobbly legged when her feet hit the ground, Abe grabbing her...literally holding her upright. His palm made contact with her cheek twice, not slapping hard enough to hurt her, just enough to keep her conscious...awake...the thunder in her head making her pray for the darkness to take her again.

"Hey...Beth, you have to stay with us..." His voice was kinder, softer now, Abe feeling, reaching
around her, pulling her gun out of her back waistband, massive hand invading her pockets, finally finding and digging out her extra clip.

Beth shied away from the force at first...didn't fight though...just needed Daryl.

"I said, Beth's awake." This time his urgent exclamation sent tremors through her head.

She would've doubled over if he hadn't had such a tight hold on her.

"Beth..."

She heard Daryl's voice...saying her name...his voice in that brief moment a respite, but he didn't make it to her side. Neither did Rick before she...before they realized they had to run again.

"Gotta go. Get her goin'. Keep her moving. Don't look back..." Daryl growled, Abe not putting up a protest, grabbing her wrist tight and dragging her through the woods. "I'm gonna try to lead 'em away." That was to Rick.

"No!" Beth cried out.

Screw the walkers. They were almost on them anyway. Her yelling wasn't going to matter; they already knew right where they were. But Daryl...she wasn't going to let him leave her again...sacrifice himself when it was all her fault because she...fell.

Fell? It wasn't just that...there was something right before she fell...something more...but it didn't matter, did it? It all turned out the same. Trying to jerk away from Abe was a fight going nowhere; his vice-like grip was unrelenting.

"Keep up," he spat out like her struggle was just a minor annoyance, pulling her further and further away from Daryl.

Beth stopped, planting her feet firmly in the ground, throwing her whole body back, twisting, trying anything to get away, Abe letting her go to fall flat on her ass. He grabbed her arm up again quick, before she had a chance to take off, yanking her to her feet.

"You done now?" Once again moving forward...forward and away.

But for a split second, Beth's mind was somewhere else, somewhere away from Daryl...away from the danger and the walkers...

Abraham let go; Beth fell. Someone else let go of her too...and she fell off the wall...

"No." Rick was putting up a protest.

"I ain't got time to argue. I'll catch up. Watch out for Beth..."

Beth couldn't see much looking back over her shoulder into the darkness, but she could hear the walkers closing in on Rick and Daryl, and Daryl trying to move off towards them. Daryl told Rick to take care of her. If he knew he had someone to look after her, he was going to be all the more reckless trying to save her life...

"Daryl...No..." Beth pleaded, not even knowing if he heard her or was paying any attention.

"There are too many. You won't make a difference." Rick asserted.

"Let me go!"
Did Rick actually have Daryl? Could he hold him? Could he physically force him to follow? They were both so matched in strength and determination.

"We're low on ammo...almost no ammo. We split up, and it's over. Might as well put a bullet between her eyes before you take off. Or if you want, I'll save one of mine and do it for you." Beth thanked God that Rick was better at handling Daryl in a crisis than she was...knew how to hit him.

Daryl growled, but she heard the two men crashing through the woods behind them, Beth finally giving into Abraham's aggressive lead.

*                      *                      *                      *                      *

Where in the hell did it all go wrong? Narrowing his eyes, just watching the tiny flickering flames from their low burning fire, Daryl instinctually tightening his arms around Beth...it all really started sinking in in this quiet moment. He'd almost lost everything...but Beth, she was still with him. Right with him...between his legs, curled up against his chest, sleeping after her trauma. When they'd finally stopped to regroup...rest...really catch their breath, they'd wanted to have a look at Beth, make sure she was okay, but he'd growled them off...even Rick, and they backed away pretty quick. All Daryl could think about was Beth...his only focus was protecting her and keeping her alive...and he'd already failed at that once tonight. Where in the fuck did it all go wrong?

*                      *                      *                      *                      *

Something made him pause in his flight for the wall...stop and look when he knew he needed to move, to get up and over...but that something was stronger than what was driving him. The light from the clear night and rising moon, now higher than when he started out, was enough to see there was a watcher on the wall reaching down, helping the bitch over. Was it more than one of them, more than one betraying 'em? Who was on guard tonight...who had watch? He should've asked. Needed to know. That person would've been having his back if it came to that. His crossbow might make it...might, but he couldn't be sure of the range at this distance, throwing it over his shoulder, and drawing his gun. He was gonna take her out as soon as she stood up on that ledge and he could get a clear shot.

The walkers weren't paying him no mind at all. Some headed straight to the gates 'cause it was right in front of them, others starting to follow the wall down to where the climbing was being done, but most of 'em were pouring into the woods, following the messy trail she laid out for them while running scared. And the others were following them, following the other walker's just 'cause that's what walkers did...followed mindlessly and ate. How many were there? A hundred, a hundred and a half he could see...and more spilling outta the darkness. Daryl would get off just that one shot, then run for it. One shot...one bullet and she would be done, all of them left to clean up this fucking mess she made. He would have a good shot...a clear shot, just needed her to get on her feet so he could take it...make sure it was a kill.

Blonde hair...that's when he noticed...the watcher...he could see in the faint moonlight she had blonde hair. There was only one blonde in his house, and she was his. Beth. If he took the shot now and the climber didn't let go when they were hit, she would go over too.
"Beth!" He had to warn her...she had to think that was him coming over that wall.

He'd fucked her by not telling her the whole truth...not telling her that this betrayal was being carried out by someone they knew, a snake in the nest. Danger from within. Some of them, some of the walkers heard him, started zoning in on him, but he couldn't care. Beth...he shouldn't have called to her. He saw her turn to find him, look at him...off guard...and as soon as the betrayer realized Beth knew...realized there was no other way out, Beth became the sacrifice; Daryl's eyes fixed on the vision of Beth falling...falling into the darkness where he couldn't reach her.

"No...Beth!"

Whoever it was slipped away, down the other side of the wall, but the walkers that had been following her didn't know...didn't care that their prey escaped. Beth would taste just as sweet to them. Daryl wasn't gonna fuck around with his bow, taking down the four walkers on him...point blank headshots with the pistol he was already palming.

Gunfire would draw the herd to him, give Beth a chance...Beth's chance was all that mattered now. But what if she was knocked out?

_God Dammit..._

He had to get to her. And help was on it's way...it had to be...someone had to have heard the gunshots.

"Beth!" Daryl desperate for her to answer...needed to know she was still breathing.

Knife now, slashing and stabbing...no method to his madness, Daryl's need to plow through the herd clamoring for his flesh overrode everything else.

Shots rang out...not his. Were they Beth's? Was she fighting? It was a sudden and heavy expenditure of bullets; they were on her...he didn't have time, driving harder through the wall of walkers.

"Come on you mother fucking sons of dicks!" The growled challenge flew out of the mouth of the most unexpected guardian angel, Daryl seeing the full fiery fury when he yanked his blade free from the walker that crumpled to the ground in front of him.

Abraham held his fighting stance over Beth, out cold on the ground below him, Ka-Bar and arms dripping with blood and brains. He caught sight of Daryl pretty quick, relaying his dire situation.

"I'm out," Abe tapping the grip of the handgun shoved in the front of his pants.

Did Abraham actually risk his own neck coming over the wall for Beth? No time to think on that...no time to think 'bout nothin'. Time to act.

They weren't gonna be able to get over that wall with Beth unconscious without one of them biting it. Couldn't risk it.

"Get her. I'll take 'em..." Daryl barked, turning to blow out a brain that signaled their second to breathe was over. "Into the woods...we gotta lose 'em there. Swing around back to the wall later."

It wasn't a good plan, but it was their only choice...all they had. Abraham hefted Beth up over his shoulder, lifeless like a broken doll, charging into the trees like a good grunt with his orders. Daryl was left slaughtering the walkers in the rear to give them a start.

"Beth!" More gunfire followed.
That was Rick. He must've been looking for her before the shit hit the fan 'cause there was no way he would've made it down from the house so quick just after the bullets started flying.

_Dammit Rick, you were supposed to take care of her...

Too late to worry 'bout that now.

"Rick..." Daryl called back, eventually meeting Rick in the middle of the kill zone, almost falling flat on his face tripping over a corpse.

"Where's Beth...we...I can't find Beth..." Rick was breathless, Daryl winded too.

"Abe's got her...we gotta go."

Even if they'd wanted to, there was no way back to the wall; the walkers hemmed in behind them, blocking it. Forward into the dark was the only way. Crashing into the woods, the direction Abraham escaped with Beth, there was no time to explain. Rick...he needed him...they needed all the help they could get, but dammit, Rick was the only one who knew he was outside the wall...the only one who knew the danger they faced from within.

Abe was starting to slow down in front of 'em, carrying Beth weighing on him; Daryl slowed too, Rick following his lead. They had a little bit of distance between them and the portion of the herd that was following 'em...were they even part of that herd...the same herd, or did they all just meet up to converge on them tonight, hell raining down its full fury.

"We've got to circle back. We're too far..." What, was Rick losing his senses? Did he not realize just how fucked they were?

"We can't, Rick. Three sides...they got us on three sides." The only thing they could do was keep pushing, not let that herd get around the front of 'em, surround them, cutting off any chance of escape or survival.

Everyone stopped completely to catch a breath.

"Anyone know we're out here? Anyone know what's at the gates?" They needed a miracle right now.

"I told Maggie I needed Beth, that I couldn't find her. Michonne caught me on the way out. I said I was going looking for Beth. Rosita was running for the house by the time I got close to the gates. Said Abe went over the wall after someone who fell into a herd that was coming." Rick blurted in an urgent succession.

Daryl blew out a hard breath, bending and grasping his thighs tight with his hands, taking in the relief that he knew was about to disappear. They had to keep moving until the cavalry came...had to keep alive...Beth alive.

"I said, Beth's awake." Abraham's voice boomed, Daryl jerking up, not knowing how he missed that proclamation the first time.

"Beth..."

But there was no time to get to her, see if she was okay, because they were almost on them again...maybe a hundred yards behind...closer on the sides, and if they started closing in...which they would...
"Gotta go. Get her goin'. Keep her moving. Don't look back..." Daryl yelled to Abe who seemed more than willing and ready to comply, catching his second wind.

Rick started to follow too, but stopped when he noticed Daryl wasn't going anywhere. Daryl sheathed his knife, pulling his bow over his shoulder. Three bolts...three bolts left. Maybe six shots left in his last mag...but he still had his knife.

They weren't all gonna make it. He just needed Beth to move on...away so he could go and do what he needed to do to make sure she had a chance to survive...keep breathing. There was absolutely no way they could all hold out, all keep the pace until help came...if help was even going to come.

"I'm gonna try to lead 'em away." It wasn't even a choice.

He'd do it...anything for her. Did it before...that impossible night in the woods when he hid Beth so she could live. It wasn't any different now except he'd got to taste the sweetness of life with Beth, and if this was his night...he'd had just enough time. Tonight he wouldn't be leading anything away though, wouldn't be running. There were too many and there was nowhere to run to. Daryl would be standing his ground, letting them circle around him...letting them have him, but not without taking down as many of those biting som'bitches as he could. He'd fight tooth and nail 'till the bloody end. That's always how it was gonna be.

"No!" Beth screamed.

She wasn't supposed to hear, but she did, fighting Abraham now. Thank God that man was built like a bull; he wasn't about to let her go.

_Dammit, Beth...just go...go. Let me save you._

He couldn't have her see...watch what was gonna happen...what he was gonna do. Knowing would haunt her dreams enough when he was gone. But what he couldn't stand...when the end was near...when they were tearing into him, if he cried out or screamed and Beth heard...thought he was afraid, a coward in the end.

"No." Rick was firm...gonna put up his little fight too, but if Beth's desperate cries couldn't move him, Rick had absolutely no fucking chance.

"I ain't got time to argue. I'll catch up. Watch out for Beth..."

Maybe Rick hadn't realized what he planned to do, not until just then when he asked Rick to take care of his wife.

"No." Rick had him by the arm, thinking he could actually stop him from protecting Beth, fighting for what was his. "There are too many. You won't make a difference." Rick was trying to hide it, the panic in his voice, hide it from Beth, hide it from Abe, but he couldn't hide it from Daryl.

And he might not make a difference in the end; Rick might be right in that, but he had to try.

"Let me go!" Daryl jerked free, or maybe Rick let him.

"We're low on ammo...almost no ammo. We split up, and it's over. Might as well put a bullet between her eyes before you take off. Or if you want, I'll save one of mine and do it for you."

Daryl almost lost it...those words...almost took Rick down to beat him 'til he couldn't feel the pain of his failure anymore, but the walkers were on them now. Daryl took off after Beth and Abraham, stealing her hand from the soldier. If they were gonna go out tonight...if he couldn't protect her...he
was gonna hold her hand.

Beth was out front with their flashlight; she was their guiding light, trying to navigate...keeping them out of the closing mouth of the herd, but they were all bloody and spent...were reaching their end...all of ’em. There was nothing they could do. Every so often, he had to push Beth from behind to keep her moving...there was no time to slow down, to stop or breathe. But the problem was, there was no one to push him to keep him going. If they stopped, they would be engulfed.

"Fence...watch the..." Beth called out.

Too late to stop the momentum of the three men driving forward, they flipped over the fence, Daryl crashing hard on top of her, Beth crying out on impact. The fence didn't hold...not even for a split second...the walkers washing over them, just not processing yet that their next meal was laid out on the ground.

It was over. He heard Rick and Abe fighting to find their feet, but it didn't matter.

"Mother Dick..."

"Beth...look at me..." There was no point to get up. Not now.

He would shield her with his body as long as he could...until...

And he would feel her close just this one last time...this one last comfort.

He finally caught her eyes, and she was crying.

"I'm sorry...Daryl...I'm sorry...this is how we end..."

 Broken...she was so broken. Daryl nodded slowly, gently wiping at her tears. He wouldn't lie to her...not now.

"I love you, Beth. I love you, Beth Dixon." Beth Dixon. He had to remind her of who she was to him, and he wanted to remind himself of what he had, why it was worth it.

Taking that last sweet kiss from soft lips, his own tears falling to Beth's cheeks to mix with hers, Daryl reached, praying that he had just one bullet left.

"Here...they're here!"

Shots ringing out, the sound of Michonne's sword cleaving skulls...they found them, a new energy driving Daryl, shooting to his feet and dragging Beth up with him.

"Come on!" Glenn called, hurrying them down the path they'd cut through the walkers to the cars idling on the asphalt.

The county road...how far had they run?

"Anyone bit? Anyone hurt?" Bob was in Beth's face and in Daryl's space before he could put Beth in the backseat of the nearest vehicle.

"We're fine." Daryl didn't know if that was true but aggressively shouldered Bob out of the way anyway.

He would take care of Beth.
"Beth..." What the hell? Now Maggie was running their way, covered in walker blood turned black in the dark of night.

This wasn't time for a fucking family reunion. Hell's army was still pretty close to taking them all out, Daryl stopping Maggie in her tracks with one glare before sliding into the back seat beside Beth.

"Get in your car now. We've gotta go." Rick gave the final word, Michonne taking the wheel and Rick riding shotgun, speeding off before Rick even slammed his door closed.

Beth was on him...literally on him...sounded like she was on the verge of hyperventilating, but she had a right to be shaken.

"Shh...you're okay...just breathe." Daryl tried to be gentle, but it was coming out strained and harsh.

He needed to take his own advice, but cooling down survival instinct wasn't the same thing as working on breathing deep...wasn't easy at all.

"Beth..." He found her flashlight that had fallen on the seat beside them, shining it in her eyes when she finally looked at him, trying to see. "Look at me."

When she shied away from the light, he grabbed her chin and forced her, feeling shitty that he was being so rough with her, but he couldn't help it.

"How's she looking?"

Daryl had to shake himself out of his focus on Beth to hear Rick and understand what he was saying.

"Pupils are constricting slow, but they are contracting." Maybe concussion, maybe not. Even after he pulled the flashlight away, he kept a grip on her so he could see her answer. "You okay, Beth?"

They were all fucking far from okay, but they were alive, and Beth nodded, almost imperceptible, but she did, even though she was so consumed.

"Hey...we're gonna be just fine..." Daryl tried his hand at comfort, maybe he even succeeded, at least in not chasing Beth away 'cause she buried her head at his neck.

Daryl knew they weren't going the right way to get back home...at least not the most direct route, but he was sharp enough to figure out there were probably walkers the right way...couldn't go back, so they had to go around. He'd never been on or seen this portion of the road, but soon enough, Michonne slamming on the breaks coming around the corner, almost colliding with an abandoned car pile-up told him this wasn't gonna be the way either. All getting out to check the situation, Daryl put Beth off his lap, Beth still not talking...too dazed, wide eyes filled with tears.

"Stay by the car, you hear me?" He got a nod; at least he thought he did.

Daryl took stock of the people who came after them...not a surprising crew...Glenn, Maggie, Michonne, Bob, Sasha. Glenn and Maggie because it was Beth; Michonne because that was just who Michonne was, and maybe just a little bit for Rick; Bob incase someone was hurt; and Sasha probably just because of Bob...but she'd always been a fighter too. He wasn't giving her enough credit. More than anything, Daryl was concerned with most of the people in the group they left behind.

"Look's like a whole town got caught up out here." Michonne appraised the fleet of cars stranded on the two-lane for the next eighth mile or so as Daryl joined the rest of 'em.
"Phhh...There's going to be no moving them tonight..." Rick ran his hand through his sweaty hair, trying to figure. "We have to go back the way you came. Was it bad?"

"Yeah...if the walkers are more localized now, the cars might not get through. We might lose them and have to fight on foot." Glenn added to the truth of their situation.

Their fight tonight was far from over.

"How far are we? How far did we come?" Rick had to be thinking about his own family, about Carl and Judith who were left behind at the house.

"Maybe seven miles by road until we found you, probably less for you coming straight through the woods on foot, then the couple miles we've driven since."

"Rick, we don't have much fight left tonight, you, me, Daryl, and Beth. Best wait to morning to head back if we're going to have to fight." Abraham stepped up now.

He had the rights of it, but that was far from what Rick needed to hear.

"My kids are back there with that herd. Rosita's there too. You just want to leave them? I couldn't shut the main gates when I went out after Beth and Daryl..." Rick was hanging by a thread.

"Wait. Just think about it. Those walkers...the herd...herds, they're all super riled up right now. Who knows why they headed to the house in the first place, but something made them come. And then now, all the stimulation they've had, all the gunshots, yelling, chasing people through the woods, cars plowing through them, they're about as agitated as they can get. If we hold here for the night, by morning they'll be cooled down, spread out, maybe even a lot of them will move on or at least be distracted by the cattle...more manageable...and you guys will have a moment to breathe...be back in the game where we need you to be." Glenn barely took a breathe of his own, not wanting anyone to object or interrupt until he said his peace.

"Judith...Carl..." Rick insisted desperately. Daryl would've been in the same place if it was Beth...the rest of the world didn't matter.

"Listen, Rick..." Daryl watched carefully as Michonne laid a hand on Rick's lower back to center him...comfort him. "I told them we might not be back until tomorrow. We turned all the lights off; everyone knew it was time to go quiet. When we left, some of those walkers were inside the main gates, but they weren't anywhere near the inner perimeter. They were more interested in the cars blowing by them. They have no idea that there's anything on the other side of that fence. It's just a fence to them."

"And fighting tonight in the dark isn't going to do anyone any good. Tomorrow, in the light of day, we can come up with a real plan to clean up this mess." Glenn added.

It was all logical, all probably right, but that didn't make it any easier for Rick to swallow, Daryl seeing the pain in his face as Rick fought with himself on his decision.

"We'll stay here tonight. Make camp."

Daryl would have made a different decision if it was Beth, but he was glad Rick made the decision he did, for his sake...for Beth's sake. Everyone else fell back, Daryl standing with Rick just a moment, not knowing what to say...not being in a state to offer comfort. He was bad at that even on his best days, but he stood just to let Rick know he was there. Rick understood...knew that, releasing him.
"Go on back to Beth."

After the small fire was built and Daryl pulled Beth away, finding their private spot under a nearby tree...people didn't know exactly what happened, but they knew whatever happened, happened to Beth. They all wanted at her at once, Rick and Bob to see if she was hurt, Maggie and Glenn to offer comfort...hell, he hadn't even had a chance to talk to her...but Beth stiffened against him as they approach. Daryl growled them all off, even Rick... apparently not getting that sitting off by themselves, staying away meant leave us the fuck alone. Daryl knew that they'd be dead without ’em, but he didn't have the mentality to deal with them all up in their space right now, and Beth's body language wasn't reading like she wanted to talk to the family either. Maggie lingered longer than the others.

"Back off, Maggie..." Daryl hating that she actually made him say it.

Daryl didn't think Beth was hurt bad, but she was probably sore as hell from her fall. He didn't wanna hurt her, but he had to put his arms around her and hold her...hold her for just a few seconds before he started asking questions. Maybe questions should wait 'till morning though...

"She let go..." Beth was the one who offered that up, voice all tremulous, almost too quiet to hear.

"Who was it, Beth?"

"She just let go..."

Where in the fuck did it all go wrong? With him, that's where. He lied to Beth. Well, he didn't tell her the full truth of what was going on in their house...what he knew...didn't tell her that someone they knew was fucking with them. He wanted to protect her from that truth, but it put her in danger...almost got her killed. In this case, not telling the full truth was the same as lying.

But even that wouldn't have mattered if he'd done his job right...done what he went out to do...didn't fucking fail at that. He had so many clean shots...kill shots that justice could've...should've been swift. Instead, something inside him wanted to see that bitch lead those walkers right up to the gates, see her betrayal at its darkest...and that's where everything fell apart. Daryl should've taken that first shot he had.

This kill...when it came...it wasn't just a kill for survival anymore-something he had to do. It was vengeance.
Chapter 75

It took a good long while for Rick to work up to coming his way again, raising a hand to placate him, slow like he was approaching a wild animal. Looked like he hoped Daryl had a chance to cool off...settle down. That wasn't the case though...not really how it worked. Having Beth with him...it was a double-edged sword...calmed him down some but made the aggression all the worse. But Daryl forced himself not to fight Rick...chase him away. There might be something critical he needed. Rick crouched down by him, keeping quiet either not wanting to wake Beth or just tryin’ to keep whatever was gonna to be said between the two of ’em.

"Is she okay?"

"I dunno..." And he didn't. She hadn't said nothin’ to him. "They dropped her off the wall, Rick..."

It was hard to even vocalize...seeing her fall again and again in his mind. Then, what came after...thinking it was over...what he thought he was gonna have to do...

"What?!"

It was a betrayal...one of them leading walkers to their home...their safe place, but what they did to Beth...nothing could even begin to justify that...unforgivable.

"They tried to kill Beth." He couldn’t say it any plainer than that, and it wrenched his gut.

"Did she...did she see who?" Rick growled low...his jaw tense, teeth grinding.

"I think she's in shock. All she said to me was 'she let go...'. I asked her who, and she said 'she just let go'," Daryl was feeling so fucking helpless, but he was getting out more words than he thought possible.

Drawing Beth tighter in his arms, realizing just how quick he was getting over his issues of being affectionate with Beth with other people around...or maybe it wasn't affection tonight. It was protection. It was the only protection he had to give her.
"What happened out there?"

Daryl wasn't feeling ready to tell the full of it, his failure, but this kind of felt like a need to know for Rick...his kids were back there at the house.

"Too many walkers. Both got in over our heads...I fucked up. Didn't take the first clear shot 'cause I wanted to see 'em all the way up to our gates so no one would have no doubts. I fucked it all. Beth could've...died." It was a hard truth.

"Hey, this isn't on you, you hear me. This whole burden shouldn't have fallen on your shoulders." Rick's voice raised a little, Beth stirring, and Rick reaching out to gently stroke her hair like he was trying to soothe a troubled child. "Beth's fine."

But it was on him...his fault. And that bitch got over the wall 'cause of him when he should've shot her dead.

"Is she? Are any of us okay?" Beth was all that could matter to him, but Rick had to know...nothing was okay.

*                 *                 *                 *                 *

Whatever was shaking her awake was trying to be gentle, but it was no less jarring in her fragile state...just wanting to sleep...needing to sleep. It didn't hurt when she was out.

"Beth, gotta wake up..." Daryl slid out from behind her, her support and protection gone, Beth putting her head between her knees trying to make the sickness in her tummy go away.

Everything was so fuzzy except for the throbbing in her head...its steady, rhythmic pulses of pain. *Breathe in...breathe out...just breathe...*

Those simple instructions gave her something to focus on, helping the fog in her head start to clear, eyes still closed though because she didn't feel steady enough to open them, even though instinct told her that wasn't a smart idea being outside...so vulnerable.

She was happy to be forgotten, if just for the moment. No one tried to take Daryl's place at her side...grateful...she didn't want to talk...didn't have anything all that coherent to say. Beth couldn't even get her own thoughts in order, pulling Daryl's poncho closer, not just for warmth in the cool night, but like a security blanket. People...she couldn't handle people...but suddenly there were more of them than they stopped with. They came with a commotion, not a walker commotion, but a people
commotion...so loud, everyone trying to talk at once, talking over each other, asking questions, trying to have their say...so many voices buzzing in her head, she'd never be able to make sense out of them, even if she wasn't so shaken.

Finally pushing herself off the ground, the chaos of what seemed like a million conversations finally converged into one she could understand while she approached the group unnoticed. But coming into the middle of everything, Beth couldn't really grasp what was going on, not yet at least. Rick was backing off, turning away from whoever had been talking, face gone grave and lethal, jaw tightening to the point of shattering, hand digging desperately into his unruly hair.

"Beth fell off the wall," Abraham boomed, answering a question she didn't hear asked.

That wasn't right though. She didn't fall...one thing she knew for certain...not on her own. They let go...chose to let her go...but only three people knew that. Beth knew, and Daryl, and...

"Beth fell?" Carol's voice rang out in something close to...shock.

They were all being so loud...too loud out in the open...or maybe it was just that her head was so tender.

Carol...Carol was there?

Looking around, Beth saw...saw all of them...Carol, Carl, Judith, Tyreese, Tara, Rosita, Eugene...everyone who apparently stayed behind at the house. They abandoned the house...was it gone? Feeling like her knees were gonna buckle beneath her, Beth just wanted to go and curl up somewhere, hide, praying she would wake up in the morning with Daryl holding her so tight that she could barely breathe, safe in their bed, and this would all be over...this nightmare. The closest she could get to that now was going to his side; finding the wings on his back in the dark, she went to Daryl. He was so stiff, even without seeing his face, Beth knew that, knew the danger in him.

"Beth didn't fall...Beth...someone threw her off that wall...into...into a herd of walkers." Daryl's voice was cracking in anger, Beth slipping past Rick, right up behind Daryl, hoping to be able to steady him.

"Oh my God...Beth...not Beth..." Beth watched Carol try to hug him.

Daryl jerked away violently before she even got close to getting her hands on him. Was she trying to comfort him? The way she talked...the sympathy...how did she misread Daryl's state as sadness. That wasn't sadness, that was pure aggression. And why would she think he was sad?

"Daryl...Beth's gone...? I'm so sorry." Carol sounded so wounded when he pulled away.

Why did Carol think she was gone? Where would she have gone? Beth was standing right there, trying to make sense of it; it made her head hurt more. Laying her hand on Daryl's lower back, he went more rigid at first, at that touch, then his body recognized her, finally loosening up in that tensely quiet moment that followed Carol's odd sympathy. But then Beth went stiff...realizing Carol thought she...she was dead. Not just gone. Dead. Dead and gone. Why...why would she be so sure she was dead?

You know why...

But she didn't. Beth didn't know anything.

Beth peeked out around from behind Daryl needing Carol to see...needing to see Carol. All her instincts were alive and on fire, overriding the pain and confusion because something in her body
knew she needed to tap into that instinct to survive. Carol went still...confused, the look of relief taking so long to spread across her face, and there was something else in her eyes she couldn't force away...it looked a lot like fear. Even if no one else would ever notice, Beth saw.

"Beth...? You're okay...alive. Oh, thank God...come here sweetheart!" Carol reached out, trying to grab her.

Beth gasped, fear gripping deep in her gut, a fear she couldn't understand, stumbling back even as she watched Daryl throwing out his arm to block Carol from getting anywhere near her.

"Fucking stay away from her!"

Beth wanted to run...tried to escape.

"Hey...hey...shhh...what's wrong?" Realizing that she wasn't going anywhere, her sudden flight stopped when she hit the massive wall that was Tyreese who had her by the shoulders now, turned to him.

"I..." Beth looked around, and all their eyes were on her like she was some idiot...maybe she was...all except Rick who seemed to take her really seriously, breaking away from his state of anger to take her from Tyreese.

"Beth? What is it?" So desperate, like he needed her to say it.

She needed to say it too; she just didn't know what it was that she needed to say.

"I just don't...feel good...my head...it just hurts." Beth begged off, not needing everyone to think she'd gone crazy.

But Rick knew it was something more, looking beyond her to Daryl who was still standing his ground, his body an unforgiving lethal mass, glancing over his shoulder at her, concerned.

Beth's eyes weren't on Daryl though...they couldn't focus on him, seeing instead Carol, and Daryl missed nothing.

Turning back to Rick, she saw him shaking his head no to Daryl...turning again, her eyes finding...going to Daryl...Daryl who was shifting his crossbow from his back into his hand to the ready.

"Maggie..." Rick called out, trying to mask the urgency in his voice, passing Beth to her sister quick like the unspoken words between him and Daryl weren't enough and the moment was about to explode.

The very air around them...it felt...volatile...deadly.

"What...wait...? What happened?" Glenn's voice cleaved the tension. "Someone threw Beth off the wall? Who...why?"

"Who...who? Same person's been leading the walkers straight to our gates. Why? 'Cause Beth saw 'em." Daryl spat.

Daryl wasn't steady...far from it. He was teetering on the edge.

"Someone's been leading the walkers?" Maggie who was holding her so close went uneasy, not helping Beth’s own sinking feeling of danger.
"How do you know?" Glenn finished up for Maggie, sounding like he was trying to piece it all together, not questioning Daryl, just trying to wrap his mind around it.

"'Cause tracks don't lie. And I saw 'em tonight. Saw 'em do it...all of it..."

"What were you doing outside the wall?" Carol's query was oddly accusatory.

Beth's eyes focused on Daryl's grip tightening on his bow. He stepped forward into Carol's space, and she took three steps back.

"Hunting..." A feral growl that was barely a word.

For a split second, Beth saw Daryl go to raise his bow, but Rick's sudden sturdy grip on his forearm prevented whatever was going to happen.

"There are a lot of questions. We've all got a lot of questions, but out here, in the open, they're not doing any of us any good." Rick clearly forced himself into diplomatic mode because he had to. Daryl was ready to kill, and that didn't look like it was about to change. "We need to regroup, fortify for the night..."

Rick moved in front of Daryl during his speech, keeping him pressed back with a shoulder, Daryl wanting at someone...

"Safety...safety is..." He had to turn and glare at Daryl, driving his shoulder deeper against his brother's chest, trying to settle him through some sort of male aggression Beth didn't understand.

Maybe she needed to go to him, trying to slip free of Maggie's embrace, but she wouldn't turn her loose. Did Maggie see or sense something she didn't?

"Let Daryl be..." Maggie stilled Beth with hushed words.

"Safety is our priority tonight." Rick was finally able to finish as Daryl took a step back.

But that step back wasn't because he was giving in or didn't have anymore to say...

*                      *                      *                      *                      *

"Safety..." Daryl hissed, sliding past Rick, evading his attempt to capture. "Safety's the priority, and there's gotta be answers for that."

Rick's diplomacy wasn't sitting well with him...wasn't gonna cut it.

"Whoever did this, you're gonna answer for it." Gesturing with his bow, it passed over all of them.

Feeling Rick grabbing at him, saying his name...Daryl didn't stop, just shrugged him off hard. Abraham stepped defensively in front of Rosita who'd had the sights of his bow passed over her, raising his hand...not in challenge, just trying to get him to stop, surprisingly stable. Not in challenge, Daryl told himself. Challenge would've been a death sentence.

"Whoa...you saying it's one of us? How do you know?"

"I told you, tracks don't lie!" Didn't know how much plainer he could say it. "Whoever did this ain't
Daryl could see ‘em all, had ‘em all...all the suspects within his range, eyes on them each in turn; Rosita who stepped out from behind Abraham, refusing his protection; Tara who looked all shaken, shying away from his words, or maybe it was his bow; and Carol...her name had never crossed his mind before as doing this, but in his gut, maybe it had been there all along.

"...and I ain't letting it go down like that again this time." Addressing everyone now.

Not everyone knew who the Governor was or felt the personal devastation of what he did, but the ones who mattered...they knew. Poor Beth...he shouldn't have said it...shouldn't have brought up the Governor...the pain of losing Hershel...not tonight. This was real though; he had to protect her.

"Why don't you put your crossbow down before we have to take it from you, and we can all talk like civilized people, calm and rationally?" Carol...was she trying to reason with him?

Daryl did take a calm moment to blow out a heavy breath and scan the group to see if there were any takers...anyone who was willing to try to wrest his bow from his grip. No. Not one. No one made a move. They might not be standing with him, but they sure in the hell weren't moving to stop him.

"How about whoever did this 'fesses up and dies with some integrity." Calm as cool still water, he was offering them the closest thing to redemption they could ever hope for. And a clean death...the chance to know they were going and make peace with their maker.

He was barely willing to give that...calm only ‘cause his shot would be steadier; wouldn't massacre anyone in front of Beth, Judith, or Carl...not in this second at least. The calm didn't last too long though...on the verge of going ballistic...

"Huh? Come on? Ain't nobody got any conviction for their cause? Willing to kill Beth for it, but not die for it? Or were you just a coward trying to kill Beth to keep her quiet...save your own skin?"

"Enough, Daryl, back off!"

He didn't realize Rick had gotten in front of him, lowering his bow...would never point it at him, but Rick had no right. Daryl stepped up into his face, nose to nose, uncomfortably close, not backing down...not this time.

"Move outta my way."

"Not now..." It was a husky hushed plea, not a command...just for him to hear. And Rick's eyes, Rick wasn't challenging or standing against him. He needed Daryl to stop. But Beth...this was about Beth now. So torn up inside, Daryl didn't move...didn't do nothin'. No one did, waiting to see how it was all going to play out. "Not now..."

Daryl's world was going blurry, didn't know what to do...what move to make...choosing to trust Rick who pushed him away, out of the middle of the fray, even past Beth.

"What in the hell were you thinking threatening everyone like that? You can't just go execute someone in front of the whole group, especially with no evidence." Rick finally paused when they were far enough away in the dark, barely touched by the firelight and out of earshot, turning him loose.

"You wanna watch me!" He was fighting so hard...needed to fight...needed that blood to save Beth. Bloodlust...he'd never been one for bloodlust...but someone tried to kill her. His bloodlust was
always tied to Beth.

"Who are you going to kill? Which one of them? Even if we knew for sure, you execute one of us here and now...everyone shaken...on edge, you'll divide the group." Rick was torn too, but desperately trying to hold everything together. "We're out here, vulnerable...if walkers come through, we can't have everyone turning on each other or afraid that you're going to go off and take them out. We need them all if there's any of chance at taking the house back, and right now, there's no reason any of them wouldn't want to. Everyone who's staying wants that safety back, and Abe's group...everyone who's leaving with him wants those supplies and weapons you promised them..."

Rick was making perfect sense...but still, it wasn't enough in his mind, Daryl just trying to hold himself together.

"Whataya wanna do, Rick? All sit here in our Kumbaya circle, holding hands and singing by the fire?"

Shaking his head no...that wasn't a good enough answer from Rick...not by far.

"I ain't gonna sit out here in the dark just waiting for her to slit our fucking throats in the middle of the night." Daryl didn't hear himself getting louder until Rick tried to shush him, but then he didn't care.

"Hey...hey..." Rick grabbed him by the shoulder...Daryl getting more restless by the second...Rick trying to force him to focus. "Listen to me. She's gonna get nervous. Beth saw her, and Beth's alive. Beth's going to remember eventually. With your little show out there, whoever did it, she's even more scared now. She's going to mess up. And we know she's not afraid to be out on her own in the dark...she's afraid to die though. There's a good chance she could slip away in the night, and you're going to be ready...watching. When she does, I've got Beth, and you're going to go take care of it. Track her...hunt her, do it however you want to. I don't care, as long as it gets done."

*                      *                      *                      *                      *

Beth sat silently by the fire with Maggie and Tara...consumed...too consumed to talk even though Maggie was trying to get her to. Beth was a ball of emotions...scared, anxious, nervous, worried...about everything, but she could only really focus on Daryl and his animated conversation with Rick. But just for a second, her attention snapped to something barely discernible moving along the tree line. Once the firelight hit the steel, the bright glint off the edge of the blade, Beth could see her...Michonne whose stealth movements allowed her so easily to melt into the darkness. Michonne was prowling the perimeter, sword in a deadly graceful grip. It made a sense of uneasiness well up in her chest, not because Michonne was on watch, but because she wasn't looking out on the darkness of the woods and what could be laying in wait in the pitch black unknown. She was looking in...on them. Eyes back to Daryl and Rick, Rick catching Beth's glance and nodding her over.

Thinking it might have been something about Daryl and his state, but nope...flashlight in the eyes again, this time from Rick, eyes still so sensitive to the light that Beth instinctively tried to brush it away.

"Beth..." Rick warned, and she complied, looking up at him, understanding the drill by now. "Still lethargic pupil response. Where did you hit the ground?"
She didn't remember; the black came too quickly, but she knew...knew because of the pain and soreness.

"My back...maybe my head...it hurts..."

Rick set a gentle hand to feeling the back of her head, but it was too tender.

"Oww..." Beth shied away.

Daryl growled, moving to step between her and Rick, but laying her soft touch on his lower arm staid him...steadied the protective beast in him.

"What do you remember, Beth?"

It was a question she couldn't answer no matter how much she wanted to...at least the parts that mattered.

"I thought...I couldn't see who it was in the dark...I thought it was Daryl...helped them...pulled them up on the wall..." Words were as choppy and chaotic as her memory. "I didn't have my balance...she was gripping my wrist...but she let go. She just let go...knowing what was coming...what was down there..."

"Who was it? Who was she?" Rick prompted.

Shaking her head hurt, and she needed to answer in words too.

"I...I can't remember...I don't know..." She didn't know, but she was terrified of her, tummy all tied up in knots.

Daryl's strong arm drawing her near, closer into his protection helped her breathe again.

"Sometimes victims of trauma can't consciously remember at first because of the physical or mental pain; it's the mind's strange way of coping. Even so, that memory, it's there inside, and we might not be able to say it or see it in our own head, but the body remembers and acts to protect itself." Rick was using his training to try to help her remember, but Beth just stared at him blankly because there was nothing... "Why were you so afraid of Carol?"

*Instinct.*

That was the answer, wasn't it?

"Beth, was it Carol?" Rick was trying to be calm and even, but it was like it was something he already knew...just needed her to say yes, but she couldn't...didn't know. Her mind was chaos.

Carol...they'd had conflict...they fought, but Carol, she was one of them from the beginning before Beth even met her new family. She'd lost her young daughter to a horrible fate with walkers. Carol wanted to leave, wanted all of them to go along, but was she...was she capable of this? Willing to risk everything...putting everyone she knew and loved in danger all to serve her cause. Beth's thoughts were so...just everywhere. Was Carol capable of killing her? Beth shuddered against Daryl, remembering but not remembering. Remembering them letting go of her...letting her plunge into the dark...remembering the terror of the fall.

Then something new came back to her...was it starting to come back...her memory? Beth felt it again, that sickening feeling of betrayal that seized her before...before she fell. It had to have been someone she knew.
Carol killed Karen and David.

Carol tried to kill you...

That little voice inside...she couldn't ignore it nagging at her, but she couldn't believe it either, not until she could see...remember the face that had looked back at her from beneath that hood...the face that chose not just to let her go, but to kill her...

"Dad?" Poor Carl...in the fury of this whole situation, Beth had forgotten Carl even existed...and Judith, both who had been left behind to an uncertain fate because of her.

Carl was holding on to his baby sister like his life depended on it.

"Yeah, Carl...come on over." Rick gestured his children to him, Carl who'd stopped a little distance away, like he was giving the adults room to talk.

Well, Daryl and Rick qualified as adults...she felt like a stupid child...her mistakes lost them their home...almost cost Daryl his life. She almost lost her everything. And was she that naive not to see the betrayal coming? So stupid.

"I..." Carl hesitated, looking to Daryl, not in fear or anxiety, but like he was contemplating, calculating what Daryl was going to do with whatever he was going to pass onto his dad. "Carol lied to you...when she told you we had to leave the house. We didn't."

That...that must've been part of the commotion she missed when her world was still blurry after Daryl woke her and left her...before the conversation turned to her being thrown off the wall. Daryl's arms around her stiffened, he was silent...so silent...and she could feel the tension recapture his stoic composure.

"What do you mean?"

"After Rosita ran to the house and told us what happened, when Michonne and the rest of them went out after you, I mean, I couldn't see all the way down to the lower gates when we let their cars out, but there were no walkers anywhere near the timber gates, and we got those closed so quick that they didn't know we were even up there."

Rick's brow furrowed as he listened to his son's account of the events. "Then what happened?"

"Michonne...she told us to close up the house, be quiet, and keep the lights out after they left. The others were downstairs, but I went to that upstairs hallway balcony you know, went out there with the night scope rifle so I could see down to the main gates. The walkers, they were inside, but they were confused, like they didn't know whether they were supposed to follow the cars or stay where they were, but none of them at all even got close to the inner fence. Not even one." Carl sighed deep at whatever was coming next.

"What is it, Carl?" Rick prompted.

"It was my fault. I left Judith downstairs with Tyreese...Tara, Rosita, and Eugene were with him so I thought she would be okay. Then Carol...she must've come in, called me downstairs. She had Judy, told me we had to leave. No one else was really saying nothing or fighting her on it...she said the walkers were coming...were gonna rip through the fence, but I knew they weren't. She wouldn't give me Judith, and I didn't know what to do...I'm sorry, Dad."

"No...you protected your family the best you could. That's all any of us can ever do." The father reassured his son with the universal truth of their world, but he was far from as composed as he was
They were all close enough that Beth could see the muscle's twitching in Rick's cheek. And Daryl, if she turned back and looked at him, she was afraid of what she would see in his face.

"But Rosita and Tara, they shut the upper gates when we left... we couldn't shut the main gates... too many walkers..."

They shut the gates. Beth felt emotion rushing through her... tears were coming, not sadness, but tears of relief. Home hadn't been overrun... it hadn't been breached. They could still go home... it wasn't the farm... it wasn't the prison... it was home, and it wasn't lost. She wished Daryl would loosen his grip enough on her that she could turn around in his arms and hug him.

"How many were there?" Those raspy words were the first ones Daryl spoke since she came to him and Rick.

"A lot... not inside yet, and I think most of them on the road and around in the woods followed the car or were already headed that way because of the others. Inside... inside the gates... maybe..." Carl was trying to give him the most accurate estimate he could. "Maybe a little more than a hundred."

"That's doable, Rick." Daryl started to relax just a little behind her. "If we can get the main gates shut, stop anymore from pouring in, get some people up on the wall, distract 'em, get 'em moved in one direction. The rest of us... we slip over the wall in the back, get inside the inner perimeter to the house, get some weapons and my bolts, and we're good to go."

This hope... it was enough hope to bring them out of their desperate place, but it still didn't eliminate the danger.

"But there ain't no way she's... going back with us... if she stays through the night... doesn't..." Daryl wasn't awkward; he knew exactly what he wanted to say, but it was like he didn't want to say it in front of her or Carl, going all cryptic. "You know... 't's gotta be taken care of either way, 'cause we know. It's all there... all we need to know. And I'm gonna..."

Rick's nod was almost imperceptible.

"Carl, go with Beth and Daryl by the fire, make sure Judith stays warm," Rick directed towards his son. "I'm gonna go check with Abe, make sure we still got him with us. We need everyone we can get."

Daryl nodded his compliance, but Beth knew he wasn't just going with them to have a nice sit by the fire; he was promising to look after Carl and Judith for him just like Rick risked his life for her. And Daryl watched them, all three of them, like a hawk, even though Maggie, Tara, Eugene, and Bob were around the fire too, and Sasha, Glenn, and Tyreese had taken up watch with Michonne since they had no perimeter or line of defense... just out in the open. Judith started to fuss in Carl's arms, not crying; she was an apocalypse baby born with that instinct to survive, but it was getting cool. Maybe that was what was wrong with her. She was cold.

"Here, Carl, let me have her..." Beth reached out.

"Are you sure... you okay?" He checked before handing her over.

"Mmm-hmmm." Beth was sore, head still hurting, but with Daryl occupied with everything around them, so feral, if he couldn't be comforting and hold her, she needed to comfort and hold someone. Judith would do her a world of good.

letting on.
Pulling the little girl close, Beth wrapped her up, sharing Daryl's poncho with her. Daryl was watching, his eyes softening at the sight of her with Judith in a brief moment of connection.

"...I made the call to protect your family...your children, and now you want to go back to a house that's going to be overrun by morning? For what? To get us all killed? It's over. The fantasy's over. Time to wake up to reality, Rick." Carol's voice cut through the quiet night.

"We need those guns and those munitions back there if we're going to stand a chance. Whatever you shoved in that SUV isn't enough to get us to D.C., not when we know what we're leaving behind..." Abraham threw in his two cents but was just ignored, this conflict between two people who didn't care what he had to say.

"It wasn't your call, Carol. It wasn't your call to leave. You had no right." Rick asserted, but sounding like he was keeping it together.

All eyes were trained on the two opposing forces. Beth shifted her glance to Daryl, waiting to see him throw himself into the middle of it all, but he didn't...didn't even look like he was going to make to move...but he was watching...watching so closely, eyes narrowed, hand gripping his crossbow in his lap.

"Maybe if you weren't off chasing after another man's wife, I wouldn't have had to make that call...taken care of Carl and Judith," she hissed back, but Rick didn't seem shaken by her accusations.

He was angry...that was plain enough for everyone to see. Abe was taking a step back, Glenn, the natural born mediator and level head, he wasn't saying anything. Daryl wasn't moving, but he looked like if he did, he was going to take someone out. It was an odd moment of complete inaction. Beth just kept telling herself that it would all be over soon...the group was shaken to the core, one of them...one of them had tried to kill her...Daryl was ready to kill...they just had to maintain their common tie in life long enough to get back home safe then say their goodbyes. But despite the tension snapping in the air, what Rick said next, he thought on it. It wasn't rash or spewed in the heat of the moment...but it was what ended it...ended the confrontation.

"Is there anything you wouldn't do for your group..."

It wasn't a question; he said it like he already knew the answer, Carol gone still and stiff, unmoving in the firelight, like it was a question she had already heard.
Chapter 76

Chapter Notes

~Author's Note: Happy Weekend, and Happy New Year since this is my first chapter posted since the holidays are over! I hope that you all enjoy the update even if things are a little dark. Thanks as always.~

Rick was right; she did run, but Daryl wasn't huntin’ her. She didn't run from him. They all ran. They were all hunted, the herd catching up with them in the night. Cut off from their cars, they had nothing but the weapons they carried and each other...the breathing against the dead. It had to be them fighting beside the enemy of their enemy. Surviving was...surviving was all that mattered. Living...his and Beth's beautiful little world...it’d been too fragile to last after all. The plan was always to go back...circle back home, but when did plans ever matter, chased further and further away from their place...that life...by the hordes of the dead that never seemed to end. At least he didn't have to worry about the traitor slitting their throats in the dark because when they had a second to breathe...hit the ground...they were all too spent to even move. Forced to their feet again...forced to run and fight in the relentless battle to keep breathing...the only way to stay alive was to fight the dead and fear the living...

*                      *                      *                      *                      *

"You're a tough som'bitch," Daryl called it like he saw it, pointing at Hershel to show him that he meant it.

Wouldn't lie ‘bout something like that. Who knew those words would've been his last to the man whose respect helped Daryl find his place of worth and meaning at the prison-as much as he could ever find in himself before Beth? Hershel was everything a father should've been.

"Yes I am." The last words Hershel ever spoke to him, voice laced with the pride of confidence and conviction, and he had the right of it.

That man was a fighter. One hell of a last conversation. Hershel was courageous to the end, maybe even braver than Daryl could ever be, sitting out there on his knees in front of the Governor. Daryl thought he was gonna live...maybe it was a naive hope, but Hershel had to know...feel the truth of the situation...his own mortality...and he didn't flinch, not once, not even when that sword was swung.

You're a tough som'bitch...

Rick had it handled...he had it all handled. He was gonna make it all right with the Governor. Before he headed down to that fence to negotiate, Rick looked back at him...didn't say it, but told him to stand down, stay back, and hold the fort incase anything happened...protect the people who were inside the fences. Daryl fell in line.
"We got to do something." Carl standing beside him at that fence like a small soldier, biting at the bit to get his.

"Your dad's got it." Daryl had faith in Rick. Kid needed to have a little faith too.

"They're talking. We could kill the Governor right now." Carl was tough but consumed with all the bravado of a kid who thought one person could save their whole world.

"From fifty yards?" Fifty yards...kid might not be able to, but Daryl, he could make that shot. But Rick had this.

Take the kid's gun. His rifle's more accurate...do it.

"I'm a good shot. I could end this right now."

You're a better shot. Take the damned rifle. End this...

"Yeah, or you could start something else. You gotta trust him." Daryl trusted him, trusted Rick with his life. Rick had done right by 'em all.

Take the rifle...take the fucking shot. That's the prick who killed Merle...made you put Merle down. Made you kill your own brother.

I killed my brother...

Take him out...he killed Andrea too. Made you sit there and listen to her blow her own brains out so she wouldn't turn. Take the fucking shot!

But he couldn't. This all happened already. All he could do was play the part that’d been preordained for him...live through this nightmare over again.

"We can all...we can all live together. There's enough room for all of us. More than enough...We'd live in different cellblocks. We'd never have to see each other 'til we're all ready. It could work. You know it could...Look, I'm not saying it's gonna be easy. Fact is, it's gonna be a hell of a lot harder than standing here shooting at each other. But I don't think we have a choice...We're not leaving. You try and force us, we'll fight back. Like you said, gunshots will just bring more of them out. They'll take down the fences. Without the fences, this place is worthless. Now, we can all live in the prison or none of us can...You! You in the ponytails, is this what you want? Is this what any of you want?...Look, I fought him before. And after, we took in his old friends. They've become leaders in what we have here. Now you put down your weapons, walk through those gates, you're one of us. Everyone who's alive right now, everyone who's made it this far, we've all done the worst kind of things just to stay alive. But we can still come back. We're not too far gone. We get to come back. I know we can all change..."

Daryl heard every single word Rick said...every word. That day, he heard what the Governor said too...but now, now it was just Rick's words...Rick's diplomacy, Rick's negotiation, Rick's pleas, Rick's insistence in the end that there was no such thing as being too far gone...that everyone could come back from what they had done.

And Hershel's face in that moment...the last before he died...he wasn't just at peace, he looked content in the knowledge that he had imparted his faith in humanity, his goodness, his hope for them all onto someone who would live on...carry that with them.

"Liar..." He shouldn't have been able to hear the Governor...it was no more than a loud whisper, but Daryl did hear. He heard that day, and he heard it now.
But maybe the Governor was right...some of them were too far gone...some of them could never come back. This was just a dream though...an odd sort of dream that wasn't a dream...a dream that was a vivid memory...too vivid...too painful, more vivid than that day he tried so hard to block out.

It happened...he knew it was gonna...nothin’ he could do about it, the Governor taking that swing at Hershel's neck. It didn’t do the job. He could hear Beth and Maggie screaming and crying before the bullets started flying...before everyone actually processed what happened.

"Daddy!" Beth cried for the father she would never see or hug again.

No...no...

He couldn't save Hershel...couldn't protect Beth from seeing that, having her heart torn out...but he could've...

...the Governor rolled right up to our gates. Maybe if I wouldn't have stopped looking...maybe 'cause I gave up. That's on me. And your dad. Maybe...maybe I could have done something...

After...chaos erupted...the barrage of gunfire, taking out the tank...watching their home destroyed...running...runnin’ with Beth...

But then he was back...back at that fence, watching Rick walk down to parley with the Governor again. It was just him though...just Daryl watching. Carl wasn't beside him, Beth and Maggie weren't there to see their father struck down...no one else...the prison was clear and deserted. He didn't even have a weapon, unarmed, forced to watch...just watch Rick go to the Governor and his raiders.

Watch. Listen. See.

"You! You in the ponytails, is this what you want? Is this what any of you want?" Rick was appealing to an army willingly following an egomaniac...an army that came to kill them.

Open your eyes and see...

There was a reason he was back here. There was something he was supposed to realize...see, everything else in the background erased...just him, Rick, the Governor and his people. But this one moment seemed so insignificant.

Sometimes victims of trauma can’t consciously remember at first because of the physical or mental pain; it's the mind's strange way of coping. Even so, that memory, it's there inside, and we might not be able to say it or see it in our own head, but the body remembers...

Daryl's head snapped to the side...sounded like Rick was right beside him, but no...nothing. Rick was still down at the fence with the Governor.

This day...it had been one of the most traumatic days of his life...but what was he supposed to remember? What was he supposed to see that mattered now?

"You! You in the ponytails, is this what you want?" Rick only said it once that day, but now...in this place of arrested existence...it was the third time those words escaped Rick's mouth.

Open your eyes and see.

Open your eyes...
When you fell asleep out in the open, on the run, you risked your life and the lives of everyone you loved and were supposed to be protecting, but you did it 'cause you didn't have a choice anymore. Waking up...it wasn't all soft and slow. You woke up 'cause you wanted to keep on surviving...breathing...and when you woke up, you came to alert and ready.

Daryl's eyes snapped open, and he saw...

*You in the ponytails*

He saw her...saw Tara for who she really was. He couldn't ever place her, couldn't figure her out...the mouse of a girl who wouldn't fight to save her own skin...sat there on the floor that day after dragging him down, waiting either to die or be saved. Now he knew...knew his gut was right all along. He did know her...not from another life, but a life she helped destroy. He just pushed it all away 'cause it was too painful to remember, and that was on him. She'd been standing on the front lines with the Governor that day...a wolf in sheep's clothing all along.

Morning started to break, the earliest grays being replaced by the pink light...still almost night in the cover of the trees, but the walkers, they didn't come...still didn't catch up. They'd been given a reprieve, long enough for him to stop and realize...stop and consider...all these threats within. Sharp eyes scanned the group, narrowed on Carol sleeping soundly near the fire...

*No...There was something else now.*

Lookin' to the perimeter...Rick, Maggie, Abraham, and Tara on watch. Tara on watch? Pfft! On watch so she could turn back in on them and take 'em all out when they were vulnerable?

This wasn't gonna stand...

"On your knees," Daryl growled.

He'd come around through the woods, through the darkness, unnoticed, right in front of her, and she didn't even see until he spoke and she stumbled backwards. They were both stupid enough not to recognize the full danger in each other...not 'til this very early morning wake-up to reality. If he hadn't dreamed about losing the prison, if losing the house hadn't made him remember...remember that other loss...would he ever have realized anything more than that nagging feeling in his gut that there was something he knew...something he needed to remember about this girl? Right in front of him. Right in front of him the entire time, making all friendly with Beth...his wife...Maggie and Glenn, his family by law...his brother Rick, Carl...Lil' Asskicker. This was on him.

"Daryl..." She eeked out, taking a step back into camp, drawing him out of the complete darkness where he seemed to thrive.

"On your knees..." Daryl's rusty voice raised now, more fierce.

Biting back his urge to knock her in the face with the butt of his bow, something inside stayed his hand. Was it the human in him, the man that wouldn't brutalize a woman who wasn't an immediate threat to him or someone he loved?

*Go for your knife...pull your fucking knife on me, girl...*

The animal inside silently challenged her, but she looked too scared to do shit, hands spread out to
her sides in surrender.

"Wha...what are you doing..." Tara's voice faltered...knew the answer to that. Saw his crossbow aimed right at her.

Shoot. Pull the fucking trigger. Remember...remember what happened last time you hesitated? Hershel...This time it could be Beth. This time it almost was Beth.

Daryl's finger quivered on the trigger, but he couldn't. He didn't. It wasn't all making sense in his head. He knew who it was...deep down he knew...all the signs pointed him to the person he should've known all along, and it wasn't this girl. Beth told him all he needed to know without sayin’ a thing...just by how scared she was even though she couldn't say why. But Tara could've been working with her...planning, plotting, helping her lead the walkers...her motivation not to get them on the road to DC, but to just get them on the road, ruin what they had, get 'em out where they were vulnerable, might get taken down by walkers so she didn't have to pull the trigger herself...get her hands dirty. Wouldn't even fight for her own life that day she dragged him down. That didn't mean she wasn't conniving...didn't mean she wasn't part of this, she’d been part of it before...at the prison...and he was gonna make her say it...expose her for who she was before he put a bolt between her eyes.

That's how it was gonna go down either way. She'd been with the Governor that day, clearly lied her way into the group...couldn't be trusted...didn't get to live.

She tried to take advantage of his hesitation, turning to run, but she wasn't quick enough. Daryl caught her with his boot, Tara crashing hard, hands and knees cracking against the ground. She didn't move after that...smart enough to know she had his bow trained on the back of her skull...too smart or too scared to put up a fight. But her cry when she bit the dirt, that got everyone's attention.

"Why'd you do it? Was he fucking you...the Governor? This your vengeance 'cause he's dead?"

"What...no...I wasn't...no..." Girl couldn't get her words together, turning over to face him...face her fate. "He told us you were bad people...we just needed a place to go, but I know now..."

The girl's voice was pleading, but he could give a shit. The rest, they were closing in on the situation, trying to grasp what was going on...hadn't heard what was said at first. They were jarred out of sleep or drawn off watch, gauging their safety before they tuned in.

"You don't know nothin'...you destroyed us...our home..." When emotion mixed with instinct to kill...it wasn't gonna be pretty, and that's where he was. It wasn't gonna be clean.

When everyone found out the full truth of Tara...maybe someone else should do it.

"Why...why now...why this time? Why were you in on this? Why were you helping? What did you get out of it?" Daryl berated. "No one would've ever known."

"Wait...I didn't...I wasn't a part of this...Please!"

Was that the truth or just another lie, another betrayal...?

"Daryl, no." Rick was approaching, words calm and firm, but he didn't know...couldn't understand. Not yet.

"Daryl stop! She didn't..." Maggie...he didn't see Maggie coming, but she went to the ground, putting herself between the girl and his bolt.
"Get outta the way, Maggie." He lowered his crossbow, but he wasn't done.

Telling Maggie the truth was gonna be almost as painful as Beth hearing.

"She couldn't...she couldn't have done it. We were unpacking together, then we were getting dinner when it all started happening..." Maggie alibied her friend.

Daryl looked around all of 'em gathered, knowing he had to tell 'em the truth and it was gonna hurt...hurt like hell.

"Don't matter...she was with him...with the Governor that day," Daryl managed.

They would all know the day he was talking about. Didn't need to spell it out for them. They were all so quiet, all except Beth. He found her, caught her eyes, saw when the realization hit her...maybe she saw...remembered too, like that little reminder brought it back for her...heard her gasp, tiny hand going to cover her mouth to hold in whatever was trying to come out. God, he didn't wanna hurt her, but he did anyway. Everyone else...all except Abraham, Rosita, and Eugene who hadn't experienced the wrath of the Governor...were all too...overwhelmed...to do or say anything. Beth was crying now, Glenn moving in to comfort her since he couldn't; Rick grave, still, and solemn just a few feet away. But Maggie, she was still shielding Tara...wasn't movin’. Didn't she hear what he said? Anger was boiling deep inside, anger towards Maggie...but why Maggie? She just didn't comprehend yet...

"She was with the Governor. Stood with him on the front lines outside our fences. She didn't swing the sword, but she might as well have hacked his head off herself. She might as well've killed your Daddy!" There was no way his words could be kind...too much rage for that.

"No...I didn't mean...I didn't know...I didn't know what he was." Tara pleaded from behind Maggie.

Beth's sobs grew louder...more devastating, but Maggie...no emotional response at all. She was tryin’ to be strong.

But strong Maggie...a Maggie who just heard Tara's confession, in this time and place would’ve taken the girl out herself...

Daryl stepped back, almost stumbled over himself...it hitting him...the disbelief.

He was the one who didn’t comprehend…and that realization…

"You knew..." Wasn't a question, rather a grave accusation...a hard truth he just learned. "And Hershel..."

That's when the emotion finally hit Maggie's face...guilt, her own, and the pain of his knowledge. Daryl almost dropped his bow...almost hit the ground himself. His whole world started going hazy...he heard Beth...the only thing he could focus on was Beth's voice.

"Maggie...?" A span of silence with no response. "But Daddy..." Her voice wavering into nonexistence then.

Daryl didn't know how he got there...closer to the fire, out of the darkness where he could see all of 'em and be seen.

"You knew...all of you?" Panning the group, he was feeling hot...so hot...dizzy...face burning...this realization a fever dream.

Watched Beth jerk away from Glenn, slamming her hands hard against his chest when he tried to
capture her again, Beth not knowing where to go or what to do, but she was breaking. And no one...no one was answering...that was their answer, their guilt, their truth. That girl on the ground, that girl Maggie was protecting, that girl who was with the man that slaughtered her father...she didn't betray no one. There was no one to betray. They all knew. They all betrayed him and Beth.

"Daryl..." Rick's hand was on his shoulder trying to settle him.

Who's the girl, the one that won’t fight? Daryl asked Rick that point blank the day they were all reunited before he brought them home to Beth.

Tara...she was with Glenn when we all caught up...

The way Rick just cut it off like that, Daryl knew there was more, something Rick was hesitating about, knew Rick would tell him when he needed to know...but now he knew. Rick should've told him right off, but he didn't for whatever reason. No point to contemplate that now. Thing was, as soon as he found those prints outside their gates, as soon as he told Rick there was a threat from within, Rick should've told him about Tara...even if Rick somehow knew it wasn't her.

Rick...these new people...you trust them? He sure in the hell didn't; didn't come to trust easy, but he needed to know exactly what Rick was thinking, what he was bringing into his home, to his wife. He just needed to know where Rick stood. And he always trusted Rick's judgment. Never had no reason not to...’til now.

No. But they're not a threat. They're manageable. Rick was right not to trust them, but so wrong about them being manageable.

Tara was with the Governor, standing there, holding her gun when Hershel's head got hacked off.

Abraham tried to kill Daryl in his own home for loving Beth, his wife...Daryl still felt the soreness of that wound.

And Carol, however she got back in Rick's good graces...for whatever reason he let her back into the fold after Karen and David...Rick brought her into his home and she tried to kill...

No...The turmoil in his head was too much...the betrayal stung too bad.

He should have never left the house that snowy morning, the morning he promised Beth everything he could and made her his wife. He should’ve gone to bed with her like she begged, made love to her then, stayed buried in her warmth until the whole world burned around them. Daryl regretted it...

Turning on Rick, he saw the same thing in his face that was in all the others. Rick knew...he brought these threats into Daryl’s home and didn't even see fit to tell him. It put Beth in danger; that was what hurt the most. It was a cheap shot, a sucker punch, but Daryl didn't hold back. It was deserved and justified. Hand throbbing, watching Rick right himself, straighten, spit blood and wipe it from the corner of his mouth with the back of his hand, Daryl waited. But Rick didn't make a move to strike back...took it like a man. The pain he saw in Rick, it wasn't from the blow...the pain in his eyes...it was caused by knowing who struck the blow and why. Didn't matter though.

"Fuck all y'all..." Daryl looked Rick straight in the eye.

Meant to say fuck you, but everyone deserved it, not just Rick. Stalking off into the woods, no one made a peep...no one tried to stop him; that would've been a death wish. He didn't stop and wait for Beth neither. Knew she was gonna follow.

After we burned the cabin...the second cabin...and I stopped in the woods to look back, you told me
to follow you, that you wouldn't lead me astray. When you turned away, all I could see were the wings on your back. I knew in that moment...I didn't really know why yet, but I realized I would follow you anywhere...I was taking it on faith. I would follow you into the dark...

Daryl remembered the moment that Beth said that to him...in bed, hurt, holding her so close...how much it meant to him. And now, knowing it was still true...knowing he didn't even have to look back, it was the only light and hope he had in this fucked up world, that Beth would always be with him. She was all he was living for...all he needed to keep breathing.

*                      *                      *                      *                      *

Beth's world turned upside-down. Gone was the fog from her fall...her memory of that one moment, who it was, hadn't come back, but the reality of running and fighting, sore, tired, exhausted, it brought her a certain clarity of mind, the clarity needed to survive. But this...this changed everything. The last time she’d been this confused about how the world worked, her Mama had been stumbling out of the barn, murdered by Rick's group...not yet her group, her family...when Daddy had said Mama was just sick and would get better. But then, when the shooting stopped, Beth learned the hard truth so fast when the corpse that used to be her mother tried to rip into her. Here she was again, not understanding anything...the world...realizing that her family, even her own blood...Maggie...was hiding something this big from her and standing by Tara...protecting her.

Forgiveness is the closest any of us can ever hope to get to the Divine...

That's what Daddy always used to say...but she couldn't. She wasn't a good enough person...not now. Daddy might be ashamed of her, but she just couldn't. Beth wasn't going to stand around and wait for the consequences to roll over her. Nothing mattered anymore...not who tried to kill her, not that Tara befriended her knowing full well she had been with the man who killed her Daddy. Only one thing mattered, and he took off into the woods after leaving Rick with the parting kindness of a mouth full of blood. Beth swiped away her tears...they were angry tears now...almost felt stupid for not realizing everything that had been going on around her, but there was no way she could've known...no way she could've remembered. Daryl was always so much more observant than she was, well, than anyone was, and he didn't remember until now. His memory must've somehow been triggered by losing their home again...another home...this one even worse because it was theirs.

After Daryl left, it just felt like everyone was staring at her, didn't know what to say to her, but she wasn't staying, heading out after him.

"Beth..." Maggie called out, stopping her in her tracks.

Beth needed to say things to her, but the truth was, she was too hurt and couldn't find the words. Maggie didn't have anything else to say either. Beth couldn't even turn around and look and her. Abraham stepped into her space when she went to walk away, grabbing her gently by the upper arm. She didn't feel the need to fight him. He helped save her, and by the confused look on Abe, Rosita, and Eugene's faces during this whole episode, they had absolutely no idea what was going on anyway.

"Hey, you don't want to go wandering around out there in the dark. Daryl knows the woods. He'll come back for you." Abe's voice took on a softer tone than she’d ever heard from him before.

He was right. Daryl would come back for her, but it wasn't going to come to that.
"He's my husband..."

Abraham understood. She didn't know him very well, but maybe in another life, he was a husband too. He nodded but didn't let her go until he pulled her knife from her waist and made sure she had it gripped tight in her hand.

Entering the gray woods just now being touched by the first light of morning, Beth reflected...reflected on everything she thought she knew, going back to the naive little girl she had been on her Daddy's farm. She didn't know Daryl back then, couldn't even really remember if she’d said a word to him, but she knew one thing about him then...he wasn't really part of the group. He didn't really belong. Things started changing after...after the horrible thing that happened to Dale and what Daryl did for him, but in the beginning, when it all started, he was an outsider. Beth would've never guessed that one day she would be so betrayed by the people she loved, all except the surly, aggressive, confrontational stranger named Daryl Dixon who roared into her life on his brother's motorcycle. In another world, they would've never met, never loved, but today, he was the only thing that made sense. She walked away from the people she thought were her family, following Daryl Dixon into the dark, Daryl Dixon who was an outsider again. And she followed because she was Beth Dixon. She was an outsider too.

"Sorry, Beth..." She heard his hushed plea just as she saw him leaned up against the trunk of a big oak.

He wasn't leaning against it casually resting, he was leaning against it for support. But he had nothing to be sorry for. Beth just needed him, sheathing her knife, crashing into his arms that were expecting her, waiting for her, needing her. He’d been with her every moment since they ran from the house the night she fell, but she felt like they had been separated for a lifetime, finding the strength and comfort she needed alone in his arms.

"I'm sorry, Beth...I can't..." He wasn't saying it all, but Beth knew what he meant...they couldn't stay...they didn't belong anymore.

"We'll go...let's go now..." Beth didn't need to look back.

"I tried. I tried to make it work...but the group...this group...now I can't..." Daryl thought he failed, but it wasn't him. It wasn't him...

"No...shhh..." Beth tried to soothe him. Even though he was the one doing the holding and protecting, she hoped he could find some solace in having her near. He’d been so brutal, so aggressive...now that it was just them, he softened. "We'll go home...we'll just go home. We'll get there. We'll make it together." She promised.

That was one thing she knew for certain. They would make it together. It started and ended with them.

"Beth...what if that life...our life there's gone?"

Maybe she was being unrealistic about making it home. They’d been chased so far away...did they even know which way to go? But it didn't matter...none of that mattered. She needed to make sure that Daryl understood that truth. Pushing away from his chest with both palms, Beth had to set him straight, wished he looked like something more than just the shadow of himself in the darkness. She wanted to see him in the light, let him see her and that truth, but her words would have to do.

"If it's gone, it's gone. We'll keep fighting. We'll make it together. That house isn't life. We're life...this is life." Beth wrapped her hand around his solid neck, not pulling him to her, but pulling
herself to his lips, needing the biting, bruising intensity of his kiss fueled by betrayal, loss, pain, and the urgent desperation to just feel.

It felt like a thousand years since she had tasted his lips. Daryl crushed her to him, not saying no like cautious Daryl would have said...not saying anything. Beth wasn't in charge long...maybe she was never in charge, just instigating the situation, Daryl turning them, pinning her against the tree. His mouth so possessive, kiss so deep, Beth couldn't take a breath, had to pull back, exposing her neck as sacrifice to Daryl for which his lips were just as hungry.

"I need to feel something real...need to feel...I need you," Beth managed between ragged breaths.

He didn't need that invitation, fighting angrily with his poncho tangled up tight around her until he was able to free her enough to slide a palm under her shirts, his hand so warm and strong, feeling so familiar but still so new against her skin. Beth was grateful for the extra layer, the protection Daryl's poncho provided her...even through it all still able to feel the rough bark of the tree trunk grating against her back.

At first she thought it was a moan that escaped Daryl's lips...but she knew what Daryl sounded like...and that wasn't it...it was too...dead...

"Daryl...stop..." Beth's hushed whisper did nothing.

Maybe he didn't even hear, so driven by lust...urgency...his deft fingers working on the button on her jeans.

"Daryl." More insistent...frantic..."Stop...walkers."

They both heard them now, crunching through the underbrush and dead leaves. Daryl heard. Stopped...went deadly still.

"Shit..." Releasing her slow and easy. "Run Beth. Run back."

The herd found them again...or was it a different herd? Were they never going to be free? The walkers, they didn't know they were there yet, just stumbling mindlessly through the woods probably all following one that was just walking in the direction of the last piece of meat it sensed because that was what they did. As soon as she and Daryl started running, they would hear them, know where they were, and start following.

"We have to go quiet..." Beth whispered as Daryl was pushing her to move.

"They're headed straight for us...straight for everyone. Go...get everyone on their feet. Get 'em moving. I'm gonna distract 'em enough to buy us all a few seconds. Then we run."

Beth opened her mouth to protest even though it didn't sound like he was planning on sacrificing himself.

"Go. Go now." Daryl shoved her hard enough that her steps weren't silent, far from it, the walkers heard, and if she fought anymore, she was going to endanger him.

"Daryl, I'm not going to leave you!"

"Never." Daryl's belief in that truth was in his voice. "Go..."

Beth ran.
The force of the impact was so brutal Beth yelped despite the danger it put all of them in...almost lost her footing, but they caught each other.

"Beth...Beth run, we've gotta run." Maggie was pushing her, trying to drive her back in the woods the way she came.

"No...we can't." What was going on? Then gunshots. Why would Daryl shoot his gun? Did he even have any bullets left? Pushing Maggie back into the clearing where they had made their camp..."There are too many..."

But that was when Beth realized it wasn't Daryl's gun...it was coming from the campsite.

"Save your ammo you son of a dick!" Abraham roared. "Time to move. Come on. Move, move...move!" Pushing everyone towards her and Maggie.

Beth saw...saw the walkers pouring out from the tree line on the other side of the clearing, saw Rick, Michonne, Glenn, and Sasha fighting off the first line that spilled into camp. Maggie would’ve been fighting with them too if she hadn't come looking for her.

"No!" Beth shook her head violently at Abe who was trying to drive them all forward while handling Eugene like an unruly child. "No...they're that way too..."

"Mother fuck me." Abraham paused, assessing his other options.

Judith's cry ripped at Beth's very core. The walkers were on them now...everywhere...seeing more opportunity than just the front line fighting them, everyone having to turn and fight. But she couldn't find Judith, until she saw Carl, separated from everyone else, fighting off two walkers with Judith in his arms. There were three more on their way. Carl took one down, but he went down with it. Beth fought past Maggie, hearing her call out her name...feeling her grab at her, trying to stop her, slipping through the others to get to the kids. She grabbed it...grabbed the walker by the hair, jerking it back, the scalp peeling and sloughing off in her grip, but it didn't matter...it turned on her, sights taken off Carl and Judith. Her knife, she drove it as hard as she could, crushing through its skull, driven by all her rage, fear, and pain, the corpse collapsing in front of her. But she drove it too deep, her blade was caught...locked...no time to fight to free it. Throwing the whole force of her body into it, Beth tackled another walker to the ground. Scrambling to her feet, Beth stomped at the head with the heel of her boot...not as effective as Daryl, first dislocating...breaking its jaw off, then after several tries, the skull gave and the brain exploded around her foot. Breathing hard from the exertion and another fall, Beth saw Carl finished his other walker and had Judith safe in his arms again.

"Beth!" He called out in warning too late.

The walker behind her, when she turned, she had no weapon...it was clawing at her, grabbing...Beth stumbled back, trying to escape. But it dropped, revealing Rick behind it, face and hands a bloody massacre from the war he'd been waging.

A booted foot holding it steady and a man's firm jerk released her knife from the head of the corpse that held it captive. Flipping it in his hand, Rick offered it to her grip first, grabbing her by the arm to steady her, all quicker than she could even think about what could've happened.

"Carl?" He growled to his son.

'We're fine. Judith's fine..."
the walkers. Rick was about to lunge back into the middle of the fray, until something made him freeze. Beth saw it too...him...Daryl slamming into the wall of walkers that started to close in around the rest of the group...the rest of the group cut off on three sides. Beth's stomach dropped remembering Daryl's blunt words to Rick on their frantic night flight...almost dying...when it was almost the end.

_We can't, Rick. Three sides...they got us on three sides._

But it wasn't just three sides, not for Daryl...the walkers she ran from...the walkers he distracted to give them all a chance, they had him from behind.

This was worse. This wasn't almost the end. This was the end.

Daryl found her, found her where she was standing beside Rick helpless, relief spreading across his drawn face. Spinning around, taking in the walkers that circled him...constricting tighter around him, Daryl took his fighting stance.

"Daryl!" She tried to jerk away from Rick, but he had her, held her fast.

"Rick!" Daryl called out, Beth looking to Rick, waiting for him to move into action...to respond...to do anything.

His jaw tensed as he panned the rest of the group clashing with the dead, fighting for their lives. Beth didn't understand. Rick...Rick was ignoring Daryl's plea for help.

"Rick...we have to...Daryl..." Beth was tugging at him to get him to move or maybe trying to break free...but his eyes...Rick's eyes were tortured. He wanted to, but he was choosing not to fight. "Nooo..."

Desperation wracked her. She knew what was happening...Daryl was...

"Rick...go...now! Take her!" Daryl was doing the only thing he thought he could...the only thing he ever thought he was worth...sacrifice.

It was all too fast...too fast, the world spinning around her. Beth raised her knife at Rick...she would...she would fight to die beside Daryl, but it was a feeble frantic move, not fierce. He had her disarmed in a second flat, shoving her knife in his belt.

"Go," Rick prompted Carl with Judith.

Too fast...there wasn't ever enough time...that's always how the end was...always how it ended. There was no last _I love you_, just Daryl's final broken words giving her over to Rick. Dragging her away from her life, Rick didn't look back, but Beth did.

She couldn't find Daryl anymore...
Chapter 77

~Author's Note: This one is going to be a dark one. Just a warning. I think we see the characters in it at what might be considered their lowest points-breaking, or already so far gone that their motivations aren't even discernible at this point. I am happy with and anxious about this chapter. I hope you guys think I did it justice.~

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Greater good...all for the greater good...

Hands were shakin’. Used to always be so steady. But they weren't shaking 'cause of what he did, they were shaking 'cause of what he lost...what he couldn't protect...couldn't hold onto. Took another man to save her...another man to take care of her. She was as good as lost to him.

Maybe you should go to Rick. He's a good man. The kind you deserve.

He said that...he actually said that to Beth the night he brought them all home...the night they were all reunited when he was trying to give her a way out, do what he thought was best for her. It surprised him even then that those words came out of his mouth...shattered his heart, but that night he thought it was the truth, just not the truth he wanted...and now...now it all came full circle. Rick had to take her 'cause he couldn't protect her; Daryl couldn't save her in that moment. All he could do was give Beth her life by offering his death. Now that it came to pass, it was more heart wrenching than he could ever imagine. And he was still breathing...it wasn't supposed to happen that way. Daryl wasn't supposed to be alive...to have to deal with losing her. But maybe all that mattered was that Beth survived. He had to take himself out of the equation and focus on what mattered. Beth.

His fire was almost as pathetic as he was...using his boot to scoot dry bark to its edge, watching it catch the dying flame to keep it going just a few more minutes. Is that what he was...fading...just hoping to keep going, just hoping to keep going a moment or so longer? Didn't matter...didn't want the warmth of the fire...without her, he was cold and dead anyway. Nothin' left. Balling both hands into fists, opening and closing them to try to make the shaking stop or at least hide it...from who, himself...? Daryl watched in a numb sort of fascination as the dried blood cracked and flaked and sank into the lines and scars on his hands, between his knuckles. But the blood on his hands, it all seemed too little, too late...

*                      *                      *                      *                      *

Watching Beth dragged away...they were supposed to be the last words on his lips...

"I love you, Beth..."

But she didn't hear. She was screaming...fighting Rick...didn't hear, but she knew, didn't she? She had to. He just never said it enough. Loving her...in his heart...in his soul, it just came so natural, like
God had put her there, but saying it...it was still so new, and now it was too late...

Crashing to his knees, feeling the cracking jolt but not the pain...trying to breathe...catch his breath, the passage of time didn't matter. It was just fight, fight tooth and nail 'til the bloody end...’til there was no more fight left, and that's where he was. Hands slapping against the ground as his strength failed him...dirt made mud by blood and guts and slime squishing between his fingers...just tryin' to hold himself up. Chest heaving, lungs burning, Daryl looked around him. There’d been so many...too many...how? He was surrounded by a ring of corpses piled high. He knew it was gonna be the end...knew his clock was ticking down; he was just on borrowed time, but he refused to go down without a fight. Now...

Layin' down in the center of the carnage...the middle of the kill zone...in a spot that seemed to be carved out just for him, he was so exhausted...felt like life finally beat him. It beat him...took Beth from him, but it hadn't killed him yet...the impossible...no bites, no scratches, he was still whole. World must still have a purpose for his sorry ass.

Maybe his fight...that sacrifice he was willing to make, gave everyone else a chance...a chance at getting away and surviving. Everyone left...left him when he was surrounded, walkers closing in from all around...they were fighting too. Maybe some of them saw him, maybe some of them didn't, but Daryl didn't begrudge them for leaving him behind. They made a call. Hell, he'd done it before too. Left Zack behind at the Big Spot when there was no hope of getting him out alive. Didn't even stop to put a bullet in his brain...put the kid out of his misery before he took off, just let the walkers tear him to pieces.

Daryl didn't begrudge them...

In a fucked up way, maybe everyone abandoning him saved his life, drawing the herd away. He already had more walkers than he could hope to handle and survive, but the whole herd...it was insurmountable. Their fight, their struggle, their flight for their lives crashing through the woods and the fact that there were more of them made 'em appealing targets...gave him the sliver of the chance he had.

And he survived.

Looking up at the canopy of tangled branches and dead leaves far above his head, it was so bright, the golden light filtering through. Full morning had come. The sun, he could feel it on his face...so warm, comforting, closing his eyes to soak it in...just rest...rest for a little while. Daryl remembered the hot, sweaty, horrible day, running through the woods...from the walkers...from the prison, fighting for their lives, fighting the pain and loss and tragedy of that day, that instinct to survive the only thing keeping them moving. They just fell in the grass, in that field when neither of them could run anymore. What if he'd just reached out and taken her hand? Would it all have been different, fate changed in that one moment, or would he still have failed Beth? It didn't matter though; they were both alive. That day when they fell together in that field, they'd both found the strength to pull themselves up...keep on fighting even though they didn't know they had a future...didn't know how much time they had left. Daryl puffed out a heavy breath, finally catching his second wind. It was almost the same as that day except this time...if he had a future...if he had any time left, he had to find Beth, because without her, he didn't give a fuck.

The tracks were so confused and muddled in the camp that the only thing Daryl could do was go in the general direction he thought Beth, Rick, and Carl ran in. All the walkers all scrapping and limping in one area, even in one direction...well, it made the path into the woods easy to follow, until that one path split into two...then all he could do was guess.

Low to the ground, he brushed leaves and broken underbrush away from the tracks...tracks he could
clearly identify as human from the extended gait, straightness, and pace. There were some small, some big...men's and women's or kid's...hopefully Rick, Beth, and Carl...he couldn't tell, but all that seemed to matter right now was that they belonged to the living. It was the only concrete thing he had to follow. They'd been moving quick...faster than he could move and track accurately, at points the path becoming littered with corpses...times when the group he was tracking was forced to turn back and fight when the walkers caught up to them. Daryl stopped too, bracing himself to find fresh human blood...but only blackened walker sludge so far. They all made it...were making it, but he had to find them before dark...before the walkers got the true advantage, and mid afternoon was already wasting away. Pickin' up the pace, Daryl sacrificed accuracy for need.

Going deadly still, the crashing in the woods maybe a hundred yards to the right sent the whole forest silent. It wasn't headed in his direction, wasn't even parallel to his path, headed the opposite way, but it wasn't a walker...too deliberate in its movements. It wasn't an animal neither...too loud. It was something human, so he tracked.

He wasn't the one doing the moving anymore, but he didn't try to conceal himself or hunker down...just stood there. They were straight ahead of him now, paused in the little clear spot in the woods, looking back and around, maybe trying to assess their situation, maybe trying to figure out which way to go...eyes passing over him once and not even seeing...not even registering it was him much less someone there. It wasn't Beth...wasn't who he wanted to find...who his heart needed to find, but it was the one person he needed to find alone. Crossbow sighted in on the back of the head, he dropped his aim at the last second. There was more to this. Stepping into the open, Daryl's boot cracked a small branch in half...wasn't trying to be quiet, wasn't trying to hide, the sharp snap sending Carol spinning around to find him...face him, maybe six, seven odd feet away. Daryl didn't raise his bow, didn't say nothin' either, but he observed carefully. He didn't really know what he expected, but Carol's actions...they gave her away...her guilt...her fear.

"Daryl..."

It wasn't until after she vocalized her recognition that he watched her hand go for her knife at her waist, a knife she hadn't felt threatened enough to be gripping, traversing through the woods alone...but now...Daryl shook his head no slow and deadly serious, feeling the low growl building at the back of his throat, her hand moving away from her weapon. Had that just been instinct, or did she really think she had the strength to take him out? Sure, she'd fucked him from behind when he was caught up in his beautiful, blissful little world with Beth...but now...this was his turf, his element...now she was lucky to still be breathing 'cause he was just animal enough to be able to rip her to pieces with his bare hands.

"You're alive..." She seemed to be surprised a lot lately by life...persistence to live...his and Beth's.

"Why'd you do it?" There was no pussyfooting around the issue.

Carol started to balk a little, but Daryl's stance and furrowed brow told her there was no room for lying.

"We needed everyone. It was going to take all of us to get to Washington D.C. to begin with. We couldn't risk losing anyone, anyone staying behind with you and Beth." He knew all that...it hadn't been what he was asking, but it was her confession all the same. "I had to do something. Somebody had to do something."

He'd heard that story before, hadn't he, about Karen and David, laying in his sick bed when she needed to spill her soul. Guess that was the generic story she stuck to when she was having trouble
sleeping at night...cleared her conscious for her.

"Beth...why? Did you...did you plan to kill her?"

It was a stupid question; she'd killed Karen and David when she thought somebody had to do something. Beth was no different in her grand scheme of things, maybe even a more necessary target since she was someone standing in the way of leaving.

"No, it wasn't supposed to happen that way." Carol's demeanor, her lack of emotion...he didn't know what to make of it. "Beth wasn't even supposed to be on watch. It was Tara. I wasn't planning on killing anyone. I didn't want anyone to get hurt, not even Tara...not even after what she did to us...to Hershel..."

Daryl stiffened, feelin' it...feeling her trying to manipulate his emotions, sidetrack him, be on his side...about Hershel. It wasn't gonna work on him.

"But that herd...you saw it. It changed everything..."

"You wanted everyone together, but you destroyed us. Now you're alone." The irony of it, if he would have been capable of feeling it, it would've been satisfying in the most fucked up way possible.

But how did she come to be alone? Did she run by herself? Did the group leave her behind like they did him? Did she leave the group? Had she seen Beth...know where she was, which way Rick took Beth?

"So are you." Carol reminded him.

Shoulders tightening at her assertion...she was right, but this...this whatever it was...this place in between...this wasn't how it was gonna end for him.

"Where's Beth? Did you see her?" He had to know if Carol knew...if Carol saw anything.

It was the only thing staying his hand, but it came out desperate, Carol looking more at ease, feeling more in control of the situation. But what she felt and what it really was...two entirely different stories.

"Beth's gone..."

NO...

"Beth ain't dead!" Daryl knew it in his heart.

Beth was strong. A fighter. Stronger than anybody gave her credit for.

"Maybe not..." So Carol didn't know shit. "...but even if she's alive, she's with Rick. You died. They saw you die. Rick, he's taking care of her now just like you did after the prison fell. He's going to take her somewhere safe and hole up with her and Carl and Judith..."

Rick, if I die...He'd been feeling his own mortality intimately that day when he asked Rick to do what only a brother could.

You don't even have to ask. I'll take care of Beth.

You always take care of the group, and you've got Carl and Judith who come first...I ain't stupid... Daryl needed to know though...needed to know Beth would come first for him after his
children.

The betrayal...the freshly discovered betrayal with Tara...Hershel...it still stung and he hated Rick for it, would never forgive him...but maybe he still had honor. Maybe Rick's honor...his word still meant something.

_Daryl, I'll take care of her like she's mine._

Rick did. He kept his promise. Daryl told him to take Beth, and Rick turned his back on the entire group to protect not just Carl and Judith...but Beth, like his own.

Daryl felt defeat starting to conquer him, listening to Carol’s words...knowing there was truth to them.

"Beth has always been Judith's mother. Rick and Carl are her family now. I know she was your heart...but..." She was going all gentle with him, stepping closer like she was gonna try to comfort him...that or pull her knife on him, Daryl jerking back.

"I'm gonna find her..." He wasn't gonna give up...couldn't. He loved her. Beth was his.

"We couldn't find you after the prison..."

"That was me," Daryl interjected. Not cocky, it just wasn't gonna happen...them findin’ him.

"...you and Beth, it was months," completely ignoring him. "Think about Beth and what she deserves. If...if you ever find her, however long it takes, you'll be coming back from the dead for her. Think about the position you'll be putting her in."

What in the hell was she tryin’ to insinuate? That was fucking bull shit! His wife...Rick? Didn't matter, Daryl regaining his composure...refusing to show any weakness or distress. Refusing to let Carol rattle him anymore. He didn't even know why she was sayin’ all this. She had to know...had to know it was over. What in the hell was she tryin’ to do?

"She's better off with Rick. People like us, we don't deserve people like Beth and Sophia..."

_People like us?_  

"Sophia...I looked for your little girl every fucking day! You were the one who gave up on her, the one who didn't go after her in the first place...the one who told me not to keep looking 'cause you couldn't lose me too when you never had me to start with! You didn't even know me, and she was your baby, your little girl! You're right, you didn't deserve Sophia, but I deserve Beth, and I ain't givin’ up on her," Daryl spat back, seeing just an instant of pain flicker in Carol's eyes.

Yelling wasn't doin' him no good...walker stumbling into the clearing...knife drawn and flying, sinking into its skull and dropping it before Carol even glanced over her shoulder. Instinct was still strong with him. It didn't faze Carol though. It should've.

"You might not want to give up...but the world doesn't always give us what we want, and maybe that's how it is supposed to be. People like us, maybe it's our destiny to be alone..."

_Do you think we have an unfortunate destiny?_ Beth's question was coming back to haunt him...a question from that day so long ago, a day spent in bed before...everything...before the first _I love you_. Maybe they did have an unfortunate destiny. Maybe the answer was yes.

"...and a kinder fate for people like Sophia and Beth...too sweet and gentle and good for this
world...to die."

That was it...that was the breaking point...Carol wishing his Beth dead...the words that brought him to the way it was always gonna end.

She didn't flinch, shy away...try to run when he raised his sights squarely between her eyes.

"You let Beth go...that wasn't fate. That was a choice...you playin' God." Daryl rasped through gritted teeth, ready to go all primal and rip her neck out.

Carol nodded. "I let go. You can kill me if you want, if you need to, but you won't..."

Daryl's arm was quivering...not because of the weight it was bearing but because of the tension, crossbow still steady to take the shot, finger at the trigger.

"...you won't because we're the same..."

No...

They weren't the same...never. Daryl's shoulders rolled forward, lowering his bow. She saw it...read the change in him, voice going all soft and maternal, trying to soothe him with her skewed truth even when Daryl was shaking his head no, refusing it.

"We do what nobody else wants to. We're not afraid...we...we fight for...the greater good..." Carol was confused, head cocked at him, eyes narrowed, cast down, then back up not understanding.

Greater good...greater good...? Daryl was dealing with a crisis of his own, but not with what he did.

Watching Carol's gaunt hand wrapping 'round the bolt sprouting outta her gut...pulling at it...that was only gonna make it...life...go faster.

She hadn't seen it coming.

He'd dropped his sights from her head, not 'cause he couldn't do it like she thought, but 'cause it would be too quick.

He'd rolled his shoulders forward, not in defeat, but because of his changing aim.

He'd lowered his crossbow not 'cause he was giving up, but 'cause his target was lower.

The shot was fatal, at her very core...wouldn't take long for her to go, but long enough that she was gonna hear what he had to say and feel the pain of it...his words, her wound...feel the life leavin' her.

He stood firm, his glare the only thing her eyes found...not sympathy...when she looked to him for anything. He had nothin’ to give. Carol...she looked betrayed...

His bolt...this was how it was always gonna end.

She betrayed her daughter...Sophia...that little girl that didn't have no one else in the world to trust but her mom.

She tried to manipulate him into betraying Rick after the farm.

She betrayed everyone at the prison by killing Karen and David...covering it up...sitting on that council and lying. Didn't even have the courage to fess up to what she did for the greater good...
Betrayed Tyreese by taking Karen away from him...

*I wanna find ‘em too. Put a bolt in ‘em for what they did.* Well, he finally made good on that promise to Tyreese.

Betrayed them all. Led those walkers to their gates...destroyed their life...his life...Beth's life...

Betrayed Beth when she let go...let her fall...wished her dead. Beth, the embodiment of all his hope and faith.

*I promise, Beth...I'll keep you safe until I die...* His first promise to Beth...the most important promise...he never made promises he couldn't keep, but now because of Carol, he couldn't make good on it. Couldn't keep the only promise that mattered. Carol made him betray Beth.

And he was just vindictive enough that he was glad she felt betrayed. There was no betrayal, but she deserved to know what it felt like...what he was feeling...what Beth felt...Beth. Just thinkin’ about her almost made him choke up, his last words to Carol sitting on his lips...the truth...a truth that she could never comprehend...didn't deserve to understand.

"Beth...she is my greater good."

A small trickle of blood ran from the corner of Carol's lips...the end was getting close...he knew it, she could feel it...feel death intimately. Letting go of the bolt in her, Carol's hand dripping her dark red life reached out to him...needed him to take it, but he stepped back, watching her sink to her knees with nothing but the cold, hard ground as comfort. Carol had no last words...no remorse, no prayers, didn't ask for forgiveness, but Daryl saw the fear and loneliness as the life left her eyes.

And he was alone because of her...because of Carol...he lost Beth. Beth was...gone...

*Alone...* 

*You're gonna be the last man standing...You are...*You're gonna miss me so bad when I'm gone, Daryl Dixon.

Daryl was at that edge...that edge where emotion and instinct collided...that point where man became monster...

The execution was over...the threat eliminated...but for him, it wasn't over. Daryl ripped his blade from the skull of the walker he took down, heel cracking its head open in the process.

White-knuckling his hunting knife...too much damage had been done...he couldn't stop himself. Just an animal...barely breathin’. Vengeance wasn't gonna escape him. Everything...everyone was gone. No need to make it clean anymore...

Daryl didn't remember sitting down, but there he was, just sittin’ cross-legged in the dirt staring up blankly at the mess he made, not feeling nothin'. Didn't remember bolting her body to the tree...didn't remember much of anything. It took a good long while for him to start noticing things...feeling things. The way his hair was plastered to his forehead, the thick warm rivulets slowly rolling down his face in an aggravating tickle...starting to dry, coagulate in the scruff that covered his cheeks and chin. Swiping the hair and blood back...it didn't do no good, his hands a mess, coated in blood cooling in the early evening air. Just made it worse.

Lookin’ at his massacre, maybe he should've felt something, but he didn't, incapable of showing any trace of emotion for what he did. Instead...he just sat there, watched, and waited. Her face...Daryl in his madness, his need for retribution, well, there wasn't much left...but her face, he left untouched...
because he needed to see...this he needed to see. That much he remembered. It started as a small, almost imperceptible convulsion, then eyelids fluttering until they peeled back revealing eyes of liquid ice...eyes that couldn't deceive, lie, hide the truth...the eyes that showed the soul was gone...nothin' left. Just the plain truth, no betrayal, Carol's eyes finally reflecting what had been there in life...nothing...finally telling the truth. The day she started leading the walkers to their gates...his home...she wasn't a human, worse than an animal, worse than the walking dead...the kind of thing that couldn't be allowed to live in their world...too far gone.

Maybe someday...someday if the living took the world back from the dead, they might look on the atrocities carried out by man and say their world drove these people to do the worst kind of things...they couldn't help it...

The thing that was Carol finally saw him...its instinct or whatever drove these things making it reach out for him, fingers clenching and opening uselessly...weak in its newborn...new-dead state...

But the thing was...he lived in their world as it was. He lived through its pain, horror, and loss, saw and felt the atrocities committed by other people. But there was still the essential truth...the truth that made them human...there was always a choice...

Carol's jaw extended, mouth gaped sickeningly wide open, neck stretching toward him driven by that overpowering need to feed. Starting to realize how to bite, teeth clacking together...hissing at him, unable to reach...

And Daryl, he made his choice...what that made him, he didn't know...

Pushing himself up, Daryl wiped his bloody knife off on his pants before sheathing it, crossbow in hand. There were only two reasons you put down a walker, 'cause you had to 'cause they were a threat or 'cause you cared about them...who they were, at the very least cared enough that you weren't gonna leave 'em like that. Daryl threw his crossbow over his shoulder, walking away, not looking back. He made his choice.

*                      *                      *                      *                      *                      *

He didn't feel tainted by the blood on his hands...

Maybe he was too cold...a monster...becoming what she was...had been.

*People like us, we don't deserve people like Beth and Sophia...*

No...Daryl shook his head no.

He remembered what it felt like to feel...remembered the joy, happiness, desperation, and pain of love...love that survived even the darkness of their world. It had been...she had been his only light...

Seeing but almost not able to see his wedding ring, coated in blood...bits of gore caught in the edges of the wings...

"No...no..." Daryl's strangled growl...his agony...there was no one to hear, but it didn't matter.

Spitting on his fingers, frantically rubbing at the cool silver surface...
A fevered panic consumed him...this last...this only vestige of Beth he had left...

It knocked the wind outta him...tryin’ to breathe...breaking down...tears, so much wracking emotion making it feel like someone was driving and twisting a blade between his ribs…

_I ain’t afraid of nothin’!

You’re gonna be the last man standing...You are...You're gonna miss me so bad when I'm gone, Daryl Dixon.

He lied that day. He was afraid...afraid of being the last...afraid of being alone...and now, the biggest fear he ever had was being realized...losing Beth...

It was clean...bright, shown in the faint flicker of the flames again...his ring.

**People like us, maybe it's our destiny to be alone...**

Carol was wrong...he wasn't her...he wasn't like her...

_Do you think we have an unfortunate destiny...do you believe in destiny? Beth's question...suddenly he remembered his answer...what he knew to be true.

Nah, Lil’ Bit... I believe in my ability to survive, to make decisions, and to do what I promise.

And his promise... I promise, Beth...I'll keep you safe until I die...

He had a whole lifetime to make good on his promise to her.

Greater good...**all for the greater good.** Carol was right...he did fight for the greater good...Beth was his greater good. Beth was alive out there somewhere, and she loved him. Daryl looked down at his hands, his wedding ring the only thing clean about ‘em. Nothing to wash with, Daryl would wear that blood like a badge of honor, but he refused to allow Carol...her blood, any piece of her to touch Beth...tarnish their love. She was dead and gone, but his love for Beth was alive.

Fuck the dark. He'd tracked in worse conditions, and nothing as important as what he was heading out to track now...had the flashlight he picked up in their abandoned camp, had his wits. Daryl wasn't gonna sit beside a dying fire and die right along with it. Kicking dirt on the flames, then stomping them out to kill the fire, put it out of its misery, he knew what he had to do...fight. He’d fought his entire life for everything he had. That was the truth...his truth, always had been...and Beth, she was worth fighting for...dying for, but most of all, living for. He was gonna fight to get her back...their life back.

Fuck destiny. Daryl Dixon would fight his fate until the day they put a bullet in his brain.

**Chapter End Notes**

~Endnote: Just to make this clear, Daryl has no fear of anything happening between Rick and Beth, he is just torn up by the fact that he couldn't protect her and Rick had to step in. What Carol said about Beth and Rick, it was just who she became trying to manipulate up until the end because she was just too far gone, but what she said was just driving home the fact of what Daryl lost and knowing that Rick is going to do whatever it takes to protect Carl, Judith, and Beth, so finding them could be difficult. So, no fears
of Beth and Rick, no chances of Beth and Rick happening, there will never be any suspicion cast on Rick and Beth if Daryl and Beth ever reunite.
Chapter 78

Chapter Notes

~Author's Note: I hope that everyone enjoys this chapter and has a fantastic weekend. As always, thank you so much for reading and commenting, it really makes my day. I am so grateful to all of you!~

"We have to keep moving."

Beth heard him, heard Rick, but it wasn't him she was listening to anymore. Looking down at the last walkers they'd taken out...no more bullets...just down to knives...these walkers hadn't caught up from behind them, they had come out of the woods from beside them. The herd that drove them away, separated them from everyone else, that was what she was listening for...waiting for, but nothing. That herd was either gone or found something easier to chase. Adrenaline coursing through her body...she should be winded...she was breathing heavy...but there was too much at stake to be exhausted or worn out...too much at stake to give up.

"The way's clear. They're gone. We can go back...we have to go back." Beth threw a glance over her shoulder at Rick and Carl with Judith, both of them unmoving...looking at her with pity. "Come on. We have to make it back! We still have a chance to find Daryl before dark." Standing her ground.

That wasn't true, was it? Looking up at the sky, even if she tried to lie to herself and say that the afternoon wasn't starting to fade, that it was just the shadowy nature of the woods, it still wasn't true...because of Daryl...

No...she wouldn't think about that...wouldn't believe it. Daryl was a fighter...a survivor.

Rick saw, snapped up her arm before she thought too much...had a chance to break, before they lost their momentum.

"Don't look back. Just don't look back." Dragging her forward again, further away from her life...what used to be her life...further away from Daryl.

What...no...

"Wait...Rick..." But Rick wasn't listening. "Stop!"

Beth planted her heels in the dirt, jerking free. Rick hadn't been holding her all that tight, but that was a mistake he was only going to make once, catching her again, unrelenting.

"I said, don't look back. Carl, go on."

"No...Daryl...I'm not gonna leave him. We're not gonna abandon him!"

"Stop. Beth, stop!" Rick gripped her by the shoulders, shaking her, trying maybe to shake some sense into her, but the only thing that was making sense was to go back for Daryl. "There's nothing to go back for."
"Daryl...we have to find him..." More desperate now than fierce...the oblivion of adrenaline starting to wear off.

"Daryl's gone." Pity turned to pain in Rick's eyes.

"No..."

"You're not going to want to see what you'll find." Voice gentling.

She was going back for Daryl. Rick might be right...he might be gone, but he was looking for her...he was out there trying to track her. And she...she could track a little too.

*I'm getting good at this. Pretty soon I won't need you at all.* His crossbow had been heavy then in her arms; she'd barely known what she was doing...but she knew they were tracking a walker. She was listening and learning from him.

Yeah, keep on tracking. Daryl was less than impressed during that first lesson, but he was teaching her...willing to share his means of survival.

God, she needed him...needed him now, but maybe...just maybe she didn't need him to track. It wasn't too late to find each other.

Rick's fingers dug painfully into her shoulders.

"I'm...I'm going back..." Beth wrested free of his grasp, but it was his words that ensnared her.

"He's dead. Daryl's dead."

Understanding now...she understood what he said...not wanting to see what she would find. Reality slammed her hard, gutted her...her last vision of Daryl...that herd, the walkers...they engulfed him like he never existed. What was left of him? What would be left of Daryl? A body, something to bury...just bones, all the flesh and everything that was Daryl just stripped away? Or would he be turned? Would he turn on her, look at her with lifeless eyes, not recognizing her...not loving her...not seeing her love...trying to kill her?

Dead...Daryl was dead. It was desperation and grief and anger...all those things too confused for the simplicity of crying yet, but the crack was there. She could feel it...knew she would soon be overcome by the purge of tears.

"You...you just abandoned him. You left him...he loved you, he was your brother...you just left him to die!" It was true...all true...too true.

Rick's jaw was clenching, teeth grinding, but he didn't say anything in his own defense.

"You betrayed him..."

"I didn't betray him...not in this."

"You did...you just left him...didn't even try to save him...help him. You wouldn't even fight for him. He always fought for you...sacrificed for you...for everyone. You just turned away...turned your back on him. You're a coward!" Beth spat, anger the overwhelming force driving her.

"He was my brother..." Rick swallowed hard, fighting to be strong...fighting to hold it together. "He was my brother, but you're his wife, and I made him a promise. I couldn't betray that."

The weight of it was too much to bear, Beth's breaths coming short and frantic.
"I let Daryl die to keep my word. He's dead."

He's dead. Rick kept saying it like it was true...because...it was true. He's dead. Daryl's dead...

Something inside Beth broke. It happened too quick...she shouldn't have, but she did, her fist sore and reddening after. Rick stilled in shock, opening his mouth and flexing his jaw, fingers probing where she made contact. Rick couldn't have been feeling it so hard if Daryl's fist hadn't made its mark first, and something in her subconsciously knew to exploit that weakness, knew this first punch she ever threw needed to be worth it even if she didn't know why. Beth turned to run...that's how it was going to be worth it...Rick too stunned to stop her from going back for Daryl.

Beth forgot Rick was a cop though. He came into their new world with a very specific set of skills that made him adept at survival...not just survival, but succeeding...just like Daryl was...had been...

Rick wasn't as quick as Daryl, but quick enough to grab her before she even had a chance to escape. Slamming her back hard to him, as furious as he had a right to be, Rick crossed his arms over her chest, incapacitating her. Beth couldn't breathe...from Rick, from the pain tearing out her insides...wished she could just stop breathing all together. Wished Rick would squeeze harder and crush her so she didn't have a choice. She just wanted it to end.

"Daryl teach you that?" His words were hot and aggressive in her ear, rattling around in her head. Your fist is small. That means your area of impact is going to be smaller, but your strike will be sharper. Okay, hit me.

"Did he? Huh?" This was Rick...the steady one...but he was snapping on her. It scared her...just another feeling in the ball of emotions she couldn't handle.

Pfft...God, you hit like a girl, Greene.

I'm not a Greene anymore. I'm a Dixon.

Prove it. Dixons don't hit like girls.

"Sure in the hell felt like a Dixon punch."

Beth twisted, trying to get away. It was just instinct...fear driving her to move. She didn't want to live, but right now her body wasn't giving her a choice.

"I can't...can't...I can't breathe..." It wasn't just because Rick was crushing her, it was because the weight of Daryl's loss finally sank in, too heavy for her heart to stand, shattering to shards.

Rick let up when she gave in...when she stopped fighting. He still held her close, but it was different.

"Daryl taught you things so you could stay alive. Daryl...Daryl made a..." She heard it then, the pain in Rick's voice...just how affected he was. "...made his sacrifice...it was his act of love. He needed you to live more than he wanted to survive."

The sob conquered her, hands gripping Rick's forearms where they crossed over her chest, fingers digging deep into sinewy muscle. Her body went limp, unable to bear her own weight anymore, Rick easing her down until she touched the ground, controlling her collapse so she didn't do any damage to herself. Clenching the cold, prickly grass between her fingers, head lowered in defeat, Beth didn't even feel like she had the strength to hold herself on her hands and knees. Rick was there too, on his knees, over her, arm wrapped around her waist, trying to support her and give her his strength, but he had little enough to give.
"I'm going to keep my promise. I'm going to keep you alive...I have too..."

The sadness was so violent, her tears burning down her cheeks...she just wanted to lay down and die. She didn't want Rick to keep her alive.

"Shh..." He tried to soothe her, hand running through her hair, pulling the loose tangles away from her face, tucking them behind her ears as she wretched, but there was nothing to come up.

After a while, he finally stopped trying, finally let her go down, go to ground, laying comatose where she belonged.

"Beth...look at me..." The herd was on them, all around them...they were surrounded...almost trampled...the walkers just hadn't noticed they were beneath them yet. But Daryl was on her...protecting her...the comfort of his weight...the last time she was going to feel it.

"I'm sorry...Daryl...I'm sorry...this is how we end..." It was all her fault...all of it.

"I love you, Beth. I love you, Beth Dixon." His words...he was so firm in his love that it would carry them through the horror of their death. It was all that mattered.

If this was it...Daryl was dead...Beth wished it would've ended right there...with a kiss, going out with him the night she fell off that wall and the world came crumbling down around them. Maybe they weren't meant for this world. Maybe they...their love wasn't meant to be...but dammit, the world could have at least given them that...holding each other in the end. Now...now she was a widow before she even really had a chance to be his wife.

Carl was begging her now. She couldn't see him, eyes closed too tight, trying to shut out the rest of everything.

"We gotta go, Beth."

No, don't say that... crying out inside her head.

Those were Daryl's words to her...Daryl's words...

We gotta go, Beth. We gotta go.

That day they ran from the prison, she thought she lost everything...but she didn't know...had no idea...

Beth used what little strength she could gather, shaking her head no against the ground.

"Beth..."

"Just leave her be. Let her have a second." Rick intoned, Carl backing away from wherever he had been standing near to her. "Take a breath and be ready to move with Judith."

Let her have a second... What was a second supposed to do? No amount of time was going to heal this. But really, time had no meaning to her...a dead girl...it didn't make any sense. Time stopped existing.

"Dad..." Carl's urgent whisper put Rick on alert and eventually drew Beth back.

"I hear 'em." Rick was close again, low, closer to her level, a heavy hand between her shoulder blades. "It's time to go."
He was trying to be gentle about it, but sometimes survival couldn't be gentle, his words unable to mask the brutal reality of their situation and the urgency that was necessary to keep them all breathing. The problem was, she didn't care...didn't feel that urgency or instinct to survive.

"Beth, come on." Arm wrapped around her center, Rick dragged her to her knees, but life had faded from her body, her will gone.

"They're coming, Beth. We don't have much fight left in us."

They were coming. She had no fight left at all. It would be over soon.

"Don't waste Daryl's sacrifice. Honor him even if that means you have to make a fucking sacrifice of your own and live!" Rick was getting desperate, hauling her to her feet.

She never agreed to Daryl's sacrifice...never wanted it or asked for it...just wanted to be with him.

"We need you, Beth. Judith needs you. Carl needs you. Dammit, I need you too."

Guilt...was guilt supposed to work on her when her life was over?

"Dammit Beth, I promised Daryl I'd take care of you like my own. Don't make me break that promise to him. He died because of that promise...don't...just don't..."

Her head was throbbing from crying. Rick shaking her didn't help. But was that what this was about? Rick needing her...Rick trying to clear his conscience?

"Go...just go..." It was all she was able to eek out, and barely that.

"I won't leave my own behind. Daryl's sacrifice was for you. You choose what to do with it. Either you run with us, or we die here today."

Screw you, Rick. Daryl died for her. She was ready to die too, but she moved. She had to. She wouldn't have their blood on her hands too.

*                      *                      *                      *                      *

"Beth, you hear me?"

"Hmmm..." She'd been far away, eyes caught on the dying fire.

Could it really be considered dying if it had never really lived...never really started? The tinder was too damp, the ground too cold. There wasn't even a flame to nurture.

"I said, it's just the three of us now and Judith. Our first priority is shelter, find somewhere to hole up and figure out what the next move is. You're going to have Judith." Rick moved out of grief, resuming his duty as leader, and he was much more fierce with it being just them.

"I'm not weak. I can fight." It was as close as Beth could get to insisting.

She wasn't going to be a burden. She already got Daryl killed. She could fight. She'd fought before.

"I know. You're going to have Judith until you're ready to fight again...after you've had time to..."
Mourn. That's what he was going to say but didn't, right? If that was the case, would she ever be ready to care enough again...enough to really fight? She didn't have anything to fight for.

"Judith needs a mother."

Whether Rick meant it or he was just saying it to give her a sense of worth...a purpose to get her compliance, it didn't matter. He said it earlier; they didn't have much fight left, not now...Beth had no fight left, especially not to go to war with Rick over words. But Judith...if she had to...if she could, Beth could keep going and survive for Judith.

"Do you want her, Beth?" Carl handed over Judith before she could answer like his sister was some sort of living doll that could make everything better.

Beth didn't turn her away. How could she? Maybe Judith...Judith and Carl were the only things that mattered anymore...the children surviving. Carl...he might not seem like a child anymore...he'd done things that most grown men never had to do in their lifetime...never had to deal with, but he was still a child. Judith and Carl deserved a chance.

"We're weak right now, but we can't be." Rick started again, focusing on Judith in her arms. "Walkers...we know we're going to have to deal with walkers, but people...if we come in contact with people, we can't trust them. Only the worst kinds of people are left out there. Trust...not now...not after one of our own..."

He was feeling the betrayal, that betrayal by whoever was leading the walkers, who dropped her off the wall, the person who ruined them. That betrayal was weighing on him, but Beth felt like she had faced betrayal from every angle...the person who tried to kill her; Tara who befriended her after being with the man who killed Daddy; Maggie and Glenn...Maggie loving Tara anyway and not telling her; Rick knowing and letting Tara in the group and not telling Daryl; Rick turning his back on Daryl and letting him die...

"You might have to kill..."

Yes, that was directed at her. She might have to kill.

He knew his son had killed. If he only knew about one kill, Rick knew about the boy who had been with the Governor's people...the boy who came across her and Daddy with Carl and Judith taking cover in the woods. And who knew what happened to Carl between the point that they lost the prison to when they all met up again. Just like Rick had no idea what she and...she and Daryl had been through in their time together.

Rick thought she was a burden. She might not have any passion left, but she had self-respect...she was going to stand up for herself.

"I've killed before. One of the Governor's people." She was numb...it came out so unaffected.

"I know, but this...this is going to be different than shooting people from the fence."

He thought she meant during the Governor's attack when Daddy died. Beth couldn't say for sure if any of her bullets hit anyone...never considered that she might have killed that day, so blinded by the tragedy and her tears in that moment. That wasn't what she was talking about though.

"Until we find some ammo, we're down to knives. It's different...killing...up close and personal."

Maybe he wasn't being condescending. Maybe he was just trying to prepare her...he had no idea.
"Daryl...Daryl and I, we were with this group...just a few days. We needed somewhere safe, just to
sleep...just to recover...just a few days to be." Rick's intense blue eyes were on her, not
understanding her sudden break to this story but not interrupting either, just letting her talk.

Beth closed her eyes for a second, remembering...lost in a moment...the moment Daryl first said
it...Beth, I love you...

The same night of her first kill...

Pulling Judith just a little closer for comfort, she continued.

"We didn't know..." biting her lip, trying to suppress the horror her life had become. "I didn't know
until Daryl confronted them about a tank and the prison...and their leader..." Beth knew her story
was broken...maybe it wasn't making any sense at all. "They were the Governor's people...Tara's
people...part of the group that killed..."

She couldn't say it. The grief of the day was too much already.

"These people weren't fighters, they had no leader, barely any knowledge of a gun between them.
They were the people the Governor left behind because they were too weak, but Daryl knew...we
knew we couldn't trust them, and they weren't the ones standing on the front line by the Governor
where he had...had Daddy on his knees." There might not have been any inflection in her voice, but
the emotion was there...he knew it...knew what she meant, that she was referring to Tara.

"We were trying to leave when we found out. There was a confrontation. One of them tried to take
Daryl down. Walkers were coming. One of them caught me...wouldn't let me go. I didn't even think,
but I killed him. I drove my knife up to the handle into his stomach. I felt his blood on me. I watched
him collapse as the life poured out of him."

Rick didn't say anything, but he got it.

"He was one of the Governor's people. I killed him. I had his blood on my hands. Is that up close
and personal enough?"

No answer was given. No answer was necessary.

*                      *                      *                      *                      *

At some point, they just gave up...stopped trying...let the fire die. It wasn't even worth it anymore. It
was cold, but there was nothing to do about it. Beth offered Carl Daryl's poncho for Judith, but Rick
shrugged out of his coat instead so she could keep the last piece of Daryl she had wrapped close
around her. Carl was cuddling Judith...just a boy and a baby forced to sleep on the ground, out in the
open, with no protection, no shelter, not even a fire for warmth. Beth couldn't sleep. She didn't even try,
just sitting there with her arms wrapped around her knees, trying not to shiver, watching Rick
restlessly prowl the tiny perimeter around them. What was the point? It was driving her insane, just
sitting long dark hours, waiting to hear their death marching towards them.

Just Rick...one man, a woman, a boy, and a baby waiting to die. Beth couldn't stand it. She wasn't
going to sit passively by a dead fire waiting for the end, feeling a fire of her own inside reignited...a
fire to try to do this thing...not suicide, but maybe the last thing. She was tired of letting other people
decide her fate...Daryl telling Rick to take her away...making him make that promise in the first
place; Rick agreeing, following through, and ripping her away from her world. She was a person...not a child. Keeping secrets, hiding betrayals...trying to protect her...Rick, Daryl, Maggie, Glenn...this was where it all got them...it destroyed them. Forcing herself up off the ground, she didn't avoid Rick, knew she couldn't so she didn't even try.

"We've got to do something. We can't just sit here in the dark." She caught Rick off guard with her regained will.

"We're going to sit here until morning."

"No, I'm not." Beth asserted it as plainly as she could.

"Go sit down. Now." He shifted from leader to father, but he wasn't her Daddy.

"No, I'm not a child. You don't get to treat me like one. I know that would make it easier for you, but that's not how this works." Beth's tone was sharp but quiet.

"I'm not treating you like a child, I'm treating you like Daryl's wife...protecting you." Maybe now, after having lost everything and everyone except the three people he was pacing a trench around, that was the only thing he had left to hold on to...protecting...the only thing that was keeping him going.

But she couldn't...she couldn't accept that.

"You can't protect me. I'm already gone...You're just forcing me to breathe." It was the truth...one he didn't want to hear.

Rick opened his mouth to object, but she didn't give him a chance.

"If you expect me to keep living for you and Carl and Judith, I need to do this. I need to go back for Daryl." It was the only way...the only compromise.

"Beth..."

She wouldn't look at him, eyes cast down to avoid him seeing her tears.

He'd never think she was strong or rational enough if he saw her breaking again. His hand was cool against the back of her neck as he drew her close, and Beth allowed it, needing that comfort before she had to be strong again.

"Beth, listen to me...I can't let you go back." Rick's tragic mix of emotions...pain, sadness, resolute strength, sympathy...it made him formidable, but Beth's determination and undying love for the man who died for her was stronger...couldn't be broken.

Pulling away from where he held her, Beth looked up at the man who was Daryl's brother, even if not by blood.

*It's not your choice.* That is what she knew, but saying it now wasn't going to get her anywhere.

"I have to. Daryl...he deserves..." Even if it was just his body left...bones...she was going to bury him. It was the only way she could honor him. "I can't leave him there like that. He deserves to be buried...that at least. He...Daryl always made sure everyone had a grave...had their place in the ground. Help me bury him..."

"He's gone, Beth. He's not just dead, he's gone. There's nothing left to go back for." Rick said the exact same thing earlier, but as she had more time to think...process...it just got worse and worse.
"I've been here...I know...Lori...she was..."

Trying to sympathize with her...the eerie similarities of their losses...maybe he was the only one who could really know. It was all too much to bear...this life.

"I'd go back with you if I thought...thought there was anything left. Daryl, he deserves...he was the best of us...but..." But...there was always a but, just this time, no words followed, only the wetness she could barely see glistening in the corners of his eyes.

They were lost, Rick trying to steady himself.

"...You get to grieve, but you don't get to kill yourself in the process or the people around you who care about you."

He knew...he had been there before, and he didn't get to say that...the rage of desperation joining the pain ripping into her wounded heart.

"No one stopped you from goin’ back into the prison after Lori died...not a soul. You put everyone at risk!"

"Shh...Beth, shh..." Trying to quiet her.

"No...there was nothin’ going to be left of Lori, and you knew it, but you left...you abandoned everyone...Carl who’d just had to put down his own..." She was being cruel. It felt like she had to be, but even so, she couldn't say that...what Carl had to do for his mother. "And Judith..."

"Beth...stop..."

"...Judith, you just left her...wouldn't even look at her...touch her. Daryl saved your baby even though you didn't care if she lived or died. Daryl was the first man to hold...the first person to feed your baby..."

"And now I'm saving you for him."

"No, you already did your duty. You saved me. Now, you're letting me go. You've loved and lost...you know I have to go back, and you're gonna let me." She was going one way or another.

He was quiet...contemplating for long moments, finally sighing.

"No, I'm not letting you go..." Raking his fingers through his tangled hair.

Beth started to protest but was shut down before she said a word.

"...I'm going with you..."
Daryl tripped up on nothing, hands and knees cracking against the pavement. He cried out...pain, exhaustion, desperation all too much to fight. Letting his bow crash down beside him, just trying to breathe, his side was searing...splitting pain from the effort of his run.

The road...it took all skill and knowledge out of tracking, diluted it to a choice...a guess...just luck. He'd been dodging walkers all night, not having the time or energy to waste on taking 'em out...finding Beth his only priority. The corpses on the ground...the ones they put down, made following the trail through the dark hours easier, let him know he was going the right direction. And the frantic way they'd been running and fighting through the woods and brush, it was a godsend. He was going to find them.

But everything...every factor that made it seem like someone-the world was on his side disintegrated when he emerged from the tree line, the first hints of false dawn barely illuminating the asphalt river that ran black in front of him. Crossing the road, hoping they'd crossed too...hoping to find the trail and pick it up on the other side leading into the woods...his heart wasn't even in it because he knew. They followed the road.

Right or left. It was just a guess...a chance. He made that choice, and it was the wrong one. He didn't know it at first. How could he? In the beginning, he looked, hoping someone walked in the grass of the easement a little instead of sticking to the tar. Why in the hell couldn't they have given him something...some indication he was going the right way...just one small sign? But why would they? They didn't know he was tracking them. They thought he was dead. From then, he just pounded the pavement...just tried to catch up...tried to calculate how much time he lost in tracking them...fighting off the walkers in the beginning, the walkers he thought were going to be his death...Carol...sitting in front of his fire hopeless before he kicked his ass into gear. They could've been a whole day ahead of him, but seeing that there were no rotting corpses strew along the way, once they hit the road, their path seemed clear, so they wouldn't be running anymore. He was tough. He could catch them.

Afternoon faded, the dark was coming when all his stamina was leaving, and Daryl realized that it didn't matter how fast or far he ran, he wasn't gonna catch them. He went the wrong way...made the wrong choice...failed. That's when he tripped and crashed. Sucking in cool air, feeling it fill his lungs...he was hot, so hot...and a sob of desperation caught in his chest. Fucking tears followed. The wrong way...the wrong choice...he couldn't run anymore even if he tired. Letting himself sit on his ass instead of abusing his throbbing knees...he'd never been afraid to fight...just that life seemed to always find a way to show him fighting didn't matter.

Sixty seconds...sixty seconds to feel sorry for yourself.

That was all he was gonna allow. He hurt. He was exhausted...defeated...had nothing left to give, but he wasn't gonna let himself give up. He knew which way they went now. Sucking it up, swiping away his tears, on his feet, Daryl moved forward.
The stream under the little rock bridge had provided momentary relief, finally washing the caked and flaking blood off his hands before allowing himself to cup up a cool drink, gulping down the sweet water, feeling it freeze his insides. The chill of it splashed against his face, red bandanna soaked and pressed to the back of his neck soothed him, but once he was moving again, he warmed so quickly. Any fleeting respite, any invigoration the water provided, faded before he even had the chance to fully recover. Beads of sweat replaced droplets of creek water. It was odd...the sun was warm, he was hot...sweating like a sinner sittin’ in church, but the air he was breathing...it was cold. Daryl stopped, looking down to where his coat and vest were hanging at his hip from his crossbow sling. Nothing else to do except strip off another layer and keep moving...adding his button down to the mix of clothes he was toting, leaving him in just his wife-beater, pressing on.

Night came...

Then day...

Darkness neared again...

Stumbling, still moving, he didn't know how, but he was.

He stopped every so often, forgot...forgot who he was or where he was headed, but then an image of her would burn bright in his mind...Beth...and he would remember.

The cold was gettin’ to him...worse than the heat ’cause he didn't have more clothes to put on, his coat and vest buttoned up tight around him. The shivers came...a natural mechanism to keep warm, but also a warning...a warning that the body wasn't handling the temperature...the elements well on its own.

Fire...he needed a fire.

No...no time to stop. No time for a fire. They were gonna stop somewhere for the night. He had to keep going. He had a chance...a chance to catch up to them.

Everything started to get hazy, every step an effort in his weakened state. Instinct was fighting his resistance, fighting his will to keep going, to find Beth.

Fire...sleep...that's what his body needed, and it was fighting a war it was determined to win...but his heart was stronger.

Beth.

Fire...

No. He wasn't gonna give in.
Fire...fire? That's when he realized it wasn't his instinct trying to get him to give up. It was what he was seeing. Fire...a campfire...maybe three-hundred yards ahead, just off the pavement by the side of the road. He let himself break, his breath coming heavy and painful, hands clenching his thighs as he doubled over, coming to grasp with the reality he found them. Three-hundred yards...he just had to make it another three-hundred yards...then he would feel Beth in his arms and nothing else mattered.

Close enough he could start to make out their shapes gathered around the fire beside the road...close enough that he started to see movement...close enough they saw him...

"Walker..." One of them called out, everyone going on alert.

Wasn't the first time he'd been mistaken as a walker, and that time got him shot in the head. He might be walking wounded, but he wasn't walking dead yet.

"I got it." Michonne...was that Michonne?

No...

Daryl wasn't sure if he said it but needed to say something so they knew he was still breathing.

"Beth..." Croaking...voice forced and rusty like he hadn't talked in years.

"Daryl...?" Michonne sheathed her sword behind her head, frozen in front of him like she saw a ghost.

He was a ghost to them.

"Daryl? It's Daryl?" Maggie and Glenn made their way to where his feet were finally hitting the grass.

Where was Beth? Why wasn't she coming to him...running to him?

He knew the answer to that; it was just too hard to bear the truth. Two paths in the woods to choose from...he picked the wrong one...the wrong one from the start.

"Beth..." The rest of 'em were gathering around now. He looked to Maggie who was shaking her head but wasn't speaking.

"We lost track of Beth. She was with Rick." Glenn stepped up, telling the truth he already knew, but to Glenn's credit, he was trying to do it gently. "They didn't run with us."

Daryl staggered backwards, not even having the ability to stand steady, so broken by life.

"And Carol..." Daryl's attention snapped, but he couldn't tell who said it. Beth was gone, and they...someone cared about Carol after everything? Even if they didn't know the whole of everything, it was a blow…

"She's dead." Spitting it out, no one asked him for an explanation.

Did they know...he was still covered in her blood…

He needed the fire...the warmth. It was so close. He needed to rest, but he needed to find Beth more. They sure in the hell weren't doin' nothing to find her. Or Rick and the kids. It was time to head out.

"Daryl...take a breath then we'll go..." Michonne caught him by the arm as he turned to leave, and he hit the ground, laid out flat on his back, not by Michonne but by his body giving up.
He felt hands on his face...wasn't seeing anything anymore, his eyelids too leaden to try to hold open.

"He's burning up..." Maggie...it was Maggie, but she was wrong...not burning up. He was cold...so cold. "Bob!"

"Is he bit?" Ty...Ty was there too.

Was that it? Was he bit? Maybe he was wrong...maybe he didn't make it out of that walker cluster fuck alive; his death was just a long time coming. It was a fever. He knew it now...a fever he'd been fighting. At least now...now it was starting to feel like the worst was over. He couldn't fight it anymore, his body...he was just giving in. But it couldn't be a bite...it'd been days...nobody lasted that long, especially not with the pace he'd been keeping. Maybe he was just done...all his people...all the people he knew gathered around him now except the one who mattered. It was like a living wake. He wanted to fight it but didn't have much of a choice anymore.

"No." Shaking his head from side to side...probably should just let them put his sorry ass down, but as long as there was still breath in his lungs...as long as his heart was still beating...he had to keep trying...keep living for Beth.

"No, I don't think he's bit." Bob was in the mix now, close...must've been on the ground beside him too.

Someone...Bob was dragging the stiff layers of his shirt, coat, and vest up to get to him underneath.

"Oh my God..." Maggie gasped...

"Shit...he would've been fine...but no antibiotics since we ran..." Bob's fingers probing mercilessly at his side...Daryl grimaced at the ache and sting.

He remembered the wound now...acutely. The splitting pain in his side hadn't been from running, fighting, or exhaustion; it had been because of a forgotten injury...a healing wound that took no precedence over trying to save Beth, protecting her, all the fucking dire situations they'd been facing, but now...

"Infected...he might be septic." There was no might be about it.

It was bad...not just the truth in Bob's words, but the pain he was inflicting, Daryl groaning...groaning, not even growling...trying to brush Bob's hands away, but too weak. It was feeling worse than when it actually happened, when the shard of mirror had been rooted deep in his side.

"What does that even mean?" Glenn couldn't be that naïve, could he? Even Daryl knew, and Bob's lack of answer confirmed the severity of it. "What do we do? The meds back at the house...will they..."

"The herd might still be there. Even with the cars, even if we could find our way back, if we get caught, he can't fight." Sasha...Sasha was keeping a cool head like always.

She was right...but they found cars...running cars? When it was over, they could find her.

"Beth...find Beth..." No one was listening to him though.

"I'll go."

"Me too."
Michonne and Tyreese stepped forward.

"With a car, we'll find the way. Tell me what you need. We could be back by afternoon." Michonne strategized.

"I'm in too. He went for the meds at the prison. I wouldn't be standing if he didn't risk it then." Sasha joined the suicide squad.

He didn't have the strength to object.

"No. Nothing back there is strong enough. He needs intravenous antibiotics and more than antibiotics...other meds to stabilize him...help him fight. We don't have access to those." Bob took a medical stance, not an emotional one.

"But at the prison, during the outbreak...you made your own IVs," Glenn countered.

Looking up at Bob through his fevered haze, Bob shaking his head no, the only regret Daryl had was leaving Beth behind...but she had Rick to look after her.

"This is too bad for that...beyond that. It's in the blood now." Bob wasn’t sugarcoating nothin’.

"Come on. We're heading out. What we find is better than nothing. Keep him alive until we get back." Michonne refused to give up, just like with the Governor.

"D.C." Abe...still a one trick pony...Daryl would be dead soon enough, and they could all be on their merry way.

"Abraham, not now." If he had the ability to grin...maybe he was getting delusional...he would've grinned at Abe's match, his spitfire of a woman.

It was like him and Beth. Daryl's eyes were having trouble focusing...couldn't find them, but he imagined Rosita up in Abe's face, telling him how it was. His eyes did catch something...focused briefly on something though. Eugene. Eugene standing off by himself lookin’ all shifty and nervous.

"No. I did that. I'm going to fix it. Despite my initial misgivings, Daryl saved our sorry asses back in that hellhole town. Now we're going to save him. D.C., they'll have the meds he needs, the doctors...a hospital. If we haul ass, go night and day, only stop when we have to, fight when we don't have a choice, we can make it. We can make it in a few days...a week. Now we have to. Now everyone has a reason to throw their weight behind this mission. Is this time-sensitive enough for all of you now, or are you going to sit here and watch your friend die?"

No...!

Daryl realized Abraham wasn't talking about DC when he was dead...he was talking about DC to keep him alive. He tried to object... DC...he'd never see Beth again even if he lived...they might as well drag him to Mongolia...but once again, nobody was paying him any mind.

At least they were objecting for him...Maggie, Glenn, Michonne...everyone with a vested interest in Beth, Rick, Carl, and Judith...were the loudest. And Eugene...but nobody was paying him any mind neither...just Daryl because deep down he knew why.

"We can't leave. I won't leave Beth behind...I won't...she's my sister. And Daryl...he would never want...never agree to leave her behind no matter what."

"It could be his best chance. He might not have a few more days, the trip could kill him, but we have to try." How was it that Bob was getting veto power, ignoring everyone else?
"No," Daryl's voice hoarse. "I know the way...I know the way now..."

He might've sounded incoherent to them, but he knew. He knew how to find her...knew which way she went, and if they left, if they drove away, he wouldn't.

"We're not abandoning our family. Beth, Rick, Carl, Judith...they're not going to make it on their own." Maggie's appeals clearly weren't working so Glenn carried the cause, standing up to Abe.

"Mother Dick Me! Rick's got the girl. He's a survivor. He's taking care of her. Take care of your friend. You save the ones you can. He's here...you can try to save him. They're not here, and you can't do anything about that."

Nobody said nothin'. They weren't fucking giving in...were they? They weren't actually listening to Abraham...

"He's a fighter...you all owe him. Hell, D.C., Rick and Beth, they know that's where we're headed. They know that's where we have to go. They've got the rendezvous...they'll meet us there."

Daryl tried...tried to get up. Couldn't let Abraham be taken as the voice of reason...

"We don't stop. We don't go back. We're at war, and retreat means we lose. The road fights, we fight back. We fight to go forward. You all know that. Now we will get through this because we have to. Every direction...every choice is a question...but we don't go back!"

...but Eugene...Eugene who'd been pacing anxiously finally stopped...stopped and stole the show.

"I'm not a scientist! I lied. I'm not a virologist. I don't know how this started. I don't know how to stop it. I'm not a scientist..."

Silence...stillness.

"You are a scientist. I've seen the things you can do." Rosita...insisting to hold on to the truth they needed so badly.

"I just know things."

"You just...you just know things...?" A low rumble from Abraham, words barely audible, but Daryl heard because he sensed the danger in them.

"I know I'm smarter than most people. I know I'm a very good liar, and I knew I needed to get to D.C." That wasn't a good stance to take...wasn't the right thing to say surrounded by all the people Eugene had fucked.

"Why...?"

"Because I do believe that locale holds the strongest possibility for survival, and I wanted to survive. I just reasoned I was doing all of you a solid too, getting you to take me there, considering the perilous state of the world...the state of everything..."

"People died trying to get you there." Rosita...shock and defeat in her words.

*I'm gone because people had to get there...for the greater good. Beth's gone...All for the greater good..."

"I'm a coward...but now I fully realize getting us there...it's not an option. It might kill Daryl for nothing...there might not be anything left there to save him. It's not a risk we can take."
Daryl knew...

Knew the truth all along. He was never one to believe in fairytales to start with...but somehow hearing the truth from the source, seeing the others react, knowing their hope and faith were withering...this was their reality...his reality...their world. Because of this, hope died tonight. Faith stopped existing. No more light at the end of the tunnel.

Laying there, staring up at the dark night sky, just thinking about how useless it all was...

They fought for nothing.

Carol destroyed them...tried to kill Beth for nothing.

He lost his brother...Rick...for nothing.

And Beth...Beth was gone...gone for nothing.

It was all for nothing.

"You just know things..." Abe again...

Eugene was far enough away that Daryl could see Abe's first swing without even lifting his head. Saw the punch that sent Eugene to the ground...heard it too...heard the crunch of fist meets face. It was strange...how his senses were...some fading...some more acute...strange how the body worked when the end was near.

"Abraham...no! Stop!" He could see Rosita trying to pull Abe off, but even she didn't have that influence over him...not after...

"Guys help!" Tara called out.

Red was gonna pummel Eugene to death...of that Daryl had no doubt. Had nothin' to say about it neither.

Eugene must've been out cold...no screaming, no struggling...just pounding...Abe grunting from the effort.

"Focus on Daryl." Bob's words somehow magically snapped everyone's attention back to him, all except Abe, Rosita, and Tara's. "Who's got the sharpest knife?"

It wasn't even a question that needed answering, Daryl feeling Glenn pull his own knife from his belt.

"Put Daryl's in the fire. Yours too. Bring me what water we have. Maggie, Ty, help me get his coat and shirt off. Michonne, Sasha...you watch the road." Bob delegated, giving everyone their jobs.

The chill of the night air sent him to shivering again...that and his fever. At least they left him his wife-beater, just pushing it up his stomach.

Water poured over the wound...it was just cold...Bob rubbing away the dirt around it.

"After we're done here, Michonne, you take your group and go for the meds...I don't know if they'll help, but he needs something or he's not going to last. It's his only chance."

"What are you gonna do?" Maggie was still on her knees beside him after stripping his shirt off.
"I'm going to cauterize it. It's the only thing I know to do...Ty, hold his shoulders down."

Daryl didn't even have to breathe deep to try to steady himself for what was coming. He didn't care. His body didn't care either, but Tyreese pressing his shoulders down against the ground made it harder to breathe than it already was.

"Glenn, bring me Daryl's knife."

His eyes focused on his own blade, fresh from the fire, Bob pouring water to cool it, liquid spitting and sizzling on the deadly metal. Just needed it sanitized, couldn't have this one burn him...this was the cutting knife. Daryl wasn't stupid.

"Hold him tight, Ty. I need to open him to get to the infection."

"Wait...are you sure?" Maggie stalled him. "Is this going to work?"

"Don't know. Field medicine...it's always...always a last resort. I have to make a new wound to get to the old wound inside." Bob was just telling it how it was, but it sounded like he was starting to talk himself out of it. "Cauterizing...it's risky. It can either burn the infection out or make it worse because it seals the infection in."

"Make the cut..." Daryl managed. He was the only one who had the right to make the call, and all discussion on it ended. "Beth..."

Didn't know why he said it. Maybe if he was gonna have a last word...he wanted it to be her name. Maggie's hand slipped into his. She wasn't Beth, but she was part Beth's blood...family...he accepted, every wrong and betrayal fading away for just that moment. He couldn't squeeze back though, hand too limp. The pain...it was there. He felt the razor edge of his own blade slicing into him, through the stitches...through partially healed, puckered skin now crusted with pus, but it didn't hurt like it should've...not enough to fight...not enough to cry out. Shock maybe...or it might just be the end.

"Head's up. We've got incoming." Sasha's warning drew everyone's attention...put everyone on alert.

Head falling to the side, knowing there was no fight left in him...the bright white lights on the road...were they coming for him?

Slipping away...one final breath...

*                      *                      *                      *                      *

Hands everywhere...so many hands holding him down...poking at him...pricks in his arm...the icy metal scissors skimming up his stomach, undershirt cut away. Caught by the light...it was so bright, glaring down blinding him. He hadn't regained his senses, but he was awake.

"What's his name?"

"Daryl."

"Is he going to make it?"

Two voices familiar, one not…
"Everyone out, now. Out of my surgery."

Words were too much. Daryl couldn't focus on words...couldn't focus on anything. Until words and actions combined to steal the one thing he knew he was.


Just as quickly as it was said, someone went for his hand...his wedding ring, but not before he clenched his fist.

"Daryl, you have to let us have it. We'll keep it safe."

No...

"He doesn't have time for this. Take it."

He'd die before he relented, and that was likely what it was gonna come down to, his last bit of strength exerted to shoot up and buck away from the hands trying to grab him, hold him...jerking and twisting...feeling the pain now, but it didn't matter. They weren't gonna take her away from him...the last piece of her he had left.

"Sedate him."

The drugs took him quick, the strangers around him easing Daryl back in the bed so he didn't hurt himself anymore.

He was conscious long enough to feel his fist loosen involuntarily, shaking, trying to hold it tight but failing. They had to pin his arm down. He still had fight left...for this, but not enough...not enough to fight them and the drugs too.

"Just let go."

No. But he couldn't stop it. It hurt...not the wound...them dragging the ring off his finger, stripping him of his soul.

"Beth...mmph.." He whined like a broken man before he drifted away.

*                      *                      *                      *                      *

"Wakey-wakey." Daryl's eyes fluttered, rejected the light before they finally opened, adjusting, but still not seeing. "There he is!"

That voice...he'd known it his entire life.

"Mer...Merle...?" Seeing Merle leaned over his bed...it hadn't come out all the way the first time, so he tried again. "Merle...what happened?"

Looking around, it was just a cold, sterile hospital room...nothing outta the ordinary, but something was off.

"Bike threw you. Banged you up pretty good. You banged up the bike pretty good too...MY bike." Maybe Merle's explanation made sense...he couldn't really tell where the pain was localized...aching
all over...felt feverish. It could've been a spill. "MY bike...we'd be having a little talk 'bout how you
treated her, wreckin' her like that...talking with a beat down if I weren't so worried 'bout you...already laid out like a fucking corpse. Been out cold a while."

"I..." Daryl didn't remember anything, Merle's voice just buzzing in his head. He wasn't even trying
to keep his tone quiet, but that was Merle.

Didn't remember anything...not the accident, not before the accident. He remembered his life, but a
huge chunk...he knew a huge chunk was missing. Panning the room, trying to get his bearings
straight, trying to remembering anything...seeing the old man in the hospital bed on the other side of
the room...he knew him. He knew his name.

"You think you got it bad, taking a tumble off my bike, that simple farm fuck...old man got caught
up in a grain auger. It chewed his leg right off."

"NO..." That wasn't what happened at all. "He was bit. A walker...a walker bit him. Me and
Rick...we cut his leg off so he wouldn't turn."

Walker. Bit. Turn. He didn't know what any of that meant, but he could almost see the scene playing
out in his head. He'd been holding the man's shoulders down, pressed against a cold concrete floor
while someone...someone whose face he couldn't see hacked at his leg with an ax.

"Walker? What in the hell you talkin' 'bout? Who in the hell's Rick? You somebody's bitch now?"
Merle seemed amused by his confusion.

"Rick..." He's my brother. He didn't say it, but that's what he knew even if it didn't make any sense.

That...maybe all that was a hallucination.

Suddenly, some instinct he didn't understand made him jerk up, pain searing through his body, but it
didn't matter. He needed his crossbow like he needed air.

"Where's my bow?"

"Lay your ass down. What in the hell you need your bow for?"

making much sense to him.

And to protect...That's when she walked through the door...the girl...the blonde angel who barely
glanced at him...but she brought his world into focus.

To protect her...Beth.

"You don't need your bow, but that sure is somethin' I'd like to sink my bolt balls deep into. Mmm-
mmm...sweet little thing like that, I'd like a taste."

"Beth..." He called out to her desperately, but she didn't hear or she didn't care.

"But I bet she's a handful. Bounce on Ol' Merle's cock, shinin' it all night long. Pretty lil' tits like
that...have me on my knees beggin' like a baby for a suck off them tiny pink nipples."

When he could take his eyes from Beth, finally processed what Merle was sayin'...what Merle was
shooting off about...

"Shut your mouth or I'm gonna break your fucking face!" Daryl spat venom at his brother.
Merle'd talked shit his whole life, but this...this was different.

"Whoa, baby brother, you ain't in no shape to be threatening me 'specially over something like Lady Antebellum over there...ain't even meant for the likes of you." Merle tried to calm him, hand hard on his chest, pressing him back down to lay in bed.

"But Beth...she's my..."

His injury, whatever it was, and his small struggle with Merle were getting to him, suddenly so weak and exhausted that he could barely lift his hand off the bed enough to see what he needed to see...prove what he was going to say, Beth's my wife, was real, not a delusion. But his evidence...his wedding ring that he could still feel so cool against his skin...it was gone. Maybe it never existed...hand dropping in defeat.

"She's mine..."

"Shit, Daryl, what they got you on? What are they shooting you up with? I gotta get me some of that! I wanna live in your trip." Merle started rummaging through the drawers of the table beside his bed, looking for a fix he wasn't gonna find...but for Daryl, all he could focus on was the girl who wouldn't give him the time of day.

She was just a dream...she looked like the stuff dreams were made of. But he remembered...it snowed that morning. It snowed when he asked her...said words to her that he'd never planned on saying to any woman.

_I know I'm damaged...not the kind of man you ever pictured yourself with...but I know I can take care of you, provide for you, protect you. And if we ever find our family and friends again, I want them to know the promises that I've made to you...Will you take the ring?_

He'd never been much of a dreamer...

"Beth...Beth," calling out until she heard him.

Glancing over her shoulder once...briefly...then again, recognition flickered in her eyes. Smiling...seeing him like he saw her, face brightening...Daryl's heart started to pound, desperately needing her near. She came to him, taking his hand in her small one...and he saw. It wasn't his proof...his was gone, but it was proof...the ring he gave her...the ring he knew existed. His fingers found it, tracing it, just to make sure it was...

"You're real..." Somewhere between knowledge and question, a question he was afraid to hear the answer to.

"I'm not here, but I'm real..." Her soft smile saddened a little, Daryl looking around the room as reality shifted.

The old man, Hershel...Beth's daddy...his head severed from his body, blood pooling thick on the floor under his hospital bed. Merle...Merle dead, slumped in the chair beside him, gory stump of an arm bleedin’ out, face all a massacre...not even a face anymore. Daryl did that...he knew. He remembered. Frantic, afraid to look back at Beth...afraid of what he was gonna see...

"Shh...It's okay." She tried to soothe him, her hand cool against his face now, turning it back to her. "They're gone. They've been gone awhile. Just look at me."

She was still perfect and fine, unharmed, but as long as he was just sitting his ass in a hospital bed, she wasn't safe...he couldn't protect her. Beth wasn't here. She said that...and he remembered...the
herd that separated them. This wasn't his world...this wasn't reality. This was some place between...a place that didn't exist.

"I love you, Beth...I tried..." He tried, but all those promises he made to her...*I know I can take care of you, provide for you, protect you*...he couldn't keep 'em. Couldn't keep his promises...couldn't keep his word.

It felt like he was losing her...like she was fading away, further and further from him even though she was still right there.

"They're gone, but I'm not...yet. You can still try. Just hold on...keep holding on. Please don't let go..." Beth's silken lips on the top of his hand...he was still capable of feeling something besides pain and loss.
"Can you believe they told me I couldn't drink in here...hmmph..."

The words barely broke through the haze...he heard 'em but couldn't really make anything of 'em.

"Had the balls to tell me visiting hours were over too."

A wet slosh against a glass bottle...

"I told them to go dick themselves. Me and Jack were stayin'."

*Jack?*

"I used to never drink Jack. They told me it made me a mean drunk. Not whiskey...just Jack. Jim, Evan...hell, even Johnnie did the trick, but Jack...Shit like that don't matter anymore...hmmph...and this here...this here was part of the official welcome wagon, so, why the hell not?"

Silence.

"People here, the civilians, I don't think they trust us...maybe they're just afraid of us...they haven't seen what we have...or maybe it's just me...phhh..."

Another long pull from the bottle...

"I was gonna go look for the girl...Beth. Rick, Carl, and the baby too...but mostly for your girl. Rick...those are his kids...his family. The girl, she belongs to someone else you know. I was heading out. Rosita was going too. Didn't tell the others. They stopped us at the gates...they...the big ominous they...their rules. Only soldiers come and go. I used to be one of them, but I'm not a soldier anymore. Not since the mission...Eugene...not since the mission stopped existing. Hell, truth is, I don't know what I am anymore. I'm sure not a soldier."

*Nobody. Nothing.* No...that was him.

Long silence. More swigging.

"I had a wife...kids. I didn't lose them. They left me. I don't know if it was because I couldn't protect them or because of what I was when I did. When I found them...they...they were already gone."

Bottle clanging on the floor, ringing around in his head...

"I was gonna look for Beth. I was gonna try to make it right..."
Beep...beep...beep...beep...
Thrashing, not even wanting to open his eyes...
Beep...beep...beep...beep...
Just a little noise, but it felt like a bomb ticking down in his head ready to explode.
Beep...beep...beep...
Stomach churning, head bursting, memory all a jumbled haze...a hangover?...but he didn't remember.
Moonshine. No, that wasn't it.
Beep...beep...beep...beep...
God dammit. Fucking noise was gonna make him lose whatever was in his stomach.
Beep...beep...beep...
Was it the alarm? Why wasn't she turning the damned thing off?
She?
Beth…
"Daryl..." The voice pulled him from the darkness. "Daryl, you need to open your eyes."
The voice, it was just a voice...nothing familiar, but he tried...tried to open his eyes. Focusing on that eased the annoyance of the incessant beep, calmed the nausea in his stomach. Eyelids fluttering and jumping long moments before they finally started to comply, peeling back...eyes still sleep blind, trying to see through the glare of the bright white light.
"Lil' Bit...Beth..." Wisps of blonde hair falling down, framing her face.
"Just take it easy. Don't rush anything, Mr. Dixon. Take your time."
Something was off...wrong...very wrong. That wasn't Beth's voice...there was no music in it...no life for him. And he started to see, the fog of unconsciousness lifting...those eyes staring down at him weren't big and blue, they were green...sharp and green. It wasn't Beth by his side...a stranger...
Beep...beep...beep...beep...
His heart. A heart monitor...a hospital.
J jerking up, paniced, tearing at tubes in his arm...a hospital…
"No...no. Daryl, stop!" He fought against the palms pressing at his shoulders, trying to calm him.
A hospital...a working hospital. This was real...there was nothing dreamlike about it, his senses all coming back. Was it DC? It was...it was DC...
No, no...no...
I've never been out of Georgia.

They listened to Abe, dragged him to DC to save his sorry ass...and he was never gonna see her...Beth again.

"Shh...shh...you need to settle down."

"DC...I can't stay. I gotta get back to Georgia." Daryl was swiping frantically at the leads attached to his chest.

"But...D.C.? This is Georgia..."

Daryl stopped fighting, breathing labored, heart racing, but stopped fighting when he heard the confusion in the woman's voice...when he heard This is Georgia.

"Not DC...not Washington?"

"No."

Then he remembered. The lie...the greater good...the cure that never even existed.

"Where?" He was calm...as calm as he could be.

"Georgia." Was this woman dense, or did she think he was a halfwit? She already said Georgia.

"Where in Georgia?"

"Near Atlanta...well, what used to be Atlanta...about forty miles away."

Okay...not impossible. Time to move. Time to find his clothes, his crossbow. Time to find Beth.

"No. Stop. You have to stay here and rest." Hands on him again.

He wouldn't raise his hand to a woman who wasn't a threat, but she was pushing him the wrong way.

Then the world stopped...the silver glinting at her chest. Not a necklace with a charm; it was his...his ring hanging off a silver chain around her neck. His ring! Grabbing...ripping it off her...girl's fingers going to rub the back of her neck where the chain bit into her skin. Daryl didn't care though, the silver wings in his palm the only thing that mattered.

"They were a set...they had one for me too...I never thought I'd get married...even if it happened, I'd never wear a ring. But this ring...it's a ring I want to wear." Never wanted to be owned by anyone...never belonged to no one either, but when she put that ring on his finger, he became hers.

"You fought so hard. You were so sick...so hurt...the doctors didn't know if you were going to make it or not, but you fought like the devil to keep it...your ring. It was hospital policy, but I just couldn't put it in your patient tote, risk it getting lost. I was keeping it safe for you...that love you were fighting for."

Letting his ring slip down the ruined chain into his palm, he held it there, fingers feeling it, tracing it...making sure it was real before he closed his fist around it and pulled it to his heart. He covered the sob by clearing his throat and gulping hard...these people...whoever they were...didn't need to know just how weak he was. Sliding it back home on his finger where it belonged...a hand that felt naked without it...he didn't know if it made it better or worse. It didn't make him whole, and it didn't make him a man...it made him a husband who failed...who lost the only thing that mattered. There wasn't
nothin' more important than being a husband...and he fucked up. Daryl's gut was in knots.

"Is she alive...Beth?" Sympathy laced the woman's...the nurse's voice, but she had no right to ask...no right to say her name.

And how in the hell did she even know Beth's name?

"It's the only thing you've said...sometimes mumbling, sometimes calling out for her, screaming her name when the sedatives started to wear off. 'Beth'. Just 'Beth'."

Is she alive...Beth?

Was she alive...out there somewhere...Beth's words, now ominous, coming back to haunt him...

I'll be gone someday...I will...You're gonna miss me so bad when I'm gone, Daryl Dixon.

"Get this damned thing outta my arm or I'm gonna fucking rip it out," Daryl spat, tugging at the IV. It was time to go.

"No. Stop. You have to. If you don't, they'll just sedate you again. You have to heal, and the only way to do that is to stop fighting or be sedated," she whispered frantically like it was some big conspiracy.

Sedated. She said that once before. Sedated again?

"How long?" His heart cringed asking the question, but he needed to know.

"You've come out a few times...but always fighting. Fighting, ripping stitches, hurting yourself and making it worse."

"How long?" Growling, not showing just how afraid he was to hear the answer.

"You've been with us about a week and a half." The truth came out, and it was more devastating than he could imagine...suddenly short of breath and heart hurting.

"No...no..." Daryl whined, falling back into the bed, unable to hold himself up anymore.

"Julia, is Mr. Dixon back with us?" Daryl was only partially in tune with the conversation, the blur of his sedation still wearing off, and now so consumed with his own grief...but he listened as best he could because they were talkin' about him.

"Yes, Dr. Darden. He just woke up a few minutes ago."

"His vitals?"

"Everything is looking good, and he seems to be alert and coherent now." 

"Not attempting to escape or rip anyone's throat out?" Daryl wasn't sharp enough to read if he was being serious or sarcastic, but Daryl did know whose throat he was gonna rip out next if it came to that. If that doctor even thought about coming at him with a syringe again, another fucking sedative, he'd stab him in the heart with it before he went for the jugular.

Turning his head to the side to see what kind of man this was...seeing he was big but one of those men who never had to fight a day in their lives. Entitled. If he was out there, he'd last a whole two seconds. Daryl knew absolutely nothing about where he was, but it must be pretty cushy. Doctor clearly had someone fightin’ for him...protecting him if he had no sense of survival.
"No, doctor. He was calm after the confusion cleared." The nurse lied, covering for him.

"Your shift is over, in what, half an hour? I'm going to give him a good look over. Why don't you get Cindy to cover the rest of your shift and go inform Mr. Dixon's family that he has returned to the land of the living."

His manner...that was hitting Daryl the wrong way too, but he held it in, just thinking on the doctor's words...family. That meant at least some of them survived to get where they were.

"How are we feeling today, Daryl?"

He hated doctors...hated this one even more than all the others he'd ever come in contact with...keeping him sedated. Lips twitching...sneering, Daryl ate the words he was itching to spit out.

"I'm going to have a look if that's okay."

When the covers were drawn back, Daryl was grateful at least that he was in some sort of soft sweat pants instead of a hospital gown that would've left nothing to the imagination.

"You know, your family is quite unique. The night you came in, they were protecting you like some sort of wolf pack. I've never seen such a fierce familial group with so few familial relations...blood ties."

Shifting the waist of his pants down and pulling off the sticky tape that held the gauze, ripping at his skin, the doctor was just trying to distract him. Not for Daryl's benefit to keep his mind off the pain, but to keep him occupied so the pain being inflicted didn't set him off to tearing into the doctor. Doctor didn't know shit. He could fight through pain, didn't need any diversionary tactics, but Daryl did think about what he was saying about families.

"You ain't ever been out there, have you? You ain't ever fought beside anyone...lost anyone...survived beside people?" Voice still raw.

Daryl didn't wanna talk...didn't wanna get all chummy with anyone, but he did wanna try to get a handle on these people...who he might be fighting at some point.

"Nope. If I had been, I wouldn't be here. I wasn't made for that world out there." He said it like he wore it as a badge of honor.

That was the kind of person that didn't deserve to be left standing, even if Daryl owed this man his life...someone who wasn't willing to...too cocky to fight. Daryl leaned up a little, grimacing, to look at his new war wound while the doctor poked and prodded at it, stitched together more crudely now.

"Then you can't ever understand." He meant it as an insult, but it was the truth too.

"I've heard they're all still living in tight quarters. I would think they would want their own space, and we still have plenty of room, but what do I know? Have you known each other a long time?"

Hand pressing closer to the center of his stomach away from the wound, muscles sore and tender.

"Some of us since the beginning..." It struck Daryl then that he was talking too much about them...probably shouldn't be offering up all this info. He had absolutely no idea what kind of situation he was...they were in. They might be taking care of him, but they'd been keeping him out cold. What about everyone else?

"Are you their leader?"
"Pfft...I ain't nothin'..."

_Daryl, you're not nothing... to me...you're everything..._ Beth said that to him, but she wasn't there.

"You sure have a lot of visitors for being nothing. We more than bend the visitor policy and visiting hours for you. Even when we don't, they don't listen."

Daryl knew what it was...why they were all coming to see him now that they were all somewhere safe and sound. Guilty consciences.

"And your sisters and brother-in-law, they're camped out here more often than not."

_Sisters..._

"Sisters?" Confusion...maybe he wasn't hearing right.

Dr. Darden pulled his hands away from examining long enough to look at him a bit cross-eyed.

"Maggie..." Yeah, he got it wrong, didn't get the _in-law_ part. ",...and the younger one."

What? The _younger one_? Daryl's heart skipped a beat, his breath stolen, pushing himself to sit up in bed.

"Beth?" Could she be there...could she really be there? Did she make it back to them somehow?

"Beth..." The doctor thought on it briefly before answering. "Yeah...I think that's it."

Why wouldn't she say she was his wife...but then why in the hell would this stranger even care to remember? Thought Maggie was his sister. It didn't matter. Beth...

"Small girl...pretty...blonde...big blue eyes..." Didn't care if the doctor saw him get all worked up. Daryl had to know.

"No. She's a tall girl with dark hair like Maggie. Tara. That's her name. Tara." He looked all pleased with himself for finally recalling correctly, but Daryl's world shattered again. "She's not your sister?"

"No..." She was nothing. "And Maggie's my sister-in-law."  

There was recognition in the stranger's eyes, and for a brief moment sympathy as he worked out the connection. If he had a brother-in-law and a sister-in-law, the missing piece was a wife. Quick change of subject.

"Well, your most recent blood work came back clean. The infection has finally cleared, but it was a nasty one. It was hard on you and your system..."

"When am I getting outta here?" If Daryl didn't like the answer, he'd just bolt on his own time.

"We're going to keep you under observation for a few days and see how you progress. When you are discharged, you're still going to need to take it easy...rest and recover, but I don't see any reason why, if you don't fight us or fight your healing, that you shouldn't be home with your family soon."

Was that supposed to be the light at the end of his tunnel? Those words broke him and at the same time meant absolutely nothing...except pain and loss. _Home_. Wherever this was wasn't home. Beth wasn't here. She was gone...everything just a reminder of a life that didn't exist...never really existed for him.
And this *under observation* bullshit wasn't gonna fly. Long days trapped in the hospital, stuck in bed...worse than a prison...knowing every second he was there, the further and further Beth got away from him whether she was moving or not, whether Rick found a safe place for them or they were still on the run. It was all the same; the longer it took to get back out there, the less he would have to track. The truth hurt...the truth that even now he knew there was probably nothin’ left to track at all. He wasn't gonna let a week and a half turn to two, then two and some change...too long...it had already been too long.

"Tomorrow." Daryl hoped the doctor didn't need too much prompting.

"What?"

"You're discharging me tomorrow." Eyes narrowing, not feeling up for a fight but ready for it.

"No, as I said, we are going to keep you under observation for several days and..." Darden choked, words didn't come out, frozen in fear like a rabbit caught in a snare.

Daryl didn't even have to tighten his hand around the doc’s neck, just dug his fingers in a little under his ears and pushed at his windpipe. It was the shock more than anything that scared the shit outta him, Daryl having given no indication that he was about to snap. Unpredictable. An animal. A wounded animal at that...dangerous.

"Tomorrow." Daryl tried again, this time anticipating a more reasonable answer.

The doctor nodded against his hand before Daryl released him.

Waiting for Darden to call some sort of security or attempt to stab him with another sedative, Daryl remained on guard, watching the doctor working to straighten his starched white collar, rubbing at his neck. No consequences came...couldn't tell if that was ’cause the doctor was scared, pride hurt, or what. Laying back in bed, feeling drained from the small effort, Daryl felt his own limitations...knowing he had to take the day, needed it if he was gonna be any good out there to Beth. Wouldn't help nothin’ if he just fell down and died.

Clearing his throat, seeming to regain his composure, Darden backed off, but kept on talking.

"Your prognosis is good. You are strong and healthy. As far as your healing process goes, you'll have a pretty prominent scar, but I don't guess that matters much to a man like you." He was right, even though it was an assumption.

Didn't matter. His scars were there for good...who he was. And this one...this scar...he'd been fighting for Beth.

"It would've been a lot less noticeable judging from the remnants of the original closure I saw, and the interior layer of stitches, they were exquisite. Whoever...whatever doctor did that job, hands like that, we'd be lucky to have them for our surgical team."

"Phhh..." There was no way Daryl was gonna be unaffected by that. "It wasn't a doctor. It was my wife. Not a doctor...just a girl. Beth..."
"That ain't mine," Daryl barked at the orderly who extended an old-man plaid shirt to him. The nurse...he knew her name, but didn't care...finishing taping up his healing wound looked up at him, raising an eyebrow. "It ain't mine," he informed her just as fervently.

There was no reason to be mean to her...he wasn't being mean, but she wasn't Beth. Wasn't gonna adjust his attitude for him. He was grateful to her. She'd been trying to help him...trying to help him get better so he could get outta there...so he could find Beth. She didn't know that part, but that's what she was doing. Even so, she had no power over him...to look at him and soften him.

"You didn't come in with a shirt on, just an undershirt, and with the bloody state you were in, I don't think your shirt could have been saved." Smoothing the last edges of the bandage down, she was finished with him, and Daryl was finished with having strange hands on him...finished with being touched.

Didn't she know nothin'? Hadn't she been out there either? Clean clothes weren't really a priority. Blood, guts, dirt...none of it mattered. None of it mattered as long as you kept breathing and kept your family alive. And that shirt was his. He wasn't gonna take no more from these people than he had to. Wasn't a charity case. Wasn't gonna owe nobody nothin'.

"What, are you just gonna stand there and gawk? I said it ain't mine!" Daryl spat again before the orderly finally retreated.

Well, at least he had his own pants all washed and dried. Going to pull his boots on, he was feeling all light headed and woozy...hadn't had his feet on the ground in over a week and a half. Had barely even been able to pull his pants on, get zipped up and buttoned before the nurse came in to change his bandage before he left, and he'd been leaning on the bed for that. Now she was seeing just how affected he still was.

"Here, let me..."

"No, I got it." He wasn't weak. Wasn't gonna let nobody think he was neither.

Daryl frowned to himself, stepping into his boots, just wanting to get the hell outta the damned hospital...didn't need a woman to dress him. But he had let one...Beth. He let her button his shirt. First time it happened...never knew something like that could be so intimate and so very confusing. Told her she didn't have to, but then didn't want her to stop...watching intently as those delicate little fingers went to work on the buttons.

"As clean as it's gonna get." Daryl straightened with effort, Michonne who'd arrived on scene passing him his shirt...the shirt he ran in.

He had the distinct urge to growl mine and officially claim the thing, but just taking it instead, happy to have it to put on so he wasn't sitting there half naked or chancing anyone...Michonne seeing the scars on his back.

"Thanks..." It was half-hearted. Didn’t have a whole heart for anything. "You didn't have to come to get me. I would've found my way."

Michonne just raised a skeptical eyebrow, both of them knowing that wasn't the truth. "Here, put your coat on. It's cool out. You don't need to catch a chill."

Daryl did. But it had nothin’ to do with the temperature, just that it was his coat, his vest...his.

"Maggie's back at the house getting your room ready and lunch put together. Glenn's signing your discharge papers..."
"I can sign my own papers." What, did these people living in their perfect world think he couldn’t write his own name?

Somehow, being in such a clean, unaffected place put him on the defensive...made him feel like the way it used to be...what people used to think...of him.

"Hmmph...no, you can't. The only way they're releasing you is to the care of your family."

It was hard for him...being released into the care of anyone...but he was being released after his little convincing conversation with the doctor. That was all that mattered. But then it got even worse...the shirt pushing orderly pushing something totally different...a wheelchair...through his door, Ty following with a the shit's about to hit the fan look on his face.

"Get that thing the hell away from me. I ain't an invalid. I can fuckin’ walk." Daryl barked.

"I...it's hospital policy...discharged patients...patients with injuries..." Man knew he was risking his life and limb explaining policy Daryl didn't give a shit about.

"We got this. We take care of our own." Tyreese ended the discussion as he shouldered into the hospital room to stand near the bed by Michonne. His deep voice, not loud...not aggressive, just him, cleared the room of orderly and nurse alike.

Daryl was grateful, knowing when he stood, he was going to falter...didn't want strangers to see.

"Easy now..." Tyreese's hand supporting him.

"I got this," Daryl tried to resist the help.

"And we got you."

Wobbly on his feet, Michonne's hand caught him in the chest to offer momentary balance. "Let's take this nice and slow."

"Are we ready to roll?" Glenn didn't mean nothin' by it, but it sounded like a crack on the wheelchair he refused, and Daryl wasn't handling humor...any sort, real or imagined...well. He wasn't handling anything well at all, his face making it clear. "Are we good to go?"

He was feeling it, not the injury, that pain was all but gone...just sore, but what the infection and being in bed did to him, drained his strength...took away his ability to take care of himself.

Outside the hospital doors, it was a whole different world.

"Whoa, hold up a minute..." Daryl needed to stop, couldn't keep going without leaning anymore on Ty and Michonne, and he didn't want them to know how bad off he was. But he was gonna use it as an excuse to have a look around...try to get a hold on the situation.

The sun was gentler than the stark lights in the hospital, but still the change left him squinting and blinking like Punxsutawney Phil drug outta his hole on Groundhog's Day. Scanning his surroundings, it was an odd hodgepodge of a community, little homes all alike with small yards, an expanse that at one time seemed to have been empty meant for more development now the white trash section, set up with what looked like temporary trailers...FEMA maybe...that became permanent residences, and what was probably supposed to be a pretty little park at the center of it all, now a garden still growing winter crops and farming sun with its field of solar panels. There were people, strangers going about their daily lives, looking all oblivious to what the world was really like. Hell, this was a regular Apocatopia. But these people were stupid, all their smiles, happy, thinkin’
they were safe...they had no idea. He'd let himself be like this, and both times he...the people he loved got fucked for it...at the prison and then losing his home with Beth. Wasn't gonna happen again. Wasn't gonna stay long enough for it to happen. Wasn't gonna get attached to nothin’ or no one. There was no place for him here...no reason.

But he did need to see some things...know some things for however long he was gonna be staying. He saw the perimeter. The chain link topped in razor wire looked like it went up first, then an inner wooden stockade with sniper nests and guard stands towering over it all. They were manned too...with uniforms...actual uniformed soldiers at the perimeter and the gate, men wearing fatigues or tacticals. Whatever was going on here, they had a system. Daryl didn't know it...didn't like how it was feeling though...felt like a clear definition between civilians and soldiers, the weak and the powerful. He almost asked Are we prisoners?, but he caught sight of Glenn's pistol strapped across his chest, glancing to the side and seeing Michonne's sword over her shoulder too. So they had their weapons; they weren't prisoners. And he knew at least one point of escape...the gate he saw...but it wasn't enough.

"Where are the other points of exit?" Steady and standing more on his own, Daryl tried to take in everything he could that was immediately vital to survival.

"Just the two gates, this one," Glenn indicated the one he could see already. "And one to the south. That one isn't used at all, apparently just for in case of emergency or official evacuation. People don't come and go a lot though. It's safe here."

"Pfft...safe," Cynicism wasn't getting the best of him...it was instinct and survival now. Naivety was gettin’ the best of Glenn.

Daryl didn't like it. Didn't like it at all...too pretty, too clean. Beautiful things never lasted. But he didn't have time to think on any of it too long...needed to move...needed to start walking with them instead of just standing there. God he was weak, leaning on Tyreese, Michonne close at his side in case he needed her. Hershel had his leg hacked off, almost died of blood loss, but a couple days later, he was up on crutches moving around on his own, and he didn't even have the benefit of medical care. Hershel was a tough som'bitch. Tougher than he'd ever be. The Greenes, they were a strong breed...Beth was strong. He needed to keep reminding himself of that.

"This is us."

Finally pausing in front of one of the little houses, two family homes he could tell now...duplexes...was that what they were called? They'd gone maybe a quarter mile and Daryl was spent, even though once he'd gotten moving, he didn't feel all that weak…not ‘til they stopped. Maybe he just needed to be up and about.

"Ty, Sasha, Bob, Abraham, and Rosita are on that side, and this is us."

Daryl did the figuring in his head...that meant Tara was part of us, and if Eugene was still breathing...which he probably was, cockroaches never died...that meant by default, he was part of us too. Couldn't put Abraham and Eugene together if they wanted to keep Eugene alive for whatever reason. Didn't matter. Just needed a place to lay his head for a bit, get some strength back. He wasn't staying, he kept reminding himself.
He knew he put someone out of their room, but Daryl was beyond any point of caring. Maggie stayed sitting on the bed longer than she needed after shoving the pills down his throat. It was a hard pill to swallow, not the meds, he needed those...but the fact that Maggie was the one sittin’ beside him and not Beth...that they were all still together, safe, but Beth was out there God knows where, having to face everything without him.

"It's like my heart's been ripped out...Beth...I just found her again. Now she's gone." Maggie was suffering too, but she didn't need to tell him what it felt like to have his heart torn to shreds. Beth was the one who taught him how to feel...how to love. Without her, he didn't have anything. "And Rick, Carl, and Judith...Beth...the heart of us is gone."

The pills were taking effect quick, or maybe it was that he had absolutely nothin’ left to give and was in a place where he felt he had to rest...his eyes were so tired. Couldn't keep 'em open. He needed it...chose not to fight it. Gave himself until tomorrow 'cause he had to.

Never been one to open up much to people...except Beth, but somethin’ was loosening his tongue.

"She saved my life. She saved me. In here.” Fist went to his heart in the middle of his chest, still beating for just one reason...he was gonna find her.

Maggie gently swept the hair out of his eyes. He didn't see it coming, jerked a little, but stilled himself. If he pretended, it could be...he remembered Beth...her touch. Even when Maggie's lips brushed his forehead, he didn't shy away.

Was that the nature of the way things were? Maybe he knew it...he'd lost a lot in his life, just in his life since the turn, not even accounting for what it'd been like before. It was how people kept breathing. They moved on and moved on quick, but they shouldn't just forget. That was exactly what they were doing though. The laughter...that's what was gnawing at him. Any poor animal caught in a trap would chew its own leg off to preserve its life, but that didn't mean it didn't feel the pain, didn't lick its wounds, and carry that loss with it ‘til the day it died. It didn't stop surviving, but it was scarred. Two weeks...maybe two and a half since they lost Beth, Rick, Carl, and Judith, and they were laughing.

It didn't help none that last night he'd woken to the sounds of Maggie and Glenn screwing in the bedroom next to him, meds worn off and every fiber of him engulfed by the betrayals and inequities of the world...layin’ in a cold, empty bed trying to block ‘em out. Even when he drifted back to sleep, his dreams were dark and troubled. He fought himself the better part of the morning, wanting to turn down the breakfast Maggie brought him, but knew he needed to eat, so he did. Then it was the fight between his body and his heart. He needed to recover...he wasn't ready, but he needed Beth, needed to find her more. He'd already lost so much time...the days tracking, the hospital, not remembering how long he'd slept since he'd been released into the care of his family, hazily remembering Maggie making him swallow pills a few times...but he couldn't help it...couldn't fight it then. Now it was time to go. Nothing could stop that urgency...that desperation and need. Getting dressed, the only things he still owned were on his body...clothes, coat, vest, knife, handgun with an empty clip tucked in his waistband...maybe he'd find ammo somewhere..., his crossbow across his back, and his ring. It was who he was, and it always seemed to come to this.

Picking up his meds, he wasn't gonna let this shit get the better of him again...messy script scrawled
across generic orange bottles with no label.

**Antibiotics 2 x Day.**

**Pain 3 x Day As needed.**

**Sleep 1-2 At Night.** Daryl threw that one across the room, banging against the far wall.
Sleep...sedation...same thing. He'd been there too long...lost in a world where he had no power to save Beth. Not anymore. Shoving the other bottles deep in his pocket before heading out...

But then there was the laughter...

Standing in that kitchen doorway, seeing people not just surviving...not just breathing, but living...Daryl was boiling inside. Cookies...they were making cookies...not even making cookies, but wasting food...food that was given to them. Maggie screeching and giggling, dodging a handful of flour launched by Tara, Glenn getting covered by it instead. Going in for retaliation...Glenn who knew what it was to do without food...they all did...grabbed his own fistful of powder white ammunition, aiming at Tara who ducked behind Eugene for protection...Eugene the human shield. Hell, that was all he was good for.

"Now Glenn, let's consider this reasonably. I am not trained in the art of diplomacy, but it seems to me that every cup of flour ration that flies through the air as a most ineffectual projectile severely diminishes the prospective cookie to person ratio. Is that something you are willing..." Pork Chop's negotiation ended with a face full of flower; then as he wiped it away, he felt Daryl's glare, getting all fidgety seeing him standing unmoving in the doorway.

Daryl had plenty of words for 'em but didn't even know where to start. Eugene shifted nervously under his disapproving stare, sensing the lethality in Daryl, and he had every right to be afraid. Busted up face from Abraham givin’ him the beat down when the truth came out about the mission was still healing, but it hadn't been enough.

"Daryl...should you be up?" Maggie's voice only half registered, her question and concern meaning less than nothing to him.

And how the fuck was he supposed to take her seriously covered in flour?

There should only be one thing worrying her, and that was Beth...her sister, but that concern didn't seem to be on the agenda today. Maggie was here playing **Suzie Homemaker**...and Beth, she was out there either fighting for her life covered in blood or dead...

No! He hated himself for even thinking it. She wasn't dead. She wasn't. Beth was strong.

"We're making cookies. Everybody loves hot, gooey cookies, right?" Tara emerged from behind Eugene, trying to diffuse the situation like an abashed child. Did she forget...forget what she did? Forget that he knew...saw...that he'd been ready to put a bolt through her when he finally realized she’d been standing with the Governor? And she had the guts to talk to him?

Cookies. Hot gooey cookies...

"When I was little and my mom was havin' a good day, that is before she died, she used to make these really awesome oatmeal butterscotch cookies." Daryl closed his eyes tight for a minute, and he could almost smell them, taste them so hot outta the oven that they burned his hands and mouth, but they were so good it didn't matter.

"And you know now how homemade cookies are the little precut squares in the packages you get at
the store and cook at home...no these were the real homemade kind with the measured out flour and sugar and everything. I know for the world you come from, that's how things always were, but for me, that was special." He paused a minute realizing he was neglecting his dinner, took a bite, wiping the grease from his chin, and glancing over at Beth who was intently waiting for him to continue.

"I used to sit and watch her cook, and everything just seemed so perfect and normal in those moments...nothin' else mattered...and my mom...she made 'em extra special...she put chocolate chips in with the butterscotch ones too. Always on my birthday and Christmas, I knew I would get em..." Daryl trailed off, realizing how much of a deal he was making about stupid cookies.

Daryl swallowed the lump of emotion and cleared his throat to mask it.

"It sounds like a really good cookie," Beth offered with sincerity. She reached over and squeezed his lower arm to comfort him. It felt nice.

How in the hell could a fucking cookie tear at him like this? But it wasn't the cookie, it was telling Beth...what he shared with her...everything he could...and now...

Refusing to shed a tear for them to see, Daryl's sharp eyes shifted from Tara to Maggie, back to Tara then to Glenn, thinking on what was traded off for this girl. Hershel's life...Hershel's life for her? Tara...so quickly accepted as Beth's replacement...a replacement sister for Maggie. Merle...well, Daryl's relationship with his brother had been complicated at best, and Daryl accepted Rick as his brother when Merle was gone, but Merle was blood, and Daryl still felt his loss despite everything. Beth was sweet and good and kind, deserved better than just being forgotten by her own.

"Pfft!" Daryl turned away, ready to head out, not willing to waste another second of his time...Beth's time on this bullshit.

"Daryl, hey...wait..." Glenn caught him by the arm but removed his hand pretty quick when he realized he was more like to lose it than to stop Daryl from moving. "What are you doing?" Giving him a good look up and down, seeing he was geared up and ready to go.

He didn't owe them an explanation. They should be able to figure it out for themselves...but it was the closest he was gonna get to sayin’ goodbye and go to hell.

"Goin’ after Beth."

"No, you're not ready." Glenn actually placed himself between Daryl and the way out.

He didn't want it to come to a confrontation. Didn't wanna hurt Glenn, but right now, Glenn was standing between him and finding Beth. Not a good place to be.

"We've been waiting. When you're better, I'll go with you. We all will, but not today."

"I'm fine. And I'm better on my own. You stay here and take care of you and yours." Bitter...so bitter.

"We're family. We take care of each other." Glenn insisted, thinking that made the difference...and it did, just not the way he thought, Daryl assessing Glenn's new family...Tara and Eugene.

Glenn had taken the same stance before, right after Merle and him escaped from the Governor, Daryl reunited with his brother when he thought he'd bled out somewhere...the last of his blood. Glenn called Daryl family, but didn't want Merle nowhere near. And now, Beth...she was Maggie's blood, Glenn's sister by law, but she wasn't worth nothin' anymore. Now that she was his...he dirtied her...
"Hmmp...family? You mean like Hershel?" Daryl glared at all three of them in turn, Glenn, Maggie, and Tara...Eugene excluded from this one 'cause he had absolutely nothin' to do with it. "Funny thing about family with you, isn't it?" Back to Glenn. "Merle...my blood...you wanted me to abandon him...and after we got back to the prison, me and Merle saved Rick's ass, you all still locked him up like an animal, like when you all left him handcuffed to that roof in Atlanta. I ain't never begged nobody for nothin', but I asked you to forgive Merle, and you might as well have spit on me."

"Daryl...he held a gun to Maggie's head. He beat me...set a walker on me. And the Governor...he almost...what he did to Maggie…"

It wasn't doin' neither of them any good getting all worked up, but what had to be said was gonna be said.

"He died tryin’ to save our asses.” It might've been the only decent thing Merle ever did, but it was all that mattered now.

"It could've never worked. He was with the Governor. He was going to give Michonne to the Governor."

"Michonne...that was Rick's plan. Rick came to us. Came to me...wanted us to do the dirty work so you all could live and didn't have to have a guilty conscience!"

"The Governor was going to kill us. He almost did!" And Glenn hung his own argument there.

"Almost..." Daryl's voice cracked thinking on what kind of impact that word had. "Almost killed you...but the Governor did capture Hershel...he did kill Hershel...he did hack off Hershel's head. Not almost! Merle left the Governor. Chose to fight against him when he was stronger than us. Chose to die to try to save us, give us a chance. But she..." Daryl pointing an accusatory finger at Tara, "...she stood beside the Governor when he murdered Hershel. She fought with him, stood with him when he destroyed everything. She didn't choose to leave him. She stood with him 'til he was dead, and now she's standing next to you...and worst of all...you're standing with her."

They didn't say nothin’. Maggie was almost in tears over her Daddy, Tara not knowing what to do, Glenn keeping his mouth shut either 'cause he didn't know what to say or knew better than to say anything. Eugene...Eugene was still and silent, trying to stay outta the line of fire...coward.

"You're standing here with her while Beth's out there, and you ain't doing nothin’ about it. Beth...your sister, the one who stood beside you at the prison behind that fence watching the Governor putting your Daddy on his knees before...before he..." Daryl couldn't finish that, but Maggie started to open her mouth to say something...it was too little, too late. He wasn't gonna listen. "Don't worry about Beth. She's your blood, but she ain't yours anymore. Pfft! Beth deserved better."

Fuck 'em all. Daryl had no problem turning his back and walking away.
Chapter 81

Chapter Summary

~Author's Note: Happy 4th of July to everyone in the United States! As always, thank you all so much for coming back to read the updates to this fic and leaving your comments. I really do appreciate each and every one of you, and the comments make my day! I hope that you enjoy!~

"You pull that trigger, you best pray I'm dead."

There was no fear in Daryl. The man...boy holding the gun to his head, for all his bluster and pretty uniformed confidence, he'd probably never shot a breather in his life, and Daryl knew he wasn't gonna be the kid's first.

Leaving proved a little...a lot more difficult than he anticipated...fucking protocol and security excuses that he didn't give a rat's ass about felt like control. It didn't matter how pretty the prison was, if you were locked in, it was still a cage. If Daryl had been at the top of his game, he would've just backed off and found his own way out...but he wasn't, and the way these dumb grunts were treatin’ him...there was no way this was gettin’ done without a confrontation. There were a few other soldier-soldier types standing by, some looked older and more seasoned, hands on their side arms, but it was like they were letting the kid handle this little inconvenience. Daryl wasn't backing down, and the kid's finger was starting to tremble on the trigger, doubting himself.

"What the fuck is going on out here? Second day back from my ass-kicking R&R outside that perimeter, and things are already going FUBAR?"

A door slammed on what Daryl knew had to be a little command and control center behind him...saw it on his way up to the gates, watching some uniforms comin’ and going.

The kid's eyes shifted, paying attention to the wrong thing, Daryl knocking the gun flying, fist met face, puttin’ the ROTC wannabe on the ground.

Boot crushing the chest beneath it, Daryl crouched low and feral, knife kissing soldier boy’s throat.

The rest of the camouflaged compatriots were takin’ Daryl pretty damn seriously now, sights trained on him. They might be soldiers, but observation and real life survival skills gave you the upper hand every time.

"Just open the gate and let me out or your boy here is gonna be breathin’ blood."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa...everyone just stand the fuck down. Holster your weapons." Yep, he was the man in charge...the one everyone was listenin’ to on approach, guns all tucked away nice and neat.

"And why don't you let Campbell here up and we can see what kind of terms we can come to. No reason whatever this is should've escalated."
This one was tryin’ to diffuse the situation by treating it as an annoyance but knowing it was a threat. Keeping cool. That was smart.

"How ‘bout I keep G.I. Junior here as my insurance policy ’til you open those gates?" Daryl meant business, and he sure in the hell wasn't gonna give up his leverage, but he did pull his blade back a little so it wasn't prickin' the skin anymore, red droplets dotted across the kid's neck.

"Let's start with this. Who in the fuck are you?"

Daryl assessed the man barking at him. He wasn't loud because he had to be, he was loud 'cause he could be. Crew cut, straight squared-off stance, he was a soldier through and through...formidable like Abraham except this one had the bearing of a leader, control from before the shit hit the fan. But Daryl wasn't one of his butt boys ready to kiss the ass of the brass. He’d be defiant to the end.

"I ain't none of your business. Open those gates, and I'm already gone." Daryl spat.

"Well, you see, you are my fucking business, and you're not already gone. I'm the Head Mother Fucker here, and this is MY gate, MY business. This gate is to keep you in and the dead out. You don't get to come and go as you please 'cause you threaten the security and integrity of my perimeter...defeat the whole damned purpose of brining you in in the first place. You go out there and get yourself bit, you're another dead son of a bitch we have to kill. You go out there and panic, start popping off rounds, you draw more to our location. Civies don't do field trips...don't get day passes either, the end, that's it...goodbye."

Was that spew supposed to change his mind or get them anywhere? Daryl narrowed his eyes, waiting for someone to make a move on him...try to take him down. His new friend stepped in a little closer...intimidation tactic, but it didn't work on Daryl. Straightening though...straightening so that they were on equal footing, replacing his blade with his boot at the kid's throat...that was where he fucked up, hand instinctively goin’ to the still sore tightness in his side made tender by the effort of this useless confrontation. Their leader's observant, sharp eyes didn't miss Daryl's physical admission of weakness. But he didn't say anything. Didn't act on it neither or draw anyone else's attention to it, just appraised him quietly for a moment.

"Let's try this again? Why don't I know you?"

"He came in with that big group of survivors about two weeks ago." Another soldier offered.

"You spent some time in the infirmary?"

Daryl didn't feel obliged to answer that question; it seemed like a foregone conclusion anyway, watching his eyes drift down to his side he'd been holding then back to his face...Daryl's lips twitching.

"You the one who tried to rip everyone's throats out while they were trying to patch up your sorry ass?"

So, maybe the doctor hadn't been exaggerating about him going all hostile with the staff when they brought him in...doc said that too...about ripping throats out. Then Daryl had done the same thing again to try to secure his timely discharge from the hospital...help the doctor see eye to eye. What, did they write up a memo on him and circulate it?

"Only one that I remember. And I wasn't really tryin'." Probably should've kept his mouth shut; the head honcho chuckled though. He didn't take a step back, but his stance was less aggressive.

"Please tell me it was Dr. Darden. I hate that self-righteous prick. He's a necessary evil, but he needs
to be put in his place."

"Mmm-hmm." It wasn’t nothin’ but the truth…

That’s when the tension broke. Daryl realized he was gonna have to take a chance and give something if he wanted to get somethin’ in return. Pressing his boot down just a little harder against the boy’s throat to drive home what he was gonna say…

"You draw on me again, your brains are gonna see the light of day."

"Let the boy go. You’ve established your dominance."

Daryl held on a second longer, letting go on his own terms.

The bullet sponge rolled away once freed, choking and sputtering, cradling his throat.

"Campbell, pick your sorry ass up. You're a disgrace. Go clean yourself up and wipe that blood off. I'll strip you of that uniform and send you back to food distribution before your blood drips on it. We don't bleed inside the fucking gate."

One of his comrades dragged the kid up, then all eyes were back on Daryl.

"Everyone else stop gawking. Back to your posts. Show's over."

"You gonna open this gate?" Daryl just needed to get out, goin’ straight to the point.

The commander gave him another good look up and down trying to gauge him.

"Tell me something. You came in with your family...your group. Why do you want out there so bad?"

"My family's out there." It was the most painful reality he could imagine...not just being separated from Beth, but he was the one behind fences...relatively secure by the looks of ‘em...not safe, but secure as far as he could tell, and Beth was out there. She was out there in the wild with nothing but Rick, a boy, and a baby. And if she thought he was dead, she would die for them, die to protect them instead of fighting to live for him like Daryl made her promise.

"A woman?"

"My wife." Daryl didn't know if it was the way he said it, or just the word and its meaning, but the soldier soften and sighed.

"The way things work here, the only people who come and go through my gates are my people. My sweep teams and my asset recovery teams. My fighters..."

Daryl wasn't lookin’ to be recruited, and that was what this was starting to sound like.

"I ain't plannin’ to come and go, just go..."

"You're going to want to come back if you can't find her. Your group is here. And who knows what my crews will find out there."

He didn't get it. If Daryl didn't find Beth, he wasn't coming back. He didn't have a group anymore. Didn't have anything. Daryl didn't say nothin’, didn't know what to say, watching the stranger pull the radio off his shoulder.
"Protocol. We're on channel two. This one's fresh charged. Radio has a good long life if you don't use it. With the terrain around here, we get about ten miles range."

Taking it just because it was being shoved at him, Daryl wasn't planning on putting in any calls for help.

"We radio in when we're four miles out. No surprise arrivals. We try to keep our tours out there to less than two weeks."

"There ain't no 'we'. I ain't one of you, and I ain't gonna be."

"If you come back, if you plan to walk through those gates, you bring something useful back with you for trade. That's the way this is going to work." Just ignoring Daryl's resistance.

"I ain't workin' for you." Why in the hell was he not just keeping his mouth shut. Needed to let the asshole say whatever he needed to say 'cause Daryl was getting what he wanted. It was just that it wasn't in his nature to submit.

"Do you plan on going out there with just that crossbow and a knife?"

"Mmm-hmm." No one saw the pistol he was packing under his coat, but there weren't any bullets for that anyway. "Never needed nothin' else."

"Broken Arrow."

"Huh?"

"That's your designation." The head man was smiling to himself like he was entertained by his own wit.

_Designation_. Daryl narrowed his eyes.

"Your call sign. Everyone on my asset recovery crew has one. Most of them are just numbers, but I'm not going to have you break that chain if you go rogue. Broken Arrow."

Daryl didn't need an explanation. He knew what a designation was. It might hurt his pride that people still thought he was some dumb inbred redneck, but it was better to be underestimated.

"I ain't part of your crew..."

"Everyone who goes out there..."

Designation. They were trying to brand him.

"I got a name." If it was comin' to this, he'd rather tell than be regulated to what someone branded him.

"I know. I know who you are. You're in my reports. I told you, this is my gate. I know who comes and goes. It just took me a little while to put two and two together, Dixon."

Okay, that was great...his gate, Daryl got it. He made that very clear. Daryl was trying to play nice, get that fucking gate opened...itching to be free.

He was done with drama at gates...so done.

"Hey, Rivera, that tan SUV, is it gassed up and ready to go?"
What the hell, was he ignoring him now, calling out to one of his grunts?

"Yes, Sir, I believe so."

"Bring it on up to the front for Dixon here."

What? They were giving him a car? There had to be a catch. He didn't like catches; felt like he was caught already.

"I don't need a car. It ain't mine. Just open the fucking gates." Daryl was losing patience he didn't have to begin with.

"Well, it's not mine either. It apparently came in with your group, and it's junking up my motor pool. We're still working off of military issue here, and I plan to keep it that way."

Vaguely remembering something mentioned about cars...something about finding cars after he found...stumbled on Maggie, Glenn, Michonne, and the others...

"And let's be honest...it's not being weak, but you need a car. You won't get five miles out there without falling over. If you want to find what you are looking for, it'll get you back to the beginning faster."

*Back to the beginning.* He needed to get back to the beginning, where he first chose the wrong path, made the wrong turn. If you were gonna do something, there was no point to do it if you weren't gonna do it right, and to track right, you had to go back to the beginning.

"Gas can with 10 in the back, Sir, and map with home marked in the glove compartment." The driver passed the keys off to his commander after pulling around, then the keys were relinquished to Daryl.

"I don't know if this helps, but my reports say you and your people were picked up sixteen miles out. Follow this road here until you get to the first paved crossroad." He pointed out ahead of them as if there was another road he was gonna mistake for this road here while Daryl put his bow in the car.

"Take a right. Go about nine miles, and that will be your point of origin."

Daryl nodded, didn't say thank you, but it was a small appreciation.

"You got a name?" Stepping up into the SUV, wanting to know just in case he ever needed it...unlikely.

"I told you. I'm the Head Mother Fucker."

"Pfft." Must've been a military thing.

"Maddox. I'm Maddox." Catching the car door before Daryl could slam it and spin off. "Good hunting, Broken Arrow."

"Dixon." Daryl insisted. "Name's Dixon."

"Good hunting, Dixon."

* * * * *
"Keep moving. Just keep moving...Come on...Don't look back...Keep moving. Just keep moving...Come on...Don't look back..."

Those were the words she heard over and over and over again, Rick a broken record, dragging them forward...always forward...keeping them moving, just trying to stay one step ahead...ahead of the world. She didn't say anything. Carl didn't say anything. Beth's heart wanted to protest, wanted to call Rick on his promise, but she knew...knew they couldn't fight through them...through the walkers to go back. If they could just get a little further ahead of them...room to breathe...then...then they could go back for him. But there was no going back. Maybe there never was. Even though Rick said he would...would help her get back to Daryl...help her bury...

There was no going back.

They were chased. So much that Beth forgot what not having to run was like. So cold. So tired. So hungry, only eating what scrawny winter animals Rick was able to catch with his bare hands or snare if they had a rare moment of respite...no bullets left to save their lives much less hunt. There was nothing to scavenge...Beth never knew there was so much wilderness in Georgia. Georgia. Or maybe it was that they were being chased in circles, wider circles, smaller circles, maybe crossing a path they had already traveled but never on it long enough to realize...get their bearings even if there were bearings to be got...just trapped in their own personal circle of hell.

There were times Beth imagined what it would be like if they could go back home. Could they draw the walkers out? Shut the gates and secure them? Food. Supplies. Weapons. Judith and Carl would be safe there. They could grow up. And she...she had memories there...memories that they had lived. They had loved. But she was worse than useless. She didn't know where they lived...where home was...didn't know her address so she couldn't point it out on a map if they had one...if they could even find a road. Beth hadn't even been awake when Daryl brought her home that first and only time. She just woke up in the warm embrace of a safe haven he had secured for them...a gift...a chance given to them against all odds. Maybe it never existed. Maybe it was all a dream from the first...too good to last...

Time passed. Everything...even time stopped mattering, except maybe days. It came down to days...just surviving, making it, sometimes just minutes or seconds...just fighting to stay alive.

There was no going back.

It was like Daryl was just gone, like he never existed, the only pieces of him left were what she carried with her-his poncho, her wedding ring...those silver wings she would trace and caress to make sure it was still there...and what she held close inside her...that love that had been so real.

But her dreams...nightmares...Daryl was there every night...seeing it in her head. Daryl being ripped to pieces, watching it like God from above or sometimes like she was standing in the middle of that herd beside him but could do nothing to help him. They didn't just bite him...they tore at him, stripped his flesh clean off the bone, ate him while he was alive...watched...Daryl fighting. Fighting...fighting made it worse...prolonged the agony...but Daryl...Daryl always fought to the end, Beth praying in her dreams that he would just die, sometimes screaming it to him. Die. Please, Daryl, I love you...just die...Please die... What kind of life was it that you wished the person you loved most dead...when death was the kinder fate? But Daryl fought...and he never screamed. He never cried out, but Beth...she did...

Beth's nightmare...tonight it wasn't about Daryl...spared the horrific images of his drawn out death that her mind conjured for her as punishment...punishment for leaving him, punishment for not being strong enough, punishment for daring to love. No, tonight she dreamed of falling, not of any fall in particular...just of falling, falling into the black, that fear and helplessness. She didn't hit the ground,
startled out of sleep before her body smashed and broke...startled even more by the memory that seized her the moment her eyes popped open and she came to consciousness. Carol. Beth remembered. She saw her face in that hood, the face she saw that night so clear like she never forgot...like the image never slipped away...like she knew all along. Carol let go. Carol let her fall. Carol tried to kill her.

Nobody kept watch while they slept anymore. It was a risk, but when they had the chance to sleep, nobody had enough strength or energy to give up that rest, and having been out in the open so long...now, even in sleep, instinct would alert them to danger. So cold, all huddled close together, Carl cuddling Judith between her and Rick, Beth saw him. Rick was awake, moon just bright enough that she could see his concerned gaze from where he was laying across from her on the ground. Shaking her head, trying to tell him she was okay without bothering Carl or Judith, it was a lie, and not a very convincing one. Beth needed space. Any distance was dangerous in the dark, but she didn't go that far away, just sitting on the cold ground with her back turned to everyone.

Carol. It was her face...the face of a mother that stared into her eyes, that face that went to stone solid resolution as her decision was made and Carol just let go.

She just let go...

Carol...Carol could have been her mother. Carol tried to kill her...Beth sniffed back her tears, breath going ragged...everything...it was all just too much. She was trying to be strong, trying to harden herself for the life she had to live, but she still felt it.

Rick stayed away for awhile, letting her alone in the dark, but actually hearing her distress must’ve drawn him. She’d been pretty good at hiding her emotions since...but she wasn't always strong. Especially in the quiet...in the calm...when there was time to think. Night was the worst. When he sat down beside her, Beth didn't give Rick a chance to try to find irrelevant words to comfort her when they would do no good. She was just going to go straight to the heart of it, try to purge it so she could move on.

"It was Carol. Carol was leading the walkers. She let me go...tried to kill me."

"I know." There was no inflection in his voice.

Beth wasn't surprised though, remembering the night she fell from the wall, when the whole group was reunited, Daryl confronting Carol, Rick asking her if it was Carol...but she couldn't see her face...not then...

"Maybe I did too...I just didn't want to believe...even after everything..." Carol killed Karen and David...Carol tried to kill you...Beth remembered thinking it that night, but she wouldn't let herself believe it, wouldn't let herself be influenced by Rick's prompting.

Beth, was it Carol?

She knew...Beth knew then, in her gut. She should have gone with her gut like Daryl always did. The surprise in Carol's face when she saw she was alive, the fearful reaction Beth had to her...it was instinct. What would have been different if she just said yes? Would Daryl still be alive?

"I promise, you never have to see her again." The gesture, it was there, but it didn't mean anything.

Beth picked at the frayed threads around the hole in the knee of her jeans.

"You can't promise that..." She wasn’t a child. She’d experienced the cruel realities of the world, more than her fair share, and she knew the truth...the world always found a way to break
promises...except Daryl's...

*I promise Beth...I'll keep you safe until I die...*

That promise was kept...bought with Daryl's blood...his life, and it broke her.

"If we ever see her again, I will kill her."

Beth had nothing to give Rick in reply. The bitter part of her thought Rick would do it to vindicate himself...for the choices he made as a leader, actions she could never understand. Allowing Tara to join the group after being with the Governor...with what happened to Daddy...accepting Carol back after he chose to banish her for killing their own people...not telling Daryl about anything...why he did it. But that feeling of being betrayed, that hatred she harbored toward Rick...those feelings couldn't matter any more. That past...she couldn't think on it; it hurt too much. She didn't want a future, but if she had one, it was wrapped up in Rick and his family. The painful now was what she had to deal with, and she would allow herself the small comfort of that promise, despite Rick's motivations.

"Hey, Beth...look at me." Rick insisted.

He must have sensed her anguish...felt her just giving up. She couldn't see his face in the shadows, that meant he couldn't see her, but she turned to him anyway.

"I will kill her. I will finish what Daryl started. I will kill her for what she did to you...to Daryl..." Voice cracking and faltering. It had been a long time since Beth heard emotion of any sort in Rick's voice. He'd made himself hard so he could survive.

She wanted to tell him that it should be for Daryl, only for Daryl...not her. Carol caused Daryl's death...but the men, they had their codes, the reasons they fought, breathed, and killed. Either way, dead was dead.

"Carol killed Daryl..." Beth had been bearing so much of that guilt...causing his death...killing him. If she hadn't been so stupid, if she hadn't traded watches with Tara, if she hadn't thought it was him coming over the wall, if she hadn't fallen...but this wasn't all on her. Not anymore. Maybe it had never been. Rick's arm around her shoulders drew her closer in warmth and comfort. "She killed us all."

"We're not dead." He was trying.

*Yet.* They weren't dead, but they were getting there.

Rick eventually went back to protect his children and keep them warm through the last dark hours of the night to the promise that she would come back soon. Alone, Beth just stared off into the pitch black of the woods thinking...cursing Carol...hating her for being right.

*The wild calls to him...Daryl is eventually going to leave. It might not be today or tomorrow, maybe not even next year, but one day Daryl's just going to head out into those woods and never come back...*

It didn't go exactly like that, but Daryl was wild, a creature of instinct. His instinct to protect her...it killed him. He did leave...he chose to leave...die...so she could live. The wild called to him, he answered, it claimed him and took him home.

*You don't know Daryl. He can't belong to anyone.*
He never really belonged to her...in her world.

Four miles out. How in the hell was he supposed to know where four miles out was? It was his first time back...retreating to base in failure. He hadn't planned to come back if he didn't find Beth, but then, thinking...hoping, just hoping maybe to find Beth waiting there for him. If he ended up there, what if she found her way there too. It wasn't a risk he could take, not going back. He had a map, knew how to get there, but it wasn't like he had the miles marked out for him. It wasn't until the fence appeared on his horizon that he realized four miles out was about three and a half miles ago.

"Comin' in," Daryl radioed the gates.

"State your designation."

Fuck...what was he supposed to say? Screw their games. He didn't have time for this. Never did. Other little boys played king of the fort with their walkie-talkies out in the woods, but when he was a kid, he was out with Merle, learning to be quiet, hunting, just trying to survive and find food to put in his mouth.

They weren't kids; they were supposed to be men...survivors.

"Dixon."

"State your designation." By the time their little game of *let's be soldiers* was at its peak, Daryl was slowing down. "State your designation or be fired upon."

"God dammit, everyone cool your heels. Let's not draw every fucking corpse down on our location and start WWIII. We don't shoot friendlies. Open the gates, and let Dixon in. Come on home, Broken Arrow."

Radios went silent, no challenge of that order.

*Broken Arrow*...remembering now...his brand irked him.

"Next time, let's try not to come in so hot. Protocol's there for a reason." Maddox was harping at him as soon as he stepped a foot outside the car.

"They're bolts, not arrows." Not being around people for a long while then suddenly having someone all up in his space made Daryl confrontational.

"Huh?"

"Crossbows. They use bolts, not arrows. *Broken Arrow* don't even fit. I'm Dixon." Denying the name and attacking what Maddox originally thought was a witty designation was small satisfaction. But he was smiling even more now.

"*Broken Arrow* has nothing to do with bows or crossbows or arrows or bolts or whatever you want to try to make it out to be. A *broken arrow* is a nuclear incident that didn't hurt anyone going off and no one knew about. Dixon, you're my nuclear incident that nobody knows about."

Daryl didn't know if that made it better or worse, just shrugging it off...he was just there for a second,
shouldn't even have come inside the gates. Just needed to know...

But he did drive through, so he was gonna pay the price, pay his entrance fee so nobody could claim he owed them anything. Reaching in his pocket, grabbing his extra mag, fully loaded, he slapped it down in Maddox's hand.

"I ain't staying...I just came back to see...any new people?" Daryl was afraid of the answer he already knew.

There wasn't much reason to ask. Maddox would've told him straight away if a woman, any woman had come in. Or maybe he wouldn't have. Daryl didn't know him at all, but it felt like he was a decent person despite their tension. Fuck it. That kind of thinking was likely to get him killed. A shake of the head confirmed that Daryl's trip back had been a waste of time, but he had to try. Nodding, Daryl was ready to head back out again.

"You got enough gas?"

"I'm good. I can take care of myself." Truth was, most of Daryl's searching was done on foot out in the woods. And he didn't need nothin' from nobody.

"Hey! Daryl." Abraham calling didn't surprise him. It was just that he wanted to head out, didn't even really want anyone to know he'd been there to start with.

Daryl decided to go and meet him halfway so whatever was gonna be said was said in private, giving Abe a good look up and down.

"They offered me a uniform. Didn't trust me as a civilian. And it's better than being the town drunk with my dick in the dirt." Abraham tried to make light of it, but Daryl could see in the way he carried himself...in the way he held himself that he needed this...this purpose.

After Eugene...the mission...after losing everything driving him, Abe needed a reason to go on. And still not knowing what was going on in this place, not knowing their system, not trusting it or even having a grasp on everyone and their motivations, it was good to have an inside man just in case. Abraham, this man who had been both friend and foe in turn, oddly enough, Daryl trusted him. It might come back to bite him in the ass, but there was trust. If anything, if Abe was gonna try to kill you, he was gonna let you know, was probably gonna tell you ahead of time. He wasn't just going to stab you in the back...betray you.

"You leaving? You just got here."

"Mmm-hmm...just came to check in...see if..." Just saying that he came to see if Beth made it in on her own was an admission of his failure, adjusting his bow over his shoulder to avoid.

"No sign of her?"

"I made it back to the road...where we camped that first night and left the cars when we had to run. There was a little bit of a trail from the herd, but even that...it went cold pretty quick." Daryl had spent days and nights just stabbing blindly into the woods knowing he wasn't going to find anything but running on faith.

"Where now?"

He didn't know why Abraham was so interested or why he was wasting time he could be searching to talk to Abe, but maybe Daryl needed to talk it out, just get his thoughts straight.
"I'm gonna try and back track from the point where I caught up with you guys." It was a much longer track back to the point where he lost her, but it was the only thing he had to go on now.

Abraham pulled his gun, trying to pass it to Daryl.

"Take it. I know you didn't have any rounds in yours when you left. If there was a fraction of a possibility that you could have a negative amount of ammo, that would be now."

Daryl refused it, nodding back towards his SUV, not the same SUV he left in.

"I found the cars we left on the road...the one that Rosita, Eugene, and Tyreese came in with the kids." Abe nodded, remembering there had been a stash of guns and ammo in that vehicle...little help they'd been then. "I didn't want to come in loaded down too heavy. I'm not gonna trade more of what's mine than I have to."

Daryl didn't need to make a show of what he acquired out there by packing more weapons on his person than he left with.

"Anything you want to say to anyone? I can play messenger boy."

"Nope."

"Daryl, your wound?" That one was still personal to the both of them.

"I'm right as rain." It wasn't even a lie anymore.

*                      *                      *                      *                      *

A hand thrown up stopped them in their tracks. Rick just a little ways in front of her, Carl behind, Beth ready to turn and run...knowing that not being chased, not having a million walkers on their trail for a day was too good to be true. It felt like they were nearing their end, no food, no shelter...the walkers never got tired, but they did. It was inevitable. No...Rick didn't turn to run...not this time. He signaled to Carl, gestures that apparently only men were genetically predisposed to understand, Carl looping around behind while Rick moved forward. She got her signal though, stay put with Judith.

Rick's low whistle a few moments later beckoned her into a little clearing with a panel van covered in vines and brush, an equally overgrown campsite, and two apparent suicides.

"It's clear. Why don't you and Judith rest a bit." While Carl and I get rid of the bodies.

He didn't say the second part; Beth knew but just didn't understand why he was trying to protect her from the realities of the world, even if they were ugly. It didn't get much more horrific than the things she had been through...seen...but she was beyond fighting with Rick.

The smell of death and decay was heavy, but it didn't bother her anymore, not like it should...even instinctually. Blood, open wounds...that was what instinct noticed now...what they feared because of the danger it posed, what it drew...the walkers...their eventual death. Even the smallest scrape, the tiniest trickle of blood...she could smell that iron tinge, a damn panic alarm set off inside...but not with the smell of death. Not anymore.

"Do you think they were hippies?"
Beth was pulled from her thoughts by Carl's cheerful tone, watching him and Rick sift through the pockets of the bodies before they disposed of them.

"What? Do you even know what hippies are?" There was lightness in Rick's voice too.

"Yeah, Mom said Grandma and Grandpa were hippies, and Grandpa had a van like this in the garage."

"Hmmph." Rick reached out flipping the brim of Carl's sheriff's hat up. "Come on, help me grab his feet."

"Maybe you're a hippie. Hippies have long hair." Carl continued.

"Yeah, well, have you looked at yourself in the mirror lately?" Chuckling, Rick glanced over at Beth, giving her a small smile.

"Well, at least I don't look like a crazy, homeless grandpa."

Carl...Carl was just a kid...resilient. They bounced back quick. And they had found a moment of respite...maybe a little shelter in the van while it lasted...a few days, she could pray for that, but Rick...his laugh...his smile. He was moving on...no more grief...forgetting Daryl. Everyone was moving on, but she couldn't...wouldn't.

Work...keep busy...she had a job to do. She just had to stop thinking and start doing. Judith on her hip, Beth tried turning the key in the ignition...but nothing...before she ripped the rearview mirror off and went to start a fire. Judith was sitting on the ground beside where she knelt, Beth catching the sun in the mirror, the light reflecting through her shard of glass...the broken bottom of a bottle...catching her tinder on fire. Blowing on it softly, watching the tiny curls of smoke start to rise...Daryl, he was the one who taught her this...how to start a fire, to survive.

"I'm tryin'..." Whispering to Daryl...he wasn't there, but...

Tears. She had to stop crying.

"Here." Beth hadn't noticed Rick until he crouched down beside her, offering her a lighter. Did he hear her? If he did, he didn't saying anything.

"No, I've got it. Save it for when we don't have anything else."

What he held out next, in his other hand was a gift she couldn't turn down...five bullets. Beth snapped them up without even thinking...were they for her?

"There was a partial box left. They're 9 mm. They'll work with yours and Carl's...well, mine too. I've got their gun now..." Indicating the corpses they dragged out of sight. "We've got fifteen shots between us. We don't shoot unless we have to."

That went without saying, but Rick still said it.

Loading her empty magazine, racking a round into the chamber, Beth was so intent that she missed Carl presenting his rare find to Rick.

"Georgia Peaches. Pure. Natural. Organic. Hmmph." Beth had slipped her gun back in her waistband and pulled Judith into her lap by the time she tuned into Rick's lighthearted words, cutting the can open with a knife meant to kill. "I sure am glad they're organic. I don't know if Beth would eat them otherwise."
Eat. Food? Food, she realized as Carl brought her the can smiling. Greedily pulling out a soft peach slice, not for herself...Judith's little baby hands getting all sticking from the juice, pushing the soft sweet fruit into her mouth. The baby eating made Beth feel just a little less empty. Getting a few more slices for Judith, her own hand turning sticky, trying to pass them back to Carl and Rick, they both turned her down.


"None of us ate yesterday." There was no way Beth was going to be the only one eating, especially instead of Carl...a child.

And Rick couldn't afford to get weak if he was going to keep his children alive. She should be the last priority.

"Yeah, well, you didn't eat the day before either." How was Rick even keeping track of the days anymore. It was too painful.

"I'm not all that hungry."

"Eat. Please, Beth." Now Carl was on her about it.

The peach was heaven, so sweet, wanting to savor every last flavor on her tongue, she chewed slowly...such a treat, but as soon as she swallowed, she went nauseous at the memory it evoked...

There were peaches...peaches one night with Daryl, a night in front of a fire...a night before their first kiss, before that first I love you, before those wedding vows. Beth remembered the peach juice sticky on her hands...she could see it sticky in his beard too where it dripped down. Thinking that the night was so perfect that she could allow herself to forget all the trauma...that it seemed like they were just two people camping, sitting in front of a fire on a warm autumn night. She allowed herself to pretend, and this was where it got her. Daryl dead...

They were watching her sob. She couldn't make herself numb to it. They might be forgetting, but her memories were too strong. They had no idea what to do with her...how to comfort her when they didn't know what happened...didn't understand what triggered this breakdown. Trying to cover, not that she really could, Beth just kept feeding Judith...crying but feeding the baby who was squishing peaches between her little fingers, cooing and gurgling now because with food and warmth, all the problems in her world disappeared.

"You're a good mom, Beth. Look at Judy smilin'." Carl was trying. He was sincere, and the fact that he, a little boy who lost his mother...Judith's mother...said that to her, it didn't make everything better, but she felt it. "And maybe you'll have your own baby someday."

Beth's hand flew over her mouth to cover the tortured gasp his words elicited. He was just a kid...a kid trying to make her feel better...he didn't think about how much those words would tear into her.

"You want children?" Beth was hesitant in asking...

But Daryl, what he said, about how he would protect her above all things...

"No matter who we're with, other people or Rick, Maggie, Glenn, and all the rest of 'em, you come first for me, your safety above all others. The only time that would ever change is if there were... The only time that will ever change is if there are children. Then I will do whatever I have to do to protect my family."

...he was the one who was thinking about that future...a future she always wanted but never
considered...never really stopped to think it was something she could have after the world fell apart or Daryl would want. And everything was so new between them...just a few kisses. But his answer was honest...

"Yeah," Daryl offered just as hesitantly as she had asked, like he was waiting for her to shoot him down. "Just 'cause I had a messed up life don't mean I don't want kids, that I couldn't be a good father..."

He was the kind of man who deserved to be a father...the kind of man the world needed to be a father.

"I know...I've seen you."

She had meant with Judith, seeing what he did to ensure that she would live, seeing him take a newborn baby into his arms. That night, that conversation, there had been sadness in Beth at the thought they lost Judith, but now, here she was, Judith and Carl's surrogate mom, Rick's charge or whatever she was...and Daryl was dead...

Carl couldn't understand the gravity of his words, but Rick did.

"Carl!" Rick admonished as his son looked like he was coming to try to comfort her stopped dead in his tacks. "Leave Beth be."

Daryl would never hold his own child...never have the chance to be a father. She would never give Daryl that...she would never carry their baby. She would never bear a child of her own. She wouldn't allow it...never wanted to be close to a man again...certainly was never gonna let another man between her legs. Judith was the closest she was ever going to get. Daryl too...but it wasn't the same. It could never be the same...

"But Dad, I..."

"What in the hell were you thinking, saying something like that to her..." Rick had drug Carl away from the fire, chastising him...a harsh whisper she wasn't supposed to hear. "Think. Don't speak. We've talked about this lesson for life before."

"But I..."

"Don't speak. Think. Beth's not thinking about a baby. She just lost someone back there..."

Someone. Someone?

She didn't just lose someone back there. She lost her heart. Her life.

"Beth...she's going to be okay isn't she?" Carl asked his dad, worry setting in.

He wasn't just someone. He had a name. Daryl.

"I don't know..." It was an honest answer at least.

"Daryl..." They might not say it, but she would, if only for herself.
Chapter 82

Chapter Notes

~Author's Note: Thank you so much for reading and commenting. It really makes my
day to be able to share Beth and Daryl's continuing story with you guys. Have a
wonderful weekend!~

God, she was beautiful...and he'd failed...failed so many times before he lost her, but that smile, and
those eyes...those eyes never saw him for what he knew he was. She'd loved him...loved him that
day. Had there really been a time when he tried to push her away...doubted that love for even a
passing moment?

"Hey, Dixon..."

The door downstairs slammed shut, and Daryl's moment of remembrance...that morning in the
snow... was broken. Rubbing the cool surface of the silver frame with his calloused thumb...it was a
picture, it was only a picture, but it was everything.

"Up here..." Hearing Abe's heavy boots pounding the stairs two at a time once he replied.

He'd needed a wingman for this, knew it...but couldn't take someone he couldn't trust. Anyone
who'd been at the prison...anyone who'd been through the war with the Governor, watched Hershel
die and knew Tara was part of it...well...there were clearly some major trust issues and feelings of
betrayal there. Abraham...he and Abe hadn't started out so great, but lately they began to see eye to
eye. And he had gone over the wall for Beth when Carol dropped her off the side...did more for Beth
than her own family was doin’ for her now...risked his life for her. That made them good in Daryl's
book.

Daryl borrowed Abraham, took him on a day pass...well, more than a day, but Abe had been more
than willing to come, and Maddox didn't have much objection. Daryl was still tryin’ to figure him
out, this Maddox character who gave him so much leeway. Daryl wasn't playing his protocol games,
wasn't following the rules...even when he just came to the gates to check in, he pushed everything to
its limit, pure defiance. It had to be a strategic move. He had no idea what was going on inside those
fences, but Daryl knew enough to know that by now, if not from the beginning, the community and
its security forces knew that his group was an asset. Michonne, Glenn, Maggie, Rosita, Sasha, even
Bob were probably showing their true colors by now. Hell, Abe already put on a uniform, and like it
or not, Daryl was part of that group...if just marginally. Even to have them loosely tied to the
community was an advantage. They would fight because it was where they were living. Maddox
couldn't afford to alienate Daryl. Even the doctor talked about the group's pack mentality and
extreme loyalty to him when he was brought in at death's door. That was probably in a memo
somewhere too even though Daryl wasn't feeling that loyalty much anymore, especially when it
came to Beth and the lack of effort to find her. That didn't matter to the community though...Beth and
his feelings for her. The survival of their haven did.

It was pretty clear, even from his small observations limping out of that hospital, that there were, at
least before they arrived, two kinds of people living tucked securely behind the walls. Civilians and
soldiers, and they seemed to be, more or less, mutually exclusive groups. By all accounts, they were
no strangers to bringing in strays, but by the looks of it, once those strays came in, got a cute little
house in suburbia, and got all cleaned up, they forgot what was out there, and everything went back
to normal...the fight left them if there had ever been fight in them in the first place. But they...Daryl,
Michonne, Abe, Glenn, Maggie, most of the rest, they were a whole different breed...not civilians,
not soldiers. They were survivors. As much as he hated to admit it to himself, hating Maggie and
Glenn for their domestic bliss and cookie baking...they could do that, but if the shit hit the fan, they
were fighters...survivors, and would always revert to that, no matter where they were. That was
something Maddox had to know and couldn't afford to lose, and suspending protocol and rules for
Daryl must've been the tradeoff...a tradeoff he was willing to make. So, borrowing Abraham had
been no challenge at all.

Then the task had been simple enough, even with just the two of them. They parked the car some
distance back so they wouldn't attract any walkers going in. Went through the woods, around the
stone wall...had to go in quiet...no bullets, that would make it complicated and more dangerous...just
bolts and blades. Daryl was in a pretty bad place with bolts...down to just a few, having lost
some...left a few along the way, but he had enough green winged saviors that he could make ‘em
count. Up and over the wall, it was all about movin’, getting through, Abe taking those closest to
them down hand to hand, Daryl clearing those at long range until his bolts were gone, then both of
them cutting a path to the stockade. Up and over the inner perimeter, Daryl to his cache of bolts in
the house, and it was as good as done.

Going back out there, Daryl standin’ up on the stone wall, Abraham on the ground drawing them in,
it was like shooting fish in a barrel, an afternoon’s diversion. And Abe, he was getting something he
needed too, down there in the heat of everything, obliterating the walkers coming at him. He
could've sat up safe on the wall while Daryl took ‘em out nice and clean, but he'd never seen
someone actually enjoy killing these things so much. When Abe finished his last, he smiled up at
Daryl like a fucking maniac.

All of it...clearing the walkers inside the gates took them...just the two of them maybe a little more
than an hour. The inner perimeter hadn't even been breached. Nothing inside had been touched. The
sanctuary that was abandoned...it had never been lost to start with. It should've never been left
behind. Maybe they could've made it back. Daryl...his rage boiling inside...knew that Carol making
that decision for everyone, just jumping ship...coming after them, that had to have been what lead the
herd to the location where they all met up that night, chasing them further and further from safety and
life.

Abraham offered to go back for the car and shut the main gates while Daryl cleared the house. There
was nothing to clear. They both knew that. Abe was just givin’ him time, and Daryl took it...took the
time...took his time, wandered the house like he was clearing it. Seeing it...seeing it all where they
left it...life...the life he thought he was gonna make with Beth...he didn't feel like an intruder, not like
that first time he walked these halls, he just didn't belong here without her. It took him forever to
even think about heading up those stairs, scooping up Beth's go-bag that sat in the corner under the
fancy little table by the front doors...things she wanted to take with them in case they had to run at a
moments notice. But even bein’ prepared for emergencies didn't mean shit anymore.

Their room...their picture...the morning of their wedding...he remembered, let himself get lost until
Abraham interloped.

"Main gate's shut. We missed a few over by the stable. They got in. The horses are gone." Abe went
on, not knowing the quiet moment he'd interrupted. "Looks like a few horses broke free, might've led
some of the walkers away...but they got to the others. At least the horses didn't starve."

"Mmm-hmm..."
"It's getting dark. There's no reason to high tail it outta here. We'll stay the night."

Daryl looked up nodding. They could make it back in the dark, no problem, but he needed to stay.

"You want me to bunk in the guest house, keep an eye on things down there?"

It was one of two things, Abe trying to give him space in his own place or the memories of the hostility between them that had occurred here.

"Nah, better to stay close up to the house tonight."

"You gonna eat something?"

"Later." Daryl just needed some time.

"I'm gonna take a little evening constitutional back down to the guest house before it gets too dark, put together some of Rosita and my things for when we head home tomorrow."

"Mmm-hmmm."

"You know, it wouldn't hurt anything to get some of Beth's stuff together to take with you so she can have it when you find her."

Daryl cocked his head looking up at Abraham, thinking it odd that Abe wasn't just assuming Beth was dead. That seemed to be his general MO. If someone wasn't right there beside him, that person was out of his line of sight...out of his concern. Remembered hearing him say that about Beth, Rick, and the kids when he was laying beside the road, thought he was dying, and Abe was trying to get them all to head to DC.

You save the ones you can. He's here...you can try to save him. They're not here, and you can't do anything about that.

"Your family...Beth...at least she isn't running from you..." That was odd too...and Abe's voice...Daryl remembered something else Abraham said...didn't he...was it really a memory?

I was gonna look for Beth. I was gonna try to make it right...The smell of whiskey was intertwined with that memory...everything else was a haze. It was like a conversation he never had, but he knew the words, and knew there were more words to go with it...and sadness.

That sadness was in Abe's voice now too...wounded...near trembling, but Daryl wasn't gonna press...wasn't even gonna ask, too caught up in his own grief to care about anyone else. "No, she just thinks I'm dead-saw me die."

"Better you than her. She thinks you're dead, but you're not. If you thought she was dead, you wouldn't be looking, you'd be off self-destructing. The world threw you a bone, Dixon. You still have a chance. That girl out there has two things going for her. You and Rick. If anyone's gonna survive this, it's her."

Eyes back to Beth...that frame he still held so carefully in his hands. Abe was right. It was the best he could hope for...that didn't mean Daryl had to like it. He just had to believe. Nodding.

"If I don't see you, we'll plan on heading out first thing, sun's up guns up."

Alone again, sighing, somehow Daryl knew Beth wouldn't be here...in his gut knowing Rick wouldn't risk tryin’ to come back, even though they could've with as little effort as it took to clear the
place. But even if there was the smallest chance...he had to try. He couldn't find nothin’ in the woods...nothin’ tracking back from where he found the rest of the group, and the more time that passed, it wasn't just that trails got cold and signs disappeared, it was that either Rick and Beth got further away or closer to him. Since he hadn't found them, hadn't seen any new signs, that meant further away. After every failure, Daryl went back to that damned apocatopia...back to those gates, hoping that Beth would magically appear and be waitin' there for him, hoping maybe Beth found her way there on her own or even that some stranger did his job better than Daryl and saved her, brought her in...but nothin’...back on the road each time.

Truthfully though, even knowing Beth wouldn't be here...wouldn't have made it home, he came back for this...the proof that they existed...he had to have them. Not this one, carefully replacing the silver frame on the nightstand; that picture belonged in their home. But Daryl rummaged through Beth's bag, finding the envelope with a copy of each picture they had taken. Holding them in his hands...it was all he had.

And they weren't just pictures of them together; there was a picture of him sleeping that had startled him awake in a new place, still so instinctual and wild, pinning her to the bed; pictures of her in bed from that same morning, the first morning they woke up together in this house...their home. Daryl had never noticed before, maybe since he'd only ever seen the ones she'd framed, that she'd written on the back of each of them. Her handwriting was unfamiliar to him, but it was hers...he knew...and his name written in her script...it made his heart shudder. His name in her script. Her name in her script...

*Daryl Dixon Sleeping in Our New House. Georgia. November. Two Years After the Turn.*


*Daryl Dixon and Beth Greene. Morning in Bed. Georgia. November. Two Years After the Turn.*

*Wedding Day. First Snow of the Year. Georgia. November. Two Years After the Turn. Daryl and Beth Dixon.*

Daryl saw it...the moment Beth realized she wasn't a Greene anymore, when she became a Dixon...when she wrote it...wrote her name...took his name as her own. They went from being Daryl Dixon and Beth Greene to Daryl and Beth Dixon.

Stowing all of the pictures except one away, slid in the envelope, back in the bag for safekeeping...the one he singled out...the one of Beth in bed. She was...so angelic. That one, it had been a trade for Beth to keep the picture she took of him sleeping, but not really a trade at all...just a beautiful moment from a life that was now deferred if it even still existed.

"What's fair is fair..."

"No...I look horrible...I'm a mess." Beth tried to escape, but it was no use. He didn't even know why she was tryin’.

"Shhh..."

*Daryl gently arranged her mussed hair around her face, bringing some of it up over her shoulders, letting it spill through his fingers as he watched it fall.*

"You said we're makin' memories...I wanna remember this about you...wakin' up next to you..."
Daryl thought about what Abe said, packing some stuff for Beth so she would have it when he found her, even went as far as heading over to the drawers, but stopped. No...he wasn't gonna pack up her stuff. He didn't need to take anything with him tomorrow when they went back. This was their home. When he found Beth, this was where he would bring her. This was where their life was. She belonged here with him, even if it was just the two of them for the rest of their lives. That life...her wishes were confirmed by the last things they'd said to each other...

"I'm sorry, Beth, I can't..." He couldn't stay with the group...he couldn't belong anymore, not after...

"We'll go...let's go now..." Not a hint of doubt in her voice.

"I tried. I tried to make it work...but the group...this group...now I can't..."

"No...shhh..." Beth tried to soothe him. He was holding her close, trying to protect her from monsters he couldn't fight...betrayal...but she was the one doing the calming and comforting. "We'll go home...we'll just go home. We'll get there. We'll make it together." She promised.

"Beth...what if that life...our life there's gone?"

"If it's gone, it's gone. We'll keep fighting. We'll make it together. That house isn't life. We're life...this is life." She kissed him then...that last taste of her lips...

It wasn't enough...that kiss...but the world didn't care about that...ripping them apart.

Stepping off his boots, sliding under the covers...his bed...he needed sleep. Her pillow...it still smelled like Beth, her shampoo and the faint scent of the vanilla cupcake lotion that she loved and used so sparingly, but under that...it smelled like pure Beth. And the bed...it smelled like them. Them together. Closing his eyes and pulling her pillow tight...breathing her in...alone in their bed...

We'll keep fighting. We'll make it together

He had to keep fighting.

*                      *                      *                      *                      *

"Carl." Beth caught his arm. "Your Dad's got this."

Rick took off into the woods to handle what sounded like just a few walkers, to take them out before they got scent of them. She wasn't going to have Carl go after him and fail at her one job...protecting the kids. She also wasn't prepared to have Carl head off and leave her alone with a baby.

"If it was only one, he should be back. He might need my help." Carl's hushed whisper was part impulsive boy, part honorable young man. Beth would use that...appeal to the honor in him.

"We need you here. I need you...Judith and I..."

They took a stance to protect each other as heavy footsteps through the tangled brush got closer. Rick emerged from the denser part of the woods, nodding that all was clear, wiping the blood from his knife onto his pants before sheathing it, an action that was so Daryl she could see it in her memory like he never left her. There was something in Rick's face...something he needed them to know...no, not them, he was focused on her...and not needed...wanted to tell, begging for her
attention.

"It was just two of them."

"Okay." How was she supposed to respond to that?

"Carol. One of them was Carol."

Carol...Carol was turned? No...she was dead now. She couldn't hurt anyone anymore...no more betrayal, no more lies...Beth was left without words.

Rick sounded vindicated, like he'd avenged Daryl and righted the wrongs that had been done to her. But there was something different than vindication in his eyes and the slight height in his cheeks. Was there more? Something else he needed to say? Beth had never been as good as Daryl when it came to reading people, but she was intuitive, maybe even more so now, it being a necessity to survive. There was something more, but he decided against sharing it.

"We need to find a place to make camp. It'll be dark soon." Whatever he was withholding...the signs of it slipped from his face.

"We should bury her." Beth didn't have a chance to consider if that was actually something she wanted or was even willing to do, but despite everything, that was her innate response, the last vestiges of her inherent humanity still able to overcome the darkness and despair of their world.

"No." There was no negotiation, Rick unmoving on the issue, and Beth's goodness...her will to fight disappeared, or maybe everything was balanced by the fact that Carol's fate was deserved. "All that matters now is the living..."

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It was calm, almost peaceful sitting by the fire watching Rick poke at it with a stick. Carl beside her had taken Judith to give her a few moments of relative solitude. Snuggling under Daryl's poncho close to the flickering flames, Beth was grateful for it, not just because of it's warmth or because it was his...still smelled like him...but because under its protection, she was able to hide. Her sunken stomach; hips so thin that the skin stretched over bone was sore from being rubbed mercilessly by her rough jeans and tightened belt; arms wrapped around herself, ribs protruding sharp from beneath the surface; and her spine felt like it was just waiting for the right moment to cut itself out of her back. The hunger had been biting at first. Pretending to eat, just having a taste here and there...enough to convince Rick and Carl she was eating, Beth gave the majority of her meager portion of whatever food they had to Judith then left the rest for Carl and Rick. Sometimes she was so hungry that she was sick, nauseous, but there was nothing in her stomach to throw up. Other times, when there was food...when she had gone without for days, it was the same. Her stomach turned just at the thought of eating or even the smell of food or cooking.

She was still hungry, but it wasn't painful anymore; she just felt hollow. Beth wished it would've turned out differently...wished Rick could have found them a place to hole up in time, get some supplies so they wouldn't be so cold, hungry, scared...tired. She would've lived to take care of Carl and Judith...doing her job...the only thing that mattered, her only reason to keep breathing. But as it was, she was doing what she was supposed to, what she knew was right. They couldn't fault her for that. Rick told her not to waste Daryl's sacrifice, and she wasn't. He said that Carl, Judith, even he
needed her, and she was there, doing the only thing she could.

Beth was at peace with it...somehow even more so knowing Carol was gone, finding comfort in that sense of justice. Did that make her a bad person? It didn't matter...not anymore. Having faced the trials of life the best she could, trying to do what was right, trying to keep faith and hope...loving, when she took her last breath, only God would be her judge. Daryl was dead. Hugging herself just a little tighter, Beth felt a brief sadness wash over her...sadness for what could've been, but realizing they were never going to survive. Love...they just weren't meant to be. She just wished it wouldn't take so long...that it would be over soon.

"We need to find a road." Rick's voice drew her out of her sad reverie. "We need to find a road and get our bearings."

Carl's attention was piqued by the notion, and Beth was listening just because, well, her journey was with them for the rest of her life, as much or as little of it as she had left.

"If they're alive out there, they're on the road to D.C. It's the only point of reference everyone has. They wouldn't have gone back. It is the only place we all know to go." Finding Carol must have motivated Rick, knowing somehow they had crossed a path that part of their group might have traveled.

"But you said we just need to find a place to stay the winter. Get our strength. Judith needs somewhere. And Beth...she's..." Carl glanced at her worriedly, bucking his dad by taking his stand. He was trying to be the voice of reason now, knowing how hard being on the road to anywhere was...they'd been there before...and knowing now, having no place secure to rest for just a little, how broken and fragile they all were.

"No. It can't be just us. We can make it on our own...but we can't. And Beth has family out there."

Rick was invigorated by his new direction, a fire burning behind his eyes, not just a reflection of the flames in front of him.

This change in plan was sudden and drastic...in principle. It wasn't that they weren't trying to find a road, get their bearings...their plan wasn't to be lost in the wilds of Georgia for the rest of their lives. The problem was, they always seemed to be on the run, not really choosing their paths, just running the opposite direction of the things that were chasing them, not thinking...just moved by instinct. But now, something inspired Rick and gave him hope.

The novel idea of seeing Maggie again crossed her mind. The last of the Greene blood reunited one final time. Would Beth be able to say she loved her and forgave her? Family. Rick wanted to get her back to her family. Did she even want that anymore? Her family...Daryl was gone. The rest of them, maybe it was best if they remembered her at all that they remembered her as she had been.
Chapter 83

Chapter Notes

~Author's Note: Hey Guys! I hope everyone is having a wonderful weekend. So, here is the next chapter of Daryl and Beth's journey. Warning...it does get a bit dark, but remember, there is always light at the end of the tunney. Even if there is sadness, I hope that you enjoy the story being told here about Daryl and Beth being forced to navigate a life without each other...seeing their evolution, their strengths and weaknesses. This chapter may seem a little jumpy or fractured at times, but that was the feel I was going for to try to convey what the characters are experiencing. And if you are in need of some fun, lighthearted, Beth and Daryl fluff with substance, you should definitely check out my good friend DoeRoseQ's series "The Adventures of Beth and Daryl" if you haven't already. They way she presents Beth and Daryl's story is very unique, and her attention to detail is painstakingly beautiful creating a very vivid world in which Beth and Daryl live. Her work always makes my heart so warm. As always, I hope that you enjoy this chapter. Your readership, support, and comments mean the world!~

Something about having been back home...something about feeling close to Beth's goodness and light made Daryl not just stop at those gates and let Abraham out, but he paid his own entrance fee. Two .45s with full clips.

"That enough to come in?" Daryl brusque with Maddox.

"Mmm-hmm." Maddox appraised him, seeing Daryl geared up and not trying to hide what he had.

Gun at his hip, new shoulder holster heavy too, bow slung across his back...well that was expected...the crossbow. He also expected Daryl not to radio in until right before he hit the gate even though he had Abe with him, expected him not to use his designation, but what he didn't expect was Daryl actually wanting to come in...wanting to stay. He didn't say nothin’ though. Abraham shifted into military mode again as soon as they passed through the heavily guarded entrance, asking Daryl to take his stuff and Rosita's down to their duplex when he headed that way, and left Daryl to work his deal.

"Hit the jackpot, did we?" Looking Daryl's offerings over, then looking him up and down again.

"Something like that." He sure in the hell wasn't divulging where his stash was...where home was...even if there was more of a question implied. "That enough to stay for the night or not?"

"That depends on what else you got stowed in there."

"Pfft!" All that was ever said was bring back something useful, nothin’ was said about getting a cut of everything. "Here..."

Daryl grabbed the shotgun from between the front seats, tossing it to Maddox followed by a box of buckshot. It was something he was planning to make payment with anyway. "For the use of Abraham."
"You don't have to pay for borrowing Ford. That was just a favor."

"I don't need any favors." Favors always came with a price.

* * * * * *

He hadn't seen anyone except Abe since he left that first time...after the hospital, going off on Maggie and Glenn, and well, it'd been what...close to a month, maybe just a little less. Anxiety had never really been his thing...just avoided people, and anyway, he didn't plan to stay long. Do what he came to do, eat, sleep, just stay the night, then start out again fresh in the morning. He parked his car out front the little duplex. If Michonne hadn't been outside honing the edge of her sword, he would've never found it, a house in a row of identical houses, the kind of world he never wanted to live in...buy into. He had the urge to just sit in the SUV, feelin' uncomfortable, like an intruder...outsider. What if they didn't want him here? He didn't belong anywhere anymore...not without Beth. And they...they probably just all moved on. But that stay put in the car option didn't exist, Michonne standing, waiting eagerly for him to emerge.

"You're back." She didn't ask about Beth...knew better than that.

"Not back, just here." Grabbing Beth's bag...his prize. "How are we with weapons? Ammo?"
Straight to the point, reverting to the only purpose he could possibly serve for them.

"We have what we came in with. They issued us what they give all the civilians which isn't much. Most of their munitions are reserved for the military."

Nothin' he didn't expect...was surprised they let people be armed at all. Tossing her the car keys, Michonne caught them with her cat quick reflexes.

"Take what's in back. Just leave me some ammo and my bolts." Daryl had added more to his rolling armory from the cache back home. "And there's a bag back there with some of Abe's stuff and Rosita's. Will you get it out for 'em?"

"Where'd you get this?" Michonne questioned, lifting the hatch in back.

"Home. Anyone else here?" There was no need to go into any explanation; didn’t give Michonne a chance to ask for one.

"Everyone should be getting back soon." Looking up at the sky, she was judging time. "It was my day off."

"Hmmph. Back to the daily grind." Days off, livin' in the 'burbs...everything went back to normal for them. Normal normal. But this had never been normal for him.

"Maggie's here though. She's a mess." Michonne stopped sorting through the treasure in the back of the SUV, moving in close to him, lowering her voice even though there was no one else around to hear. "They won't give her a job because they think she's unstable, and with nothing to do all day except sit in there alone, it just makes everything that much worse. Some days she only gets out of bed to walk down to the gates and ask if they brought anyone in or if you came back with any news."

Part of Daryl was vindictive enough that he was glad Maggie was hurting, but the thing causing the
"Losing Beth twice...again..." Michonne just stopped, realizing that what she said...Maggie lost a sister, but he lost everything.

"She inside?"

Michonne nodded, Daryl forcing himself up on the porch, knocking.

"You don't have to knock. It's home."

"No, it ain't." But he didn't wait.

Michonne was right. Maggie was a mess, halfway to the door by the time he set his bag on the couch and pulled his crossbow off. Her hair was a tangled mat, clothes wrinkled, face drawn and pale like she hadn't seen the sun in months, dark sunken circles under her eyes. She was livin’ the good life, and this is how she looked? But she threw herself at him and hugged him...hugged him hard...unexpected with the way they’d parted. Daryl put an arm around her just to balance them.

"I'm sorry..."

Hell, it wasn't him that she should be apologizing to, but Daryl tried to settle himself, remembering that this wasn't why he came. Gently pushing her off...could only handle so much contact.

"Beth...?" Her voice quavered asking, taking a step back and giving him his space.

_Dammit, Maggie._ Why'd she have to ask that? She knew. If he found Beth, Maggie would've been hugging her sister instead of him, and now she was forcing him to answer a question she already knew the truth of, shaking his head _no_, copping to his failure. Maggie's eyes were glistening with tears as she collapsed to the couch.

"I..." it was awkward for Daryl, Maggie sniffing and sobbing...never knowin’ how to handle this kind of shit. And especially coming fresh from being out there. "I got this for you."

Sitting down beside her and the bag, he fished out one of his precious pictures, holding it out to her. Maggie reached for it hesitantly until she realized what it was, snatching it out of his hand.

"You...you went back for this?" She wasn't lookin' at him anymore, eyes glued to the image of Beth...her sister.

"Mmm-hmm." Sighing, realizing how hard it was to relinquish this...this rare memory, but reminding himself that there were others...

Maggie was Beth's blood. Despite her transgressions against Beth, despite replacing her sister with Tara, she deserved to have something of Beth.

"It's a good one of her...but then I don't think she was capable of taking a bad picture. I'm in it, but you can cut me out." Going salty was the only way he could protect himself...hide his vulnerability, swallowing the lump in his throat.

"Was it still there...your house...?" She couldn't manage talking about Beth long.

"I cleared it. It just took me and Abe. There was no reason they should've left. We could've gone back...we all could've gone back.

"Where is she, Daryl." Maggie lovingly stroked the surface of the photo like it was Beth, real and
tangible, before she pulled it close, puffy eyes shifting to him. "Is she dead?"

"She ain't dead!" He couldn't sit by her anymore. This was a bad idea..."She ain't dead..."

But she could be...dead.

\emph{I promise Beth...I'll keep you safe until I die.}

That promise, it kept coming back to haunt him...it had been a lie. He couldn't protect her...couldn't keep her safe now. In those last seconds, when he thought he was going to die, when he forced Rick to abandon the group to take Beth and keep his promise...if Beth was dead, he signed her death warrant...he killed her. He ensured that he would never see her again. If Rick just stayed, Rick, Beth, and the kids would've run with the group. He would've found her with everyone else. He would've been with her here, alive...together.

But they all made it. Glenn, Maggie, Michonne, Tyreese, Sasha, Bob, Abraham, Rosita, even Tara and Eugene. He made it. Carol...Carol was dead, but Daryl killed her...it had been nothing to do with walkers or the dangers of the world...it was an execution. They all survived against the odds. What were the chances that everyone...Beth, Rick, Carl, and Judith were all going to make it too?

"She ain't dead..." He stopped pacing, standing his ground even if he was having to convince himself.

"She's not...she's not dead...you have to find her." There was just a little spark of life in Maggie's voice.

"I'm tryin’..." He was trying...trying so hard.

\emph{Don't show your weakness...}

But his broken words, his bowed head, squinting his eyes closed to stop the wetness...they all gave him away.

"I know...You...you've searched for her longer than you were married to her." What in the hell was this...what was that supposed to mean? That 'cause he could count the times he held her, slept beside her...made love to her...that she wasn't worth lookin’ for? Was Maggie questioning him...his effort, thinkin’ he was giving up? No...no. It didn't matter how short of a time they were together...it was there, that love...those memories...enough to keep him going. He wouldn't...couldn't give up. He'd find her or die tryin’. "You love her."

Daryl, on the verge of breakdown, realized it wasn't any of those things from Maggie, but rather her acknowledging his love...his loyalty to Beth. It wasn't a question, \emph{You love her}, but he still answered, nodding...the truth of it tore him...ripped his gut to pieces, just how brief their happiness had been. There was never enough time.

Maggie came to him, stepped in close, and he didn't back away. She already saw his tears.

Her palm was warm against his cheek, brushing away the wetness. He let her...didn't have the strength to stop her, even when she just rested her hand there. She already knew how broken he was.

"I regret doubting you. I regret the questions I had in my heart about you and Beth...your honor. You're a good man, Daryl Dixon." Sniffing back her own tears, trying to be the strong one.

The noise...the noise was too much, everyone around him at once, even people who didn't live on this side of the duplex if he remembered right. They must've been waitin’ outside with Michonne,
giving him and Maggie time...but now it was a flood of people, a flood of voices, a flood of questions and greetings. They might not be saying it, but he could see it...feel it in them...their sympathy, their knowledge that he still hadn't found Beth. And they caught him in this moment, so vulnerable with Maggie and their shared loss.

He failed. They knew. He couldn't stand it. The room felt like it was spinning, his heart beating in his ears like a drum stretched too tight. Voices melted together, words weren't making sense, he needed out. Daryl couldn't stay. The quiet dangers out there...outside...he could handle those, but not this. He couldn't be in this place...not with all the human noise. He needed to be out there if he ever had a chance to find her. And if he didn't...if he didn't that was where he belonged...out there...to find his end. Not this place...not in a place that could provided a normal life for Beth...friends, family, community, a place she could've been happy. He would've stayed for her...been happy here with her, because of her, if that was what she wanted instead of going home, but without her...

Grabbing Beth's bag...he couldn't...he couldn't stay, not even for the night, retreating from his own group.

The cold air was bracing, broke Daryl out of his panic induced fog. It was getting dark...didn't matter. He had to escape. He had a car, had guns, had his bow, started to get a hold of himself again, but that damned gate loomed in front of him...trapping him. He should've never come in. It was a bad idea all the way around...

"Just take a seat and cool your heels." Maddox pointed to a leather bound chair sitting square in front of a waxy wood desk in his office.

There'd been no time for a confrontation to escalate at the gates; they apparently called the boss out as soon as they saw Daryl on approach.

"No departures after dark. No exceptions. Command and Control now."

Daryl had only followed hoping to come to some more reasonable terms with him in private, away from his men. He paced the room now, refusing to sit...felt like an animal caught in a trap.

"I ain't staying. I can't stay...not with them. They..."

"You're not leaving, not tonight, but we'll fix it." He didn't make Daryl explain; seeing his state must have been enough.

Daryl plopped down in the chair in his own time, deciding burning energy at this point wasn't gonna help him, just watching Maddox laying a binder on his desk, flipping through the pages, scrawling something, then grabbing a key from the collection on the wall.

"You need your own space. I get it. I know in here isn't the ideal situation for you, but tonight you don't have a choice," handing Daryl the key. "It's yours, Unit 37. The trailers, you know where they are."

Daryl was reluctant taking the key, but there was really no other option.

"No strings, just a place of your own to sleep tonight and any other night you need. You've got
electric, water, some rations. Just try not to be too hostile to your neighbors. The trailers are a good mix of soldiers, single civilians, and some small families. The civilians can get skittish sometimes."

Daryl sighed, shoulders slumped forward in both relief and defeat. Relief that he didn't have to spend the night under the same roof as the others with their sympathy and judgment focused on him, defeat that he was stuck here...should've never come back in in the first place. There was no way in hell that he was ever gonna be lucky enough to find Beth waitin’ here for him. This world made him work...fight and bleed for everything he had, and he wasn't afraid to do it for her.

"They were mine."

Snapping back, Daryl realized he'd paused while headin’ out, just a few steps away from the desk, eyes glued on a picture of a woman and three young boys in a frame sitting on a bookshelf.

"I don't even know what happened to them, but I know they're gone. That's all I have left now, a picture."

Daryl felt awkward...just by looking, he intruded, sticking his nose where it didn't belong.

"Despite all the shit I have to deal with here, that's why when I need it, when I feel the world closing in on me, I allow myself time outside that perimeter. Nobody knows why I go out there. They think I go out to blow off steam, just get away, but it's to remind myself what it's like out there to keep everyone safe in here, be here for them like I wasn't for my family...and because I still hope I might find them out there someday."

That was it, the reason he gave Daryl all the freedoms he did, let him break all the rules...had been the reason from the start...the moment that Daryl told him that Beth was still out there. He didn't really know why Maddox shared...why he opened up. It wasn't something men like them did often. More likely to beat each other bloody than get all sentimental together.

Daryl reached in his back pocket, unfolding his own picture, carefully...so lovingly smoothing out the crease.

"This is my...she's my..." All choked up, Daryl knew whatever was said here wouldn't make it past the door.

"Beautiful. You don't deserve her." It wasn't an insult. It was a compliment and a truth.

"Nobody does."

* * * * * * *

Bright, clean, tidy, untouched...it might've been a tiny government issue emergency trailer, but it had never belonged to anyone before. It was his, and it was far better than most the places he'd ever slept. But most of all, it was quiet...solitary...the best he could ask for in this fucked up situation, until morning when he hit the road, nothing but tail lights.

After his piss, Daryl stood there for a while, staring at the shower, knowing he needed one but not sure he deserved it. The draw was too strong to fight, and hell, he didn't have nothin' but time, giving in and stripping down. The steaming water washed away the dirt and blood, soaked hair plastered to his face as he was cleansed. Just pressing his palms against the wall, trying to focus on the
warmth...the warmth banishing the chill of winter in his bones, the steady stream soothing muscles sore from fighting, tension, stress...clearing his head, coming to terms with the fact that there was nothing he could do about his situation tonight.

He went to bed naked as the day he was born, dry enough that he didn't care...feeling vulnerable naked though, didn't know why. Maybe it was just this place...he didn't belong, or that even if he couldn't see them, there were neighbors...people in trailers surrounding him, but he wasn't gonna put dirty clothes back on and slide into the bleached white sheets so new they didn't have a wrinkle one in 'em. Resting his hands behind his head, flat on his back, staring up at the low ceiling, as much as he hated it...being stuck here...having a place to lay his head tonight with absolutely nothing constructive to do, it was a good thing. He was forced to think...not just do. Think. Something he wasn't always so great at.

Where now Dixon?

Where now? He couldn't just keep combing the same woods...he'd already come to that conclusion. There was nothin’ to track anymore, and so much time had passed. He was smarter than that. Beth deserved a better course of action, and Rick deserved more credit than that. He would've had a better plan for his kids and Beth. Think like Rick...maybe he needed to try and think like Rick, except he had absolutely no idea what Rick would be doing except trying to find a safe place for Carl, Judith, and Beth. Where that place would be, he had no idea. Rick was always the thinker...and Daryl was the doer.

Daryl swiped the annoying wet stands of hair that were stuck to his forehead out of his face, the action taking his mind somewhere sweet...the first night in their home...Beth coming to bed after her bath, body still steaming warm from the water, thinkin’ he was sleeping.

"What?" He asked softly, feeling Beth jump slightly in surprise beside him.

"I...I thought you were asleep..." It was like she was a kid that got caught doing something wrong. "What are you doing?"

"Thinkin'."

"About what?" She pressed.

"The possibilities."

When he'd pulled Beth to him, the wet ropes of her hair tickled his chest, sticking to his skin, all his senses alive, but the warmth was lulling him to sleep. Full stomach, their newfound safety, and Beth...having Beth beside him...soft bed, thinking about a fluffy future with her, and here he was now...couldn't even hold on to what was his...protect her. God reached down and smacked him in the face for livin’ in a fucking fantasy...thinking about those possibilities. He was a hard man living in a hard world, and he went soft. Paid the price for it...paid dearly. Beth got punished for it...that was the hardest part, but he wasn't giving up on her.

Beth was strong.

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"Beth, go...Run!"
She didn't question. She didn't look back. She couldn't hold Judith and fight. She couldn't set her down either; there were too many coming from all directions. She had no choice, dodging through the line of walkers in front of her, some of them inevitably turning on her, coming after her and Judith.

They just needed distance...just some distance between them and the walkers so Beth could think. Tripping...falling hard, knees and elbow busting open on the forest floor turned rocky...at least she had Judith pulled close to her chest...the little girl not hitting the ground. But when Beth cried out, she started crying too...a death sentence for both of them. Beth tried to soothe her, breath ragged, scrambling to her feet...the walkers...she could hear them gaining. She had to run. She had to keep going. Bare branches and thorny vines grabbed at her, cut into her skin, tore at her face as she tried to shield Judith as best she could. Just running...trying to save them, she almost didn't have time to slide to a stop where the world...her world ended, landing hard on her butt, boot slipping over the edge, pebbles, small rocks, and debris bouncing down the sharp grade.

Judith had stopped crying now, just whimpering and fussing a little, Beth able to find her feet again, looking down at their only way forward...it was too late to turn around, and the gulch in front of them...the side was too steep to get Judith down safely. Looking around at the lay of the land, not knowing what else to do, Beth stowed the little girl behind a fallen log, pulling off Daryl's poncho, and concealing Judith in it the best she could. She could only hope the darkness of the cover and the survival instinct Judith was born with would keep her quiet. Beth knew she was going to have to fight, watching the walkers closing on her, back to the sky. Pulling her gun...five bullets...there were at least ten walkers. Five bullets might make a difference, but five gunshots would just draw more to them. Beth stepped back, her heel scooting over the edge precariously, watching more walkers emerge from the tree line.

Judith wouldn't be able to survive on her own, but she deserved a chance, a chance for Rick and Carl to find her. Glancing back over her shoulder, the way down looked like some twenty feet...but it wasn't a straight plummet. Beth wouldn't die, hitting the rocky steep slope on her way down instead. She'd be hurt when...she wouldn't die...but the walkers would follow her over. They smelled the fresh blood from her earlier tumble. She would fall when they pushed her back, and so would they...then...then she would die. Beth wasn't afraid of dying. Not anymore, but she was afraid of being ripped to pieces. She wasn't brave like Daryl...Daryl who fought to the end. She was a coward. Beth palmed her pistol. Five shots would draw more walkers, but Daryl...Daryl taught her that just one shot was hard for anyone or anything to triangulate on. Deciding...Beth knew she didn't have to be alive to draw the walkers over the edge, and the more blood, the more enticing. One shot...she wasn't afraid to die...she was already dead...raising her gun...

She didn't have much time left to make peace with the world, just waiting for them to get close enough...but she was ready...ready to be with Daryl.

But Judith's wail killed the chances of her sacrifice ever working...meaning anything, the walkers' attention split between the smell of Beth's blood and Judith's cries. Neither of them might live now, but she had to try. She had to fight...

Skeletal hands drug her down on top the pile of corpses. Hitting the ground, what little breath she had left knocked out of her, Beth knew this would be her last walker. She'd taken out as many as she could before being pulled down herself, laying on top a heap of carnage. It scaled her body, dragging itself towards her face, Beth just frozen in exhaustion and resignation. Why didn't it just bite her?

She tried, and it wasn't enough.

Why wouldn't it bite her? Get it over with?
It was heavy on her, near enough she could feel it hissing at her...teeth chomping and clacking...maybe looking for the most tender part of her to tear into.

The baby cried again, breaking the silence and Beth's ability to accept her fate. Trying desperately to regain her knife, fishing for it in the corpses around her, holding the walker back by the neck, slimy flesh shredding off between her fingers as she tightened her hand around its windpipe. Finally able to hold it steady, hand wrapping around the hilt of her knife, Beth plunged her blade into the side of its head, staying her death for a moment longer.

She had to focus...couldn't look at everything else around her...just save the baby...protect her. Beth had never been physically strong...just a little thing...never brutal or violent. But instinct...the inherent need to protect a child made her fierce...deadly. Two were almost at Judith, Beth throwing the closest down, stomping it, smashing its skull in so hard that the impact reverberated up into her knee. Much bloodier, a more appealing target, Beth backed away, leading the last walker...didn't need any others zeroing in on the Judith's location, so Beth kept leading...

What happened?

Beth began to notice her wrist aching, but she didn't stop...didn't stop stabbing, didn't stop driving her knife with the force of both hands into the pile of bone, brain, and whatever was left attached to the bare spine. But there was nothing left to hit, nothing left to stab. It was just the rocky ground underneath the massacre she made.

"Beth!" It wasn't the first time Rick called for her, was it?

He was closer now, his urgency audible, close, crashing through the woods, not even attempting to be quiet. Beth's blood coated hand slipped as she drove the knife down one last time, slicing her left palm on the razor edge of the blade. The sting woke her up, looking around...finding Rick and Carl both alive, cutting down the last of the walkers who tracked them, then, looking around...around at her kills...kills Beth couldn't even remember. Judith gave a little cry alerting them to her location, Rick nodding Carl off to retrieve his sister.

"Beth." Rick's full attention was on her, but Beth wasn't done.

There was no more head to stab...but there was a heart...where the heart was...used to be. Growling and crying, driving down with as much force as she could muster...raw emotion and primal need overpowering ration, goodness, hope, faith...just the need to destroy...totally eviscerate the monster on the ground beneath her. She’d gone feral, but what else did she have left? These things...they tried to kill Judith...a child...a baby who couldn't fight...couldn't even protect herself. Feeling everything so acutely now...she wanted to feel...needed to...

The gravel digging into the skin broken open at her knees...

The sting of her sliced palm...her own blood flowing...

The way her knife chipped at and broke through brittle bone in the walker's chest...

They stole everything from her, her home...the people she loved...Mama, Shawn, Otis, Patricia...Daddy. Then they killed her...killed her heart and soul when they killed Daryl. They took everything from her...everything that a person could possibly lose in their life...friends, mother, father, brother...husband. The only thing they hadn't taken from her...wouldn't take was a child, but they stole the chance of her ever having one of her own. And they sure in the hell weren't gonna take Judith.
She stopped, dropped her knife, saw Rick approaching slowly with his hands spread at his sides like she was dangerous and unpredictable, showing he wasn't a threat...didn't mean any harm. Beth bowed her head, seeing red dripping from the tangled strands of her hair fallen loose around her face, raising her bloodstained hands, pieces of flesh, tendon, stringy veins hanging off them. Were these really her hands? What had she become? Tears...she started to cry...feeling the tears at the corners of her eyes, but cursed herself for it. There was nothing left to cry for anymore.

What had she become?

She became what she needed to be...made herself go numb.

Beth didn't fail. Not today. She was going to be strong like Daryl. She wasn't going to fail. Daryl never did. The only thing he ever failed at was saving his own life.

Rick pulled her up...as the adrenaline started to wear off, her breath was harder to catch and the fatigue of fighting started to set in...not feeling so steady on her feet, but Rick had her.

"You okay? Are you bit? Are you hurt? Any of this blood yours?" Rick frantic, looking her up and down.

Too many questions. Too much to process. She just had to answer the most important one so Rick wouldn't put a bullet between her eyes.

"Not bit..."

He hugged her close, but Beth couldn't hug back.

"We need to get you cleaned up and checked out before we move. We crossed a creek just a little ways back." Didn't he believe her that she wasn't bit? "Carl, you got Judith?"

Carl must've nodded because Rick led the way back into the woods, Beth's arm captured in his grasp, helping her over the corpses that littered the path, giving her no choice but to follow.

The water was icy cold on her busted knees, Rick trying to be gentle washing the blood and dirt away with his hands. It stung even more when he started to pick out the tiny pieces of gravel that embedded themselves in the wounds, but she didn't flinch away. Keeping her hand balled, knowing her sliced palm was the worst of it, trying to get the bleeding to stop...the blood to congeal...Rick was working his way up her body dealing with her hurts, now peeling back her shredded sleeve, attending her split elbow.

"Thank you." Beth heard him, Rick's voice humbled, the admission of a strong man who wasn't able to protect his own child.

That didn't make him any less of a man in her eyes, and who was she to even judge? Rick was protecting her because of a promise he made to Daryl.

The water cupped up to her cheek was shocking against her skin, but his hands were soft in wiping away the blood...pulling bits of gore tenderly from her hair. Was she that much of a mess? Maybe it wasn't until then that Rick noticed her clenched fist.

"Beth...let me see..." Prying her fingers open, the blood was still running…

He forced both her hands under the bitter surface of the water. It burned her sliced palm, but the freezing effect soothed it soon enough, Beth watching the blood in fascination as it washed away in the current of the stream.
But then...frantic...fighting Rick's grip holding her hands flat and open under the water, Beth jerked and splashed, trying to break free, seeing her ring beginning to slip off her finger. Rick's force, the wound on her hand, the numbness caused by the water, it was impossible for her to fight it all and close her fingers.

"I know it hurts, but we have to clean it." Rick was adamant and unyielding...but it wasn't the pain...it was her life...what was left of it...her wedding ring slipping away.

"No...stop. Please!" Rick released if only to stop her from yelling and drawing danger down on them.

Cradling her wet, bleeding hand to her chest...it was too gaunt, her fingers grown to thin and boney to wear it on her ring finger anymore...where it belonged. How she could be more broken than she already was, she didn't know. She didn't cry, but the trauma...the devastation was there, removing the silver wings from where they belonged, where Daryl slipped that wedding ring so nervously and lovingly on her hand, shifting it to her index finger. Beth told herself she would never take it off. Daryl put it on...that's where it was supposed to stay. She wasn't numb enough not to feel this pain.

"I'm sorry, Beth." Finally realizing why she was fighting so hard, pulling her just close enough, hand in her hair, Rick kissed her forehead. It was all the comfort he had to give, but he knew it wasn't enough. Nothing ever would be.

He cut away the cuff of his shirt, making a tight and efficient bandage for her palm.

But then, when he was done tending her wound, when the immediacy of survival spurred by the fight with the walkers wore off and Rick started seeing again...really seeing it was like he started to comprehend something bigger...

"Beth...what've you done?" Snatching her arm, not even giving her a chance to try to avoid.

He forced her hand up, seeing all the evidence he needed to know the answer to his question, her thin fingers...not slender...thin, realizing why she had to shift her wedding ring. But he didn't stop there, forcing the neck of her shirt over her shoulder, free hand grazing across her prominent collarbone, then reaching down to her side feeling her ribs. He had no right...she wanted to jerk away, wanted to fight, but there was no point. He already knew...already saw. She just wanted Daryl's poncho back, to hide under its safety.

"Just stay there." Rick commanded, Beth not really able to get a read on him; he was pissed and worried and whole bunch of other things.

He produced the plastic sleeve of almonds he'd been hording in his pocket...a meal for them all, dropping it in her lap.

"Eat."

"Eat...I...no, I can't..."

"You're going to sit there until you eat all of that, and I'm going to stand here and watch you until you're done."

Beth chewed her lip, looking down, both avoiding Rick's intensity and contemplating the food.

"Judith...and Carl..." She was putting up the best argument she could, but was she really convincing anyone?
"Judith's too young for nuts, you know that. Carl, he's fine. He's not starving. Eat."

She went to make another excuse but didn't have any...not any that made sense.

"You don't want to die, Beth. There's still a life for you..."

She didn't want to die? Was Rick right? She fought so hard. And Daryl...he'd wanted her to live. He died so she could.

The almonds were salty, crunchy...heaven. The queasiness when they hit her long empty stomach so worth it...it didn't stop her from shoving more in her mouth.

"Take it slow. There's no use to have them just come back up again," Rick cautioned, true to his word, standing over her, watching her eat.

One almond...just one almond at a time, a slow process. She felt so guilty eating, Rick standing there monitoring her, Carl sitting in the grass a little distance away with Judith. She didn't deserve the food anymore than any of them, but she couldn't stop.

"We should follow the stream." Beth said, pausing to make sure her stomach was going to handle the amount of food that was filling it. It was so little food in the scope of things...but it was so very much.

"Hmmm?" Rick probably assumed in her state, she wasn't capable of making rational decisions, much less deciding their course forward.

"We should follow the stream. Water. Animals need to drink too...so maybe food if we can catch it. And water always leads somewhere. Walkers can't cross it easily either." Daryl taught her those things, how to survive.

If Rick wanted to find a road, this was a good chance. It was a sizeable creek. It might not lead them to a highway, but it might lead them to a farm or country house that would eventually lead them to a road. Water always eventually led somewhere.

"We should follow the stream," he agreed.

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