Fear and Fury

by theglitterati

Summary

Ellie has been trying to fuck away her feelings, but nothing can keep them at bay forever. She needs someone who sees her for who she really is - a monster who's afraid of everything.

Notes

"Perhaps one did not want to be loved so much as to be understood." - George Orwell, 1984
Chapter 1

Ellie straddled his waist, a smirk on her lips. She whipped her shirt over her head. Her bra followed seconds later.

Derek, or Darren, or whatever his name was, let his mouth fall open below her.

“Gorgeous,” he said.

Ellie shrugged. She knew what she looked like. Her boobs still weren’t anything to write home about, but at twenty one, she was nearing a C-cup, and was pretty damn proud of it.

She grabbed Derek – yeah, probably Derek, who was cute, actually, with dimples and dark, curly hair – by the wrists and placed his hands on her tits. “Look with your hands, not with your eyes, dude,” she said with a wink that felt a little contrived.

Derek’s eyes widened as he moved his hands, tentatively exploring the pink nipples protruding from Ellie’s creamy, freckled chest.

It felt good. Really good. Ellie told herself that it felt really, really good.

Ellie let Derek feel her up while she rolled her hips against his. They were both still in their jeans, and he was rock hard beneath the fabric. Ellie wasn’t quite there yet. Actually, she wasn’t there yet at all, but she was going to get there, damn it.

“Pants off, soldier” she demanded, already working the button on Derek’s jeans. Derek helped her out, lifting his hips to let her slide his pants down over his ass. Ellie had to admit, he had a cute butt. She whipped his boxers off it while she had the chance, and then playfully smacked his left cheek.

“At ease,” she said. He lowered his hips back down. Ellie worked his pants down off his legs, and then went back for his underwear. Pulling the waistband down, she left his cock spring free of the fabric. Not the biggest she’d ever seen, but not the smallest. Nice colour. Good balls.

Good balls? What was wrong with her? Why was she appraising him, like a trader looking to sell a particularly juicy pig? She needed to get him inside her fast, to shut up her stupid brain.

Ellie whipped her own jeans and panties off in record time, then settled back into her position over Derek’s hips. She slipped her hand over his cock and started stroking, her motions practiced, rehearsed. Derek, an eager beaver, repaid the favour, slipping a finger, then two, up inside her.

He was good – better than the last guy, though not as good as the last girl. He knew his way around a vagina. Ellie moved her hips to correct the angle, so that his fingers would hit her G-spot.

She started to get bored again – that wasn’t right, was it? Sex wasn’t supposed to be boring – her restless mind flitting to more important things, like clickers, and guard duty, and her guitar. Time to seal the deal.

Ellie grabbed a condom – twenty years expired, but it was better than nothing – and ripped the package open with her teeth. Derek reached out, but she had it on him before he had a chance to take it. His expression was bewildered. Ellie took a moment to make sure it was the good kind of bewildered (excited, impressed), and not the bad kind (worried, hesitant). Derek grinned up at her – the good kind it was. Ellie finished rolling down the condom, and then lifted her hips to slip him inside her before sinking down onto him in one quick thrust.
Ellie did most of the work, for none of the reward. Typical.

Derek eventually rolled them over to get on top, after Ellie had worked up a sweat riding him, and he slid in and out of her at a steady pace. He was an efficient lover, and a talker, too, which Ellie liked. But nothing he said stuck in her addled brain. Ellie kept up a steady stream of oh yeahs and oohs and harder, fuck me harders until she could feel that Derek was about to come. She faked her own orgasm just before his own, to let him think they’d come together. It seemed to make him happy, his smile like a puppy’s as he settled down beside her.

How long did you have to stay after sex? Twenty minutes? Thirty?

Ellie made it ten.

“I have to get home,” she said, pulling her shoes on. “Early guard shift, you know.”

If Derek was disappointed, he hid it well. “Okay,” he said. He looked sleepy. “I, um, I had a really great time tonight.”

“Me too,” Ellie said distractedly, looking for her bra. “You were amazing.” Ah, there it was, slung over Derek’s desk chair.

“You think we could do this again sometime?” Derek asked.

They always asked this.

Ellie used to lie, but that had gotten her a bit of a reputation around town as a heartbreaker. It was hilarious to anyone who knew her – which was almost no one. Now, her answer was standard.

“Maybe, but probably not,” Ellie said. “I’m not much of a double dipper.”

Derek frowned as she pulled on her coat. “A double dipper?”

“No offense or anything, Derek,” she said. “Really, you were great.”

Derek’s frown deepened. “My name is Darren,” he said.


Ellie left herself in quietly so as not to wake Joel, who surely passed out hours ago. It was warm and sticky even at two in the morning, even inside the house. Ellie started peeling her clothing off at the door of her bedroom, leaving a trail behind her. She stopped to put pajamas on – she had a hang-up about sleeping naked, she never wanted to be taken off guard – and flopped down on her bed on her stomach. She smushed her face into the pillow, stifling a groan.

She needed release, but she was too tired for masturbating. Too tired to do much of anything but lie there and let her thoughts run wild. A dozen images passed through her mind as she drifted off: the dimples of Darren’s cheeks; the red hair of a girl from last month, so like her own; a broad chest under a half-buttoned plaid shirt. Ellie’s brain flicked through them like a photo album until she fell asleep.
Ellie was still hot and bothered when she woke the next morning, but at least the heat had died down. It was early. Too early.

She made her way downstairs as slowly as possible, still wearing the oversized t-shirt that served as her pajamas. She ran a hand through her hair – or tried to. It got stuck in a tangle halfway through. Oh well.

The scent of something sweet wafted into the hallway from the kitchen. Ellie sped up.

She stopped in the doorway, taking in the scene. There were pancakes on the stove, which looked like they were about to be the best thing Ellie had eaten in weeks. But despite how delicious they looked, and smelled, it was something else that got her mouth watering.

Joel, reliable, tough, vicious Joel, the one constant in Ellie’s mess of a life, stood at the stove, spatula in hand, wearing nothing but a towel slung low around his hips. He attended to the pancakes with the same determination that he did a clicker that just wouldn’t die. His hair, longer now than when they’d met, fell over his forehead as he bent over the stove.

He was completely exposed like this, so much skin, his back unguarded. Ellie knew she was one of the few who’d ever see him this way, and she felt thankful, because what a sight to see. Joel was no male model; there was no six-pack in sight. But Ellie had seen firsthand what his body could do, what his broad shoulders and tall frame and strong arms were capable of. He was still wet from the shower, water droplets trailing down his back. Ellie drunk the sight of him in like she’d just crossed the desert.

She let out a low whistle. “Those smell fucking good.”

Joel answered without taking his eyes off the stove. “Who says you’re gettin’ any?”

“Me,” Ellie said. She crossed the room and dipped a finger into the batter, sucking it off as innocently as she could while taking in the length of Joel’s very naked chest up close.

“There’s raw eggs in that,” Joel said. “Don’t come cryin’ to me if you get Salmonella.”

“Fuck,” Ellie said, going back for more. “Who cares if I get whatever you just said? That shit’s good!”

Joel smacked her hand before she could get it in the bowl. “Will you sit down and be a little patient? They’re almost done.”

“Fine,” Ellie said. She stalked off to the tiny kitchen table, sitting in one chair and putting her feet up on the other, stretching out her long legs. “But I get the bigger plate.”

Joel snorted. “Yeah,” he said, “sure thing.”

Joel flipped the final pancakes and set them out on plates. Ellie was quiet, for once, letting her eyes rove over his body. She didn’t do this often, but something about the previous night had left her feeling… open. Empty.

This was not what this was supposed to be. This – this weird, but somehow perfect, thing that was her and Joel. They were friends, allies, fellow soldiers. Sometimes, they felt like family. But most of all, they were partners. And they were partners who needed each other more than anything.

Ellie knew that, even if Joel learned to see her the way she saw him – not just as a handsome, older man, not just as another notch on her bedpost, but the way she really saw him – it would be a bad
idea to act on it. It would ruin what they had, etc, etc, all those things people said about sleeping with someone who means more to you than a night of sharing bodily insecurities.

But the gap that Darren opened in her the previous night was one that had been there almost as long as she’d known Joel, and lately, it was less a crack than a canyon. Ellie was losing her grip. Something was going to happen soon; she could feel it like an itch under her skin.

Joel set two plates of perfectly-round pancakes on the table. He moved to lift her legs off his chair, but Ellie pulled them back before he could. She didn’t think she could handle him touching her in this state of undress; she might spontaneously combust. She pulled the pancakes closer to her, feeling self-conscious.

“So?” Joel asked, once she’d taken her first bite.

Ellie met his eyes. “Amazing,” she said.
Chapter 2

Most of the time, Ellie thought that post-apocalyptic guard duty was a fucking snooze fest. But sometimes it got good.

Ellie strolled along the top of the wall, shotgun on her back, knife in her boot, pistol on her hip. The pistol was the same gun that Joel had given her so many years ago. *Something a little more your size,* he had said. *For emergencies only.* Ellie's whole life had been a god damn emergency.

Joel sat ten yards from her, in a patio chair. Her own empty chair was beside his, the book she had been reading splayed open on the seat.

She couldn’t sit still today. Her thighs ached from her workout the night before, and her heart ached for something much deeper, and more painful. The more Ellie tried to stuff the feeling down, the more it tried to leak out.

Ellie was about to go mad with longing when Joel stood up.

He made a *get over here* motion with his hand, and Ellie jogged back to him. He put a finger to his lips, to shush her before she could even say anything, and pointed at the edge of the woods.

A clicker. No, two. And a few runners behind the tree line. Shit.

Things were finally looking up.

Ellie put down the shotgun and picked up her bow and quiver instead. The quiver was almost empty, so Joel went off to find more arrows, giving her a thumbs up as he walked away. Ellie felt like he’d just plucked a heartstring. That he trusted her meant the world to her.

Ellie got to work without waiting for him to return. She crouched down so her head was barely visible over the wall and readied the bow. Her first arrow landed in the soft part of a clicker’s head, with a squelching noise that Ellie could only describe as *deeply* satisfying.

The clicker fell. None of the other Infected noticed. Ellie notched arrow number two.

She wanted to take the clickers out first, but she didn’t have a clear line of sight on any of them. Had to be a runner then. She pulled back the bow and aimed for the heart. It was a clean shot, but she had a problem. The runner fell right into one of its brethren, and that runner turned and caught sight of Ellie. It started to run, and the others followed.

“Nice shot,” Joel said, coming back with the now-useless arrows. He pressed a hand to the small of her back to steady himself as he crouched down beside her, and Ellie tensed, feeling like all of the nerves in her body had concentrated into that one spot.

“Fuck off,” Ellie hissed back.

The Infected were at the wall now. They couldn’t get over it, but still; Ellie didn’t love how close they were, especially in large numbers.

Apparently, this crew had had some friends hiding in the trees. There were at least ten of them now, maybe fifteen, swarming around the base of the wall.

“Well, I guess we can forget being quiet,” Joel said. He pulled the rifle from his back and shot a
runner right in the face. Ellie grabbed her shotgun and followed suit.

They had a good half of the group down when Ellie heard the truck. It must have been a supply crew that had headed into town early. Ellie saw the truck round the corner of the road, and started waving her hands frantically, trying to signal to them to turn back. But she was too late. The remaining Infected left the wall and ran for the truck, quickly surrounding it so it was unable to drive away.

Ellie knew what was about to happen, and she knew that Joel knew it, too. She glanced at him to confirm. She saw not just affirmation of the plan in his eyes, but recognition, like she was looking into a mirror. It was so unlike how Darren or anyone else looked at her that Ellie had the odd sensation that she might cry.

But Joel had already turned away, throwing the rope ladder over the wall and starting down it.

“You comin’, or what?!” He yelled. The Infected were getting noisy.

Ellie nodded and ran to catch up, throwing herself over the edge.

Her boots hit the ground, and all of the adrenaline, the restless, relentless energy that had built up inside her since the previous night, finally started to release. She quickly caught up to Joel – he was stronger, but she was faster – her feet smacking against the dirt road as she sprinted. He ran while aiming a pistol, taking out runners. Ellie pulled the knife from her ankle in one swift motion and headed towards one of the two remaining clickers.

Its back was turned, which made it easy. Ellie leapt onto its back and slammed her knife deep into its skull. It was even more satisfying when she killed with her own hands.

This, Ellie knew, was probably what had caused the chasm to open inside her chest. A lack of parents, a degrading and dehumanizing childhood, the constant bleed from her heart at the thought of remaining alive when it meant so many others would die – those things didn’t help. But she could have lived with them. No one would have blamed her. But this – this wasn’t redeemable, at least to most of the people Ellie had met.

Ellie liked to kill. Not people; she’d never liked that. But the Infected. She didn’t just kill them because they threatened her. Because, really, she was immune – they threatened her less than they did anyone else alive. No, she killed because she wanted them dead. And she wanted to be the one to do it.

Ellie grabbed a 2x4 from the bed of the truck and smacked a runner around the head with it. It fell to its knees, and Joel ended it with a shot to the head, throwing a nod of thanks to Ellie.

*Oh, Joel,* Ellie thought. Sometimes, when they were in mortal peril like they were now, it felt like time slowed down. Ellie thought she could see him most clearly in these times.

Ellie watched as he used her discarded 2x4 to smack down another runner, then smash its head open with his steel-toed boot.

No one was ever going to understand her like he did.

Not Darren, or the girl before him, or the guy before that, or the girl Ellie had lost her virginity to, who had cried the first time she’d even *seen* a bloater. None of them would ever see the side of her, this crazy, blistered, *furious* side of her that was so essential to who she was, because she could never show it to them. No one could love her after seeing that. No one could see that and not be afraid of her.
No one except Joel.

Joel, who was now ripping a runner from the truck’s passenger side by its remaining hair, and throwing it to the ground, finishing it with a shot from his pistol directly into its mouth.

Ellie thought he looked fucking beautiful.

There were only two Infected left, a runner that was barely clinging to life, and a clicker that was trying to smash open the driver’s side window with its own head. Joel took care of the runner, and Ellie quietly stalked around the side of the truck towards the clicker, stepping over runner brains and guts and other stuff she couldn’t identify as she went.

The clicker was distracted with its head-smashing; Ellie could make short work of this. Or so she thought until the truck driver, in his panic, honked the horn by accident.

Fuck. Fucking fuck fuck. The clicker whirled its head around, trying to locate the source of the noise, and landed its echolocation on Ellie.

It was kill or be killed, eat or be eaten. Ellie lunged, and the clicker did, too. Ellie dodged to the side, and tried to get behind it, but it was too damn fast. Instead, thinking quick, she dropped to the ground, pulling it down with her. She pulled its head into the ground above her own as hard as possible, taking its putrid weight on top of her. These things were stupidly resilient, but her shove got it to shut its mouth, its jaw clacking against the ground, and that was all the time Ellie needed to stab it in the head before it bit her.

Seconds later, the dead thing was being pulled off of her and beaten to a pulp by Joel. He took a moment to make sure it was good and dead while screaming at Ellie, “are you hurt?!?”

“Fine,” Ellie said back. It was true enough; she’d avoided getting bitten, or massively mangled. But she’d fallen on something sharp when she’d gone down, and she could feel a thin trickle of blood on her arm. Ellie used her other hand to search for the object on the ground. It turned out to be one of Joel’s shivs.

“Nice wo—” Joel started, but he stopped when he saw the blood. He fell to his knees beside her. “You’re bleeding.” He looked and sounded mad, but Ellie had enough experience with him that mad and worried were the same expressions on him.

“A cut, not a bite,” Ellie said. She held up the shiv to show him, and he cursed under his breath. She was still laying on the ground, which felt a little bit pitiful. She moved to sit up, but got lightheaded, and had to settle back down.

“Whoa, whoa, you alright?” Joel rested a hand on her good shoulder. Unlike before, it didn’t make Ellie tense up. She was too tired for that. It just felt nice. She let herself lean into it, just this once.

“’Mm fine,” she mumbled. She’d be okay once she caught her breath. “You’re bleeding,” she said. She reached up to touch Joel’s forehead, her fingers coming away wet. “You’re bleeding, too.”

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“It’s nothin’,” Joel said, though a drop of blood was running down his cheek. Ellie reminded herself that head wounds bled a lot, even when they weren’t serious.

Joel stood up and walked away. Where was he going? Ellie tried to go after him, but she still couldn’t get up without seeing stars.

“You there,” Joel said, only a few feet away. “Just what the fuck were you thinkin’, honkin’ that god damn horn?” Oh, so that’s where he went. To yell at someone. Ellie was relieved.
Joel started off on a tirade about life and death, ignoring the truck driver’s pleas for forgiveness. Ellie usually stepped in to stop Joel’s rants, but this one was deserved; that guy really had almost gotten her killed.

“You could have gotten Ellie killed!” Joel yelled. Ellie felt warm.

She let Joel go on for another minute before she could finally sit up. “Joel,” she said. “I think he gets the point.”

“I ain’t done yet,” Joel snapped, not turning around.

“Joel,” Ellie repeated. “Come help me up already.”

That got his attention. He threw a few more expletives in the driver’s direction, then returned to Ellie’s side.

“You okay to walk, baby—” Joel cut himself off, with a confused expression. He didn’t seem to know why he’d stopped talking.

But Ellie did. She was an adult now. She wasn’t his baby girl anymore.

“Ellie,” Joel finally said. “Can you walk?”

“Yeah, I think so,” Ellie said. She stood up – too fast. She ended up stumbling.

Joel wrapped a hand around her waist, and Ellie let herself fall against him. Even through her shirt, and her exhaustion, the feel of his hand on the curve of her hip made her crazy. She felt sad, and angry, and electrified all at the same time.

But she couldn’t deal with that right now. Too much killing really took it out of you. She just rested her head against Joel’s shoulder and let him guide her home.
Ellie and Joel were relieved of guard duty for three days. It was a precautionary measure; neither of them was badly hurt. But Tommy insisted, said it was protocol.

Ellie was both looking forward to and anxious about the two days off. Glass half full, it was a lot of time alone with Joel. Glass half empty, it was a lot of time alone with Joel.

She thought of hiding in her room for three days, avoiding what she felt was an ever-solidifying sexual tension demanding to be cut with her knife, but in the end, she decided against it. Joel’s presence was a fire Ellie didn’t mind burning in, at least for the time being.

They spent the first day on the couch, eating the food people had brought over and watching movies from the surprisingly large collection the town had. As was typical, though, they spent more time fighting over what movie to watch than actually watching anything. Joel wanted to watch old westerns; Ellie wanted to watch anything but old westerns.

“It’s my turn to pick,” Joel said, waving a DVD with a horse and a very stoic man on it in Ellie’s face.

“It absolutely fucking is not!”

“The last thing we watched was Finding Nemo!”

“You LIKED Finding Nemo!”

“Just because I put up with it don’t mean I picked it!”

Ellie flopped down on the couch and threw up her hands. “Fine, we’ll watch your dumb horse movie,” she said. “But you have to admit you enjoyed Finding Nemo.”

“I don’t have to admit nothin’,” Joel said. He put his terrible movie into the DVD player. She’d seen it dozens of times now, but Ellie was still fascinated by how it just swallowed up the disc. “It’s my turn to pick, and this is what I’m pickin’.”

Ellie crossed her arms. “Fine.”

“Fine.” Joel sat down next to her. He reached up to adjust the bandage on his forehead.

Ellie was quiet for a moment, before saying, “does it hurt?”

“Nah,” Joel said. “It’s okay.”

Ellie sniffed. “Good.”

“Mhm,” Joel said.

They were quiet for another minute. The movie ran through the credits.

“I liked the starfish,” Joel grunted.

“The starfish?”

“In Finding Nemo. Dory was pretty funny, too.”
Ellie smiled.

The movie had begun, so Ellie tried to pay attention. These movies all looked the same to her, though. A bunch of white dudes talking about stuff that didn’t matter at all and running around shooting each other on horses. It made Ellie depressed. All the actors were dead now, all the horses were dead now, and it really didn’t matter who got ownership of the saloon in the end or whatever the fuck. At least Nemo had a chance at surviving the Infection.

And, if Ellie was being honest with herself, a part of her didn’t like thinking about Before, because thinking about Before always lead to her thinking about Joel’s Before. Which always lead to her wondering how much he wished the Infection had never happened, and that his daughter had lived, and that the two of them had never met.

Joel seemed to notice Ellie’s detachment. He poked her leg. “We’ll watch somethin’ you want next, okay?”

“Oh? Oh, no, sorry. It’s not the movie. I don’t know. I’m just tired.”

Joel slid over on the couch and gestured to his lap. “You wanna lay down?”

Ellie did. She assumed Joel was waiting for her to throw her legs over him, but she settled down with her head on his left thigh instead. Joel tensed, and for a second, she thought she’d made a huge mistake. But he relaxed almost immediately, settling in with a hand on her shoulder.

The western finished after what felt like ages. They heated up dinner in the oven – mashed potatoes and some roasted pork – before the next movie. Ellie chose When Harry Met Sally. It was a favourite of hers.

Ellie sat down in her usual spot on the couch, but Joel pulled her back over to his side. He slid down a bit, and Ellie surprised herself by moving closer. They ended up with Ellie’s head resting against Joel’s shoulder, his arm wrapped around her.

“Just what the fuck is going on?? Ellie wondered. Were they cuddling? This was cuddling, right? Harry and Sally would probably call this cuddling. Where the hell had this come from?

Jesus Christ, you moron, don’t question it! yelled another voice in Ellie’s head. That was the voice she listened to.

Ellie leaned closer to Joel and let herself fully embrace it. God, did it feel good. His plaid button-down was soft, and his body felt even softer beneath it, but Ellie could also feel the hardness below, the swell of his bicep and the planes of his chest. She wondered how she felt to him; was her body of any consequence to him? Did he pay it any mind at all, the muscles on her shoulders, the softness of her skin?

Ellie got an answer of sorts. Joel lifted her hand from her shoulder and easily, as though he was doing it unconsciously, slipped it into her hair. He ran a finger, and then two, up the back of her neck, and Ellie nearly melted. It was a good thing she had seen this movie before, because she sure as hell wasn’t paying attention anymore.

Joel said nothing, and gave no indication of why he was doing this. He just kept tousling her hair, sliding his fingers up and down, twirling a piece around his finger every so often. Ellie did everything she could to keep from moaning. She allowed herself to slide a little closer to him, but that was all.

And then, as abruptly as it had started, it was over. The movie ended, and Joel got up to turn off the
“Gettin’ late,” he said. It was 10:30. “We should probably get to bed.”

Ellie couldn’t think of an argument. “Alright,” she conceded. She wasn’t going to push it.

They cleared up the kitchen, said goodnight, and went off to their separate rooms. Ellie closed the door behind her and leaned against it for a moment before getting into bed.

* 

Ellie was stuck in a dream. Really stuck – she knew she was in a dream, but she couldn’t get out. It was always like this.

To get out of the dream, she had to find Joel in a sea of Infected. There were people around, people Ellie knew from Jackson, but one by one, she watched them get bitten. Ellie knew from first-hand experience that it took people hours to turn after a bite, but in the dream, it was instantaneous. She watched Maria get her throat ripped out by a clicker. One of the guards, already infected, bit Tommy’s arm.

Ellie sped up, trying to find Joel. She had to get to him before it was too late, or he was going to die, and she was going to be stuck here. She kept thinking she had found him, but it turned out to be a lookalike, another man in flannel, or with a thick beard.

Ellie broke through the crowd of Infected into a clearing. Surely, Joel would be there. But he wasn’t – no one was. The Infected were all gone, and Ellie was alone.

* 

Ellie’s own scream woke her up. Her eyes snapped open, and she found herself sitting upright in bed, soaked in sweat. Her blanket was at her feet, twisted into a pretzel. She was breathing fast, and heavy.

The door to her room slammed open, and Ellie screamed again, her muscles clenching as she instinctually prepared to fight. She saw the barrel of the shotgun first. Then, behind it, Joel’s terrified face.

He didn’t lower the gun. “What happened?!” he yelled.

Ellie tried to tell him, but she couldn’t speak. She couldn’t catch her breath.

“Night… mare…” she finally said. Her eyes widened as she tried to get air into her lungs.

“You sure? No one else here?” Joel said. Ellie really wished he’d put the gun down. It wasn’t helping things.

She nodded. She placed a hand on her chest, trying to get a hold of herself.

Joel dropped the gun. “Thank god,” he said. He crossed the room to Ellie. “You alright?”

Ellie nodded, though her eyes were starting to water. She wasn’t crying, she was just that out-of-breath. Joel, despite having the emotional intelligence of a tree trunk, noticed.

He sat down beside her on the bed, and, to Ellie’s surprise, pulled her into a hug.

“That musta been some dream,” he said.
Ellie’s breathing finally started to slow.

“Same shit as always,” Ellie mumbled, when she could speak again.

“You ever gonna tell me what it is?”

Ellie pulled away from him to look him in the eye. “Nope,” she said.

Joel’s face was unreadable. “Alright.”

They sat in silence for a moment. It was an awkward one. Ellie hated that.

“Well,” Joel finally said. “Let’s go; I’m beat. Wielding a gun in your underwear ain’t easy.”

It had not escaped Ellie’s notice, even in her addled state, that Joel was in her bed, wearing just a t-shirt and boxers. She herself was only wearing a very large t-shirt that had once belong to Joel.

“Go where?” Ellie said, not mentioning the underwear part.

“My room,” Joel said, like it was obvious. “If you wake up screamin’ again, I ain’t gettin’ up.”

Ellie hesitated.

“I’m not gonna wake up screaming again,” Ellie said. “I’ll be lucky if I even get back to sleep.”

“When you’re drenched, and you’re shiverin’.” Ellie hadn’t realized, but she was indeed shaking. “Let’s go.”

Ellie didn’t argue. “Okay.”

Joel led her back to his room. Joel’s bed was pushed against the wall, so he let her get in first, then followed her in. He left, as some of the older people in town might say, “enough room for Jesus” between them, and Ellie didn’t dare close the distance. In her mind, she did – in her mind, she did a lot more than that, climbing on top of Joel and letting him strip his old shirt off of her and putting her mouth all over him. But in reality, she stayed away.

They both lay on their backs, like two people buried side by side. They were as silent as corpses, too, though it was obvious both of them were wide awake.

“Been a while since you woke me up screamin’ like that,” Joel said after a while.

“Uh-huh.” Ellie had mostly learned to keep her nightmares to herself as she got older.

“Of course, it’s been a while since you been sleepin’ here every night,” Joel added.

Ellie tensed. “Thought I was quiet comin’ in,” she said.

“You were.”

Ellie didn’t know what to say.

“I ain’t tryin’ to pry,” Joel said. “What you do is your business. But you know, if you get into any trouble, you can tell me, right?”

Ellie had to hold back her ironic chuckle. Like Joel wasn’t the reason she was out at night. Like she could tell Joel any of it.
“Yeah, sure,” she said. “I know.”

“Good,” Joel said. He rolled over, so that he was facing her. When Ellie turned to look, his eyes were open.

“Let’s get some sleep now, okay?” Joel said.

Ellie nodded. “Goodnight, Joel.”

“’Night, Ellie.”

Ellie shut her eyes.
Chapter 4

Ellie woke to the sound of snoring. Loud, motorlike snoring.

For a moment, she imagined a world before the Infection, a married couple arguing. “My husband’s always snoring!” her grumpy housewife chided. “I never get any sleep!”

Ellie did not care about sleep. She had never woken up this happy.

She rolled over delicately, trying not to wake him. This wasn’t a side of Joel she saw often, and she was going to savour it.

Everyone looks more peaceful asleep, but the difference was night and day on Joel. Awake, he was usually frowning, always tense. Asleep, his jaw unclenched, and his mouth fell open, his parted lips surprisingly soft. His body relaxed, his muscles looser than ever.

Ellie thought about what else she could do to loosen Joel up.

If she had her way, she’d wake him up with her hand on his chest, trailing circles with the tips of her fingers, eventually working her way under his shirt. He would wake up then – Joel was ever vigilant – but he’d pretend still to be asleep. Ellie would slide closer, her hand dipping lower, working its magic until Joel couldn’t pretend anymore. Then, without warning, he’d spring up and roll them over so that he was on top of her. He’d kiss her long and hard, one hand on the side of her face, one locking her hands above her head. His mouth would move lower, and he’d slide his hands down to —

“Mornin’.”

Ellie blinked. The snoring had stopped, and Joel’s eyes were open. He was watching her watching him, her whole body flushed with arousal.

Ellie struggled to make words. “Hey,” she said lamely.

“Hello,” Joel said. His mouth quirked up, like he had just remembered a good joke.

“The fucking lawnmower in the room woke me up,” Ellie said, trying to retain some semblance of dignity. “Oh no, wait, that was you.” She had never actually seen a lawnmower in use, but she was pretty sure that was a decent burn.

“You scream in your sleep, I snore,” Joel said with a shrug. “Speaking of which – you feelin’ better?”

“Uh-huh,” Ellie said. If her nightmares were the price she paid to wake up beside Joel, she’d gladly take them on. “Thanks. You know, for last night.”

“You don’t gotta say thank you.”

“Well, I said it anyway.”

“Ellie,” Joel said, his voice almost a whisper. He reached out and pushed Ellie’s hair back from her face, and let his hand rest against her neck. “It was my pleasure.”

*
Ellie practically jumped from the bed and ran straight into the shower. Once she was alone, she shoved her hand between her legs and circled her clit for fifteen, twenty seconds before she was shaking from her orgasm at the bottom of the bathtub, still feeling Joel’s fingers on her face. She came harder than usual, imagining Joel inside her, his fingers, her cock, his tongue – anything.

She stayed under the water for a few minutes, letting the energy drain out of her. She had to if she was going to make it through the day.

She and Joel had big plans. They were going swimming, and if Ellie didn’t keep her cool, she was probably going to drown.

*

As the day went on, however, Ellie wondered if maybe she wasn’t the only one keeping a secret. Joel was acting… differently than usual.

First, there was the thing in bed this morning. The hand thing. I mean, what was that? Ellie thought. It wasn’t like Joel never touched her, but his touches were usually familial. A slap on the back, a high five. The occasional hug. He was never so intimate, and never so gentle.

Then, there was the general lightness about him as they walked to The Lake, the glorified pond the town swam in. He looked much as he had when he was sleeping – relaxed, softer. Ellie wondered if he had relieved himself at the same time as she had in the shower.

She took advantage of his above average mood to release a little of the tension between them. She leaned into him as they walked, teased him whenever she got the chance. Joel not only allowed it, he seemed to enjoy it, laughing louder than usual at her jokes, smiling wider than Ellie had seen him do – well, ever. Was she crazy? Or could he possibly feel the same way?

They arrived at the lake just after eleven in the morning, and found it deserted. The day was just as unseasonably warm as the last few had been, but most people would be doing their duties, or in school. They would have the place all to themselves, at least for now.

Throwing her bag down on the pebbly bank of the lake, Ellie started stripping off clothes. She was already sweaty, and she wanted to get in the water fast. Joel didn’t seem quite as keen to move quickly, so Ellie yelled, “Race ya!” as she tossed her shirt aside and sprinted towards the lake. Sure enough, she heard Joel’s bag hit the ground behind her.

Ellie bounded in until the water was chest-level. She had learned to swim the first year they had settled in Jackson. Joel said it was too much of a liability if they ever struck out on the road again, that he was sick of dragging her around on wooden palettes, but she was pretty sure he was just worried about her. Ellie wanted Joel to teach her himself, but Joel suggested Tommy do it, since he had lifeguarded a few summers as a teenager. Ellie and Maria had had a good laugh at the image of Tommy in a red speedo.

Ellie was frightened at first, especially of the lake itself – it was deep enough in the middle that the bottom was obscured – but soon, she found her stride and started enjoying it. Now, thanks to Tommy, she could execute a perfect breaststroke, backstroke, and a few others she had forgotten the name of. If they were going on their cross-country adventure now, it would be Ellie pulling Joel around on the palettes.

Ellie dunked underwater to wet her hair and did a somersault while she was down there. When she surfaced again, Joel was standing beside her, bare-chested and soaking wet.
He gave her a playful shove. “Where were these skills when we were in Boston?”

“Maybe I could swim all along. Maybe I just didn’t feel like getting in the water with a bunch of Infected.”

“Said the woman who’s immune,” Joel scoffed. “Hey, come closer.”

Ellie’s eyebrows knit together. She took a step forward.

“Closer,” Joel said. “I wanna show you somethin’.”

That was the kind of thing people said in movies before they kissed someone. Ellie’s pulse accelerated.

She took another step, closing the distance between them until she could feel the heat of his body.

Joel rested his hands on her waist underwater.

“What did you want to show me?” The panic was evident in her voice.

“This,” Joel said. He grabbed her waist, scooped her up above the water, and tossed her a good five feet away. She landed in the lake with a huge splash.

“You… asshole!” Ellie yelled when she surfaced, spitting out water. Joel laughed his head off.

“You’re going to pay for that!” Ellie dipped under the surface and returned right in front of Joel, bringing up as much water as she could to throw in his face. Her plan worked; Joel turned away, sputtering and swearing.

“You can throw water at me all you want,” Joel said, when he stopped coughing, “but until you can throw me, I’m always gonna win.” He lunged towards Ellie, who dove back under to escape.

As on land, Joel was stronger, but Ellie was faster. She stayed two strokes ahead of him and made him chase her around the pond for a while. Then she realized if she let him catch her, he’d touch her again, so she stopped dead and turned around to wait.

Joel smirked as he caught up to her, then frowned when he understood that she’d let him win. But he still grabbed her by the waist again and lifted her until her stomach was entirely out of the water.

To Ellie’s surprise, instead of throwing her, he let her fall back down right in front of him, close enough to touch. Ellie’s stomach slid against Joel’s as he let her down, and she kicked herself for wearing a one-piece. He pulled her even closer against him and let his hands rest on the small of her back.

Joel’s face was unreadable. Is this the set-up for another prank? Ellie wondered.

But then Joel lifted a hand to her face, much like he had done that morning, and let the backs of his fingers softly brush her cheek. His hand lingered there for a moment, then he lowered it to her chin, and tipped her head up so she was looking right into his eyes. For a split second, Ellie saw reflected there what she knew was clearly visible all over her own face: need. Joel leaned in, an infinitesimal amount—

“Hey, you two, get a room!”

Ellie snapped to attention, the water suddenly cold around her. At the shore were some random guys from town, people who’s names she didn’t even know. People who knew nothing, nothing about...
what she and Joel shared.

And yet, just by coincidence, these assholes had ruined it. Ellie could already tell whatever was about to happen was... now not going to. Joel’s eyes were closed off, his posture arching away from hers even though his hand was still on her face, lingering like a ghost.

“I should probably head back. Got some stuff to take care of at home,” Joel muttered, backing away, dropping his hand. They had been there for what, fifteen minutes?

“Okay,” Ellie said stupidly. She couldn’t feel anything but the cold water.

“See you later,” Joel said. It sounded like an apology, but Ellie knew it wasn’t. At least not a real one. She just nodded.

She stood alone in the middle of the lake and watched Joel walk away. She watched him dry off and put his clothes back on, pick up his bag. He waved to her as he left. She instinctively raised her hand to wave back.

She stayed out there in the water for ten minutes, processing, waiting for the shock to wear off. When it finally did, Ellie did what she did best: she got angry.
Jessica opened the door.

“Jesus Christ, who the fuck is banging on my — oh. Hi Ellie. What do you want?”

Ellie answered her question by shoving her back into the hallway and pressing her own mouth into Jessica’s, hard enough to make a point.

“Whoa, whoa, easy girl!” Jessica said. She tucked her chin and looked up at Ellie through thick red eyelashes, the corner of her mouth quirked. “All you had to do was ask.” Jessica grabbed Ellie by the hand and pulled her inside, shutting the door behind her. Ellie gratefully followed Jessica to the bedroom.

Jessica was a former lover of Ellie’s and Ellie’s favourite of them all for two reasons: one, the girl was good in bed, and two, she had absolutely no interest in love or intimacy or feelings whatsoever. Her hair was a brighter red than Ellie’s, and she was few years older, but they were similar in shape and size. She was who Ellie might have been had she made her way to Jackson alone. Had she never met Joel.

The two women were never friends – as a general rule, Ellie didn’t have friends. But Jessica was exactly what Ellie needed right now.

Their footsteps pounded up the stairs. They crossed the threshold of the bedroom, and both women started pulling clothes off.

“What brought you to my doorstep today?” Jessica asked, as she fiddled with the buttons on her shirt.

“No time for talking,” Ellie said. She removed Jessica’s hands from her buttons and started working at them herself, pressing her mouth to Jessica’s again to shut her up.

Ellie got Jessica’s shirt off and fell back on the bed, dragging Jessica with her. Jessica wasted no time getting Ellie’s own t-shirt off. Ellie’s swimsuit was still wet from the lake. A few drops of water sparkled on her stomach.

Their mouths met again, and Ellie let herself get lost in Jessica’s kiss. She lips were soft, feminine, so unlike what—

No. She was not going to think about him. Not when she knew he didn’t give a damn about her.

Ellie sunk her teeth into Jessica’s lower lip. Jessica repaid her by slipping a hand into her hair and pulling.

“Ugh, fuck, Jo— Jessica,” Ellie gasped.

No no no no no. She couldn’t. He didn’t care.

Jessica didn’t notice Ellie’s slip-up.

“God, I’d forgotten how hot you are,” Jessica said, pulling back to grin at Ellie. “Why don’t we do this more often?” She leaned back in to kiss Ellie once more before turning her attention to the button on Ellie’s jeans. “I want you. Now,” she said plainly.
I want you.

*I want you.*

*How hard is that to say?*

“Damnit, Ellie, did you glue these jeans on this morning? This button is—hey, what’s wrong?”

Jessica’s hands froze on Ellie’s waist. “Why are you crying?”

“It’s nothing,” Ellie said, her voice thick. “Let’s just keep going.”

“Ellie,” Jessica said. She climbed off of Ellie and sat beside her resolutely. “It’s not nothing. Did I hurt you or something?”

“No, I’m fine. It’s just hormones or whatever. Just ignore it.”

“I’m not going to keep trying to have sex with someone who’s crying,” Jessica said firmly. “Apocalypse or not, that’s a crime. But if you want to talk about it, I’m all ears.”

Ellie wanted to keep fighting – she was *fine*, Jessica had to believe that – but all of her anger suddenly left her.

“I have to go,” Ellie said automatically, standing up and pulling her shirt back over her head.

“Ellie, wait. I can’t let you leave like this. Just tell me what’s wrong.”

“I can’t,” Ellie said. A fat tear fell onto her cheek as she said it; she cursed it under her breath.

Jessica followed Ellie as she left the room. “I can’t make you talk to me, I guess, but can you at least promise me that you’ll talk to someone else about what’s wrong? What about that guy you live with – don’t you guys talk?” Jessica paused. “Or is he the one that hurt you, and that’s why you’re here at my place instead of at home?”

Ellie stopped at the front door and turned back. She felt awful for doing this to Jessica, but what else was new? When was anything not awful?

“I’m sorry,” Ellie said. She meant it. “Don’t worry about me. I’m fine. But I really have to go.”

*

Ellie ran home in a daze. Since she had left the lake, the sky had opened up, rain pouring down and leaving Ellie chilled. So much for her and Joel’s sunny day at the beach. Ellie let the rain hide her tears from passersby as she rounded the last corner before her house.

Ellie wasn’t sure whether she wanted Joel to be there or not. She still wasn’t sure what she would do if he was as she pushed the always-sticking door open, her bad shoulder aching.

Joel was nowhere in sight, but he was definitely there. The kitchen was cleaner than they had left it that morning. That’s what was so important that he had to leave Ellie alone in the lake: doing the dishes. For some reason, that little detail made Ellie’s insides boil. She took the stairs two at a time to look for Joel upstairs.

There were sounds of life coming from Joel’s bedroom. Jessica wanted her to talk? She was going to yell. Just as she had banged on Jessica’s door an hour before, she banged on Joel’s now.

“What?!” Joel yelled from inside.
“Open the damn door. I need to talk to you.”

“’M busy at the moment.”

“I don’t fucking care! Let me in!”

“I said I’m busy!”

Ellie tried the handle, but it was locked. In all the years they had lived together, Joel’s door had never been locked.

“Fuck this,” Ellie muttered to herself. She ran back downstairs.

Joel wanted his dishes clean so badly that it was more important than Ellie?

Ellie grabbed a bowl out of the dishrack and chucked at the wall. It thudded off the wooden cabinet door and smashed spectacularly on the floor.

No noise from upstairs. She picked up a dinner plate and repeated the process.

Ellie got two more plates and a bowl done before Joel appeared in the kitchen door. He looked… a bit of a mess. He was still in his bathing suit and t-shirt, and his hair was sticking up on one side.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Joel said.

“Making the most of my vacation.”

“You’re breakin’ all our goddamn dishes. You havin’ a fit or something?”

“I was trying to get your attention!” Ellie hated the desperation in her voice.

“What part of ‘I’m busy’ did you not understand?” Ellie picked up another plate. “Alright, alright, Jesus. Stop. You’re gonna hurt yourself.”

“Like you care.” Her cheeks were heating up, tears threatening to start falling again.

Joel crossed his arms. “That’s what you think?” He pinned her with his stare. “After all we been through? You think I don’t care about you?”

Ellie shrugged. If she spoke, she was going to cry.

“Jesus, well, this really is a kick in the pants, isn’t it? I care more, a hundred times more” – Joel pointed a finger accusingly at her, his voice rising – “about your life than I do my own, and you don’t even damn well notice!”

Ellie took a deep breath. “If you gave a damn about me,” she yelled, “you wouldn’t have just fucking left me there!”

“I left you there—” Joel paused to get his voice under control, since he was yelling loud enough for the neighbours to hear. “I left you there,” he repeated, quieter, “because I care about you, alright?”

Ellie leaned back against the counter. The four feet of linoleum between them felt like an ocean.

“Caring about me isn’t trying to ditch me. Again.”

Joel huffed, and ran a hand through his hair. “I ain’t tryin’ to ditch you,” he said. “You gotta know I would never do that.” When Ellie didn’t answer, he insisted. “Ellie, come on. You gotta know that.”
Her eyes spilled over. Damnit.

“Then what the hell was that today? No, don’t come over here.” Ellie put up her hands. “Just tell me why you’re being like this.”

“Ellie, I…”

“Use your words, dude.”

Joel exhaled. “Ellie… do you think I haven’t noticed how you been lookin’ at me lately?”

A current ran down Ellie’s spine. No, she did not think he had noticed. She shook her head.

“Just bein’ in a room with you now feels… different. Like there’s… some kinda weird energy that wasn’t there before.”

Ellie wasn’t sure she wanted the answer, but she asked the question anyway.

“And the touching me, and the teasing me, and the playing with my hair while we were watching the movie – you gonna blame that on this ‘weird energy’ too?”

Joel straightened up. “I shouldn’a done any of that. Goddamnit… I shouldn’t have.”

“But you did.”

“Yeah, I did.”

“Why?”

Joel shook his head slowly, his eyes on the floor. Finally, he looked up and met Ellie’s gaze.

“Ain’t you noticed the way I been lookin’ at you lately?”

The current in Ellie’s spine turned to lightning.

“No,” she said slowly. “I didn’t.”

“Well, then. I guess I do a better job hidin’ my feelings than you do.”

“Denying them, you mean.”

“Keepin’ them to myself to keep you safe,” Joel said decisively.

Ellie felt a smile tugging at her lips. She promptly arranged her face back into a scowl. She was supposed to be mad.

“If you were trying not to hurt me, you already fucked it up big time. What makes you think you can fuck it up anymore?”

“Ellie, I ain’t right for you. We both know that.”

“Bullshit.” Ellie took a step across the floor. “What’s the problem? You think you’re too old for me, old man?”

“That part ain’t ideal, that’s for sure. You don’t think people around town are gonna be talkin’?”

“Since when do you give a fuck what ‘people around town’ think?”
Joel sighed in exasperation. “Ellie…” He seemed determined to look anywhere but her face, but Ellie stared until he returned her eye contact.

“I’m not a good person, Ellie. Far from it. You know that. Like you just said, I tried to leave you once before.”

“You tried to leave me again today, but look! You’re still here. You can’t get rid of me.” Ellie took another step.

“I don’t want to get rid of you,” Joel said. “But that don’t mean I wouldn’t hurt you. I would never mean to, but in the end, Ellie… I don’t trust myself with you.”

Ellie blinked slowly. “Joel,” she said. “I’m not, like, the greatest person ever, either – stop, just let me finish, okay?

“You act like I’m some amazing person, but I’m not. I’ve hurt people. I’ve let I-don’t-even-know-how-many people die so that I could stay alive. I’ve killed people, Infected. Sometimes I even liked it. And I think you know that, and the only reason you ignore it is because you like it, too.

“No one else gets it like you do, okay? No one else knows me. Most people here think I’m an asshole, and honestly, I deserve that. I don’t care about any of them. I only care about you.”

Ellie took one final step to close the distance between them. She took Joel’s hands in her own, gently, to show him that it was okay.

“You’re the only person who has ever been there for me, Joel,” Ellie said quietly. His brow was creased together, as if he were in pain. Ellie wanted to smooth it. She knew what her own face must look like: open, and wanting, her hair still soaked from the rain.

“You’ve always been there for me. It’s not like that’s gonna change,” Ellie said. “And I’m always gonna be there for you, too.” She paused. “Just… just let us be happy for once, okay, Joel? Please. Let’s just be happy.”

There was a moment where Ellie was unsure of what would happen. Joel was unusually still, his hands clamped on her own.

Then, he moved both hands to Ellie’s face, and before Ellie knew it, Joel was kissing her, again and again and again.
Chapter 6

Joel’s tongue had been in Ellie’s mouth for five minutes before her brain caught up on what was happening.

She was kissing Joel.

*Joel’s kissing me!* she thought. *Me! And Joel! Holy fuck!!!*

It was a good kiss, too, and even though her brain wasn’t quite there yet, Ellie found ways to show her enthusiasm. One hand combed into Joel’s hair; it was thick but softer than Ellie expected. The other moved up his torso, exploring the newly-discovered topography of his chest.

Joel, for his part, was doing an excellent job showing Ellie the magic he could work with his mouth. She’d never been kissed like this before. She’d had good kisses, but none from anyone so… self-assured. Joel kissed with a *purpose*. That purpose seemed to be making Ellie weak.

Before her knees could buckle, Joel walked them backwards to the counter. Without breaking the kiss, he lifted Ellie – easily – by the waist and sat her down on the countertop. Ellie opened her legs to allow him to come closer.

Joel’s hand came to Ellie’s face. He stopped kissing her abruptly.

“You’re still cryin’,” he said.

Ellie laughed gently. “Definitely happy tears.” She smiled at Joel, and he returned it. His face was just inches from Ellie’s. She’d never seen his smile this closely before. God, he was beautiful. Ellie pulled him back in and returned eagerly to their kiss.

Joel didn’t seem convinced, though. He didn’t stop kissing her, but he mumbled against her lips, “are you sure you wanna do this?”

Ellie was the one who pulled away this time, holding Joel at arms’ length.

“Joel,” Ellie said. “I want this more than anything else in the world.”

Joel snorted. “In this world, that ain’t sayin’ much. But I’ll take your word for it.” He lifted Ellie off the counter, Ellie wrapping her legs around his waist, and carried her down the hall and up the stairs.

“Your room, or mine?” Joel asked on the landing.

“Yours,” Ellie said immediately.

Joel kicked the door shut behind them, and then set Ellie down, not gently, on the bed. He climbed over her, lowering himself down until they were pressed together from head to toe.

He kissed Ellie once on the mouth, then let his lips trail down her neck, then to her collarbone as he pulled her t-shirt aside.

“You mind if I take this off?” Joel asked.

“Only if you take yours off, too.” Ellie was trying to sound seductive, but she mostly just sounded out of breath.
Joel sat up and whipped his shirt over his head. Ellie had seen him like this two days ago, but seeing
him in this position, being allowed to stare openly rather than steal glances, was different.

Her hand fell automatically to the scar on the right side of his stomach, where the pipe had pierced
his skin seven years ago. Ellie placed her palm flat against it and met Joel’s eyes, hoping she was
conveying her thoughts clearly: *I’m so lucky that you’re still here.*

Joel lifted her hand and pressed his lips against her fingers. Then, before she knew it, the moment
had passed, and things were hot and heavy again, Joel sliding his hands up her stomach, taking her
shirt with it.

Ellie let him pull it over her head. He wasted no time getting the straps of her bathing suit off as well,
pulling the suit down to her waist, revealing her breasts. Ellie had an impulse to cover herself, which
she had never felt with anyone else. She realized it was nerves, and, in classic Ellie fashion, made a
joke to cover them up: “I hope you like what you see, because there’s not more where that came
from.”

Joel made a noise of disbelief and came nose to nose with her. He slid a hand up her stomach, and
then further upwards, to cup one of her breasts. He gave the nipple a hard squeeze. Ellie sunk her
nails into his back.

“I ain’t never seen anyone sexier than you,” Joel growled in Ellie’s ear.

That was when Ellie lost it.

She rolled her hips into his hungrily, happily finding that he was hard for her. Her hands flew all
over him, across the planes of his back, down his strong chest, and finally to the drawstring on his
bathing suit. But Joel moved before she could untie it, his mouth moving to one breast and then the
other, working her nipples with his tongue.

“What kind of things do you like?” Joel asked in a conversational tone while he nipped at the flesh of
her breasts.

“Huh?” Ellie leaned up on her elbows. “What do you mean?”

Even from this angle, Ellie could see Joel’s eye roll. “In bed, you dope,” he clarified. He moved
lower, to the soft area of her stomach.

“Oh.” Ellie let out a strained giggle. “I don’t know…”

“I bet you do,” Joel said from below.

“Uh…” Ellie said. “I mean, I guess… I like talking. Like, you know… dirty stuff. I mean, I’d like it
if you told me what you— holy fuck!”

In one quick motion, Joel had yanked Ellie’s shorts and bathing suit down to her knees, and moved
between her legs, licking a long stripe from her entrance to her clitoris. Ellie’s hands flew to Joel’s
hair to hold him there, and he obliged gladly, taking up a steady pace on her clit with his tongue.

“Jesus Christ,” Ellie gasped. “I guess you can’t talk while you do this, but fuck, this works, too!”

He kept up the rhythm for a few minutes, occasionally throwing Ellie off by dipping his tongue
inside her, or sliding a finger in, making her moan. Ellie was getting louder and louder, but she didn’t
care – no one, *no one* had ever made her feel like this. Yet she still wanted, needed more.
“Joel,” she said between breaths. “Do you have condoms?”

He looked up at her through lidded eyes. “I do,” he said slowly.

“Okay… do you wanna, like, get them?”

Joel paused. “You sure that’s what you want?”

Ellie huffed. “How many times do I have to say yes?”

“At least one more.”

“Yes,” Ellie said emphatically.

Joel didn’t move. “You know, a ‘please’ wouldn’t kill ya,” he said, his eyes glinting.

Ellie put her foot on his shoulder and shoved. “Fucking move, dude.”

“Alright, alright, calm down,” Joel said. He leaned over her to the nightstand and opened the drawer, revealing a few loose condoms. Ellie took the opportunity to untie his bathing suit, and slipped her hands underneath the waistband to take his cock into her hands. Joel’s whole body shuddered when she touched him, and what an accomplishment that was.

He felt good in her hands. Joel shut the drawer and leaned back so that he was straddling her, and, just for a moment, closed his eyes and relaxed into Ellie’s ministrations. Soon, though, he was swatting her hands away and furiously rolling on the condom.

Joel kicked the rest of their clothing off and settled into position, resting between Ellie’s knees and positioning himself at her entrance.

“Are you—”

“Sure?” Ellie interrupted. “Yes, Joel, I’m sure. I’m the freaking Queen of Sure. Are you gonna make me beg?”

Joel narrowed his eyes. “Not tonight,” he said. Then he pushed inside her.

One swift motion, and Ellie was full. Joel gave her a moment to catch her breath, but honestly, she didn’t want or need it. Nothing she had ever felt was remotely comparable to how good Joel’s cock felt inside her.

“You can move,” Ellie said after a minute.

Joel didn’t move.

“Joel? Are you okay?”

“Just gimme a sec.”

Ellie was worried for a moment, but then Joel met her eyes and her worries vanished. She saw something there – she wasn’t sure exactly what yet, but it made all of her doubts, all of the anguish of the past week evaporate completely.

Ellie cupped Joel’s cheek, and raised her head to kiss him, softly. Joel kissed her back, and Ellie felt… lighter.
It didn’t take long for their passion to seep back in. Soon, Joel was biting her lip and grabbing her ass.

“You good now, then?” Ellie asked.

“Yeah, much better.” He squeezed her ass hard for reassurance.

“Okay…” Ellie said. “Then are you gonna, like…?”

“Am I gonna what?” Joel asked, cocking his head. “You said you liked talkin’. You ain’t doin’ a very good job of it.”

Ellie snorted. She should have known that even in bed, Joel would be a stubborn asshole. But if he wanted to play games, Ellie wasn’t going to let him win.

Ellie put on her best poker face before saying: “If I can still talk, then you probably aren’t fucking me hard enough.”

Joel smirked. He pulled out of her almost completely, and then pushed himself all the way back into her.

“I can still talk,” Ellie said. “Blah blah blah.”

Joel repeated the thrust once, twice, three times quick.

“Still no speech problems,” Ellie said, albeit a little breathily.

Joel fucked her nicely for thirty seconds, flicking at one of her nipples as he did.

“You’re gonna have to do better than— ahh!”

Joel had slammed into her hard, his fingers gripping tightly on her hips. She thought that he’d been giving her his entire length before, but evidently, he had been holding a couple inches back. Ellie couldn’t stop from rolling her hips against him to ask for more.

“Thought that would shut you up,” Joel said with a laugh, before he began fucking Ellie in earnest.

After that, Ellie could barely think, let alone form a sentence. All she managed to mumble as Joel fucked her was his name and the word *more*.

Above her, Joel looked incredible. Holding himself up, his muscles were more pronounced than ever. The sweat glistening on his skin only served to make him more defined. Ellie’s eyes flitted frantically between his body and his face, where he looked with Ellie with more reverence than she could handle.

“Fuck, you feel so goddamn good,” Joel swore, in between repetitions of Ellie’s name.

“So do you,” Ellie breathed. “Fuck, your cock is like magic.” If this was a silly thing to say, Ellie didn’t notice or care.

“Been thinkin’ about doin’ this for a while now,” Joel said. He put his mouth to Ellie’s ear. The tickle of his breath as he spoke sent shivers down Ellie’s spine.

“Me too.” Joel was still pounding into her.

“Almost did it this mornin’,” he continued. “You got no idea what it was like, waking up with you
beside me, wearin’ nothin’ but my shirt.”

Elle was full-on panting. “‘Got some idea,’” she said. “Came in the shower about two minutes later.”

Joel’s eyes widened slightly. “Fuck,” he said, rather loudly. He pulled Ellie’s legs up to get a better angle, somehow pushing in even deeper than before.

“Uhhh,” Ellie moaned. “Next time I’ll wake you up by riding you. That’s what I was thinking about this morning.”

Joel’s eyes darkened, and his pace quickened, and Ellie knew he was close. She was, too.

“You ain’t gonna be able to move when I’m done with you,” he said.

Joel kissed Ellie roughly as her fucked her through his climax. His hands dug into her hips hard enough to leave bruises. Ellie scraped her nails down his back, knowing Joel well enough to know he’d get off on pain without even having to ask. On cue, Joel moaned into Ellie’s mouth. His hips stuttered, and Ellie could tell from the pulsing inside her that he was coming, hard. She let out a moan of her own as she moved her hips in time with his, leading him down from his orgasm.

Joel had barely finished when he pulled out of her, his face immediately between her thighs. Ellie shook at the shock of his mouth against her clit, sensitive from the friction of sex. It felt incredible, though, and Ellie knew she wasn’t going to last long. She knotted a hand in Joel’s hair and pulled. All it took was him slipping three fingers up inside her before she was shaking and crying out, finishing on Joel’s clever tongue.

When she stopped twitching, Joel gently pulled his fingers from her and wiped them rather inelegantly on the bed sheets. He flopped down beside her, and Ellie raised her head to let him wrap an arm around her shoulders.

They lay there panting in synch for a few minutes until their heartbeats both returned to normal. When they did, Joel pulled Ellie in close, her head falling onto his chest. Ellie threw one leg across his. Joel kissed her on the forehead, and Ellie smiled, feeling incredibly whole.

“I thought that was pretty good, if I do say so myself,” Ellie said. She noticed with interest that she didn’t feel the way she normally felt after sex: empty and drained. She just felt… really happy.

“Baby,” Joel said, his lips against the top of Ellie’s head. “I ain’t never felt better.”
Ellie and Joel spent the rest of the night in bed together, learning each other’s wants and needs. Ellie relished every new bit of information she gathered about Joel. How his hands kneaded a particular pattern into her hair when she went down on him. How his breath caught when she pinned his hands above his head. And how every muscle in his body tensed and released as he finished for her, time and time again.

But what Ellie was happiest to learn was that what Joel needed most was just her.

They took a break at dinner time, when both of them realized that they hadn’t eaten all day. Joel heated up leftovers while Ellie sat at the table, her feet on his chair. This time, when he brought their plates over, she didn’t flinch when he touched her legs, or when he ran a hand up her calves, slowly, getting to know her body.

They didn’t talk much at dinner. Food was a necessity, fuel for getting back to what they really wanted to be doing. They scarfed it down and ran back upstairs, Joel smacking Ellie’s ass as she charged ahead of him.

They fell asleep around midnight, their legs intertwined like snakes. But Ellie didn’t sleep well.

The nightmare came again. It was the same as always until it wasn’t. For the first time, Ellie found Joel.

“Thank fuck,” Ellie said, when she recognized Joel in the clearing. “Thought I’d never find your ass.”

Joel turned around. Immediately, he raised his gun. “Please,” he said. “Don’t hurt me.”

Ellie frowned. “What?”

Joel’s face looked strange. It took Ellie a minute to realize it was because he was scared. Ellie turned around, but there was nothing else there.

“Ahh!”

Ellie spun back around. Joel was doubled over, hands on his stomach, his gun dropped on the ground.

“Joel? Are you bleeding?!”

Ellie stepped forward, but Joel raised a hand.

“Please,” he begged. “Please, just leave me alone.”

“Joel, what are you—”

Ellie looked down. The gun was in her hands, and it was smoking. She had fired on Joel.

Ellie didn’t want to, but she raised the gun again, looked Joel right in his pleading eyes, and pulled the trigger.
She woke up screaming.

Joel was awake in one second, his gun in his hands in two. The sight of the gun made Ellie scream louder.

“Okay, no gun,” Joel said, setting it down. He took Ellie by the shoulders. “Hey, everthing’s fine. You had a nightmare.”

Ellie knew damn well that she’d had a nightmare, but that wasn’t doing anything to slow down her breathing. She stopped screaming, though, when Joel wrapped his arms tight around her shoulders, pulling her into his chest.

“S’okay, baby, it’s okay,” he muttered into her hair, pressing kisses to the top of her head. He didn’t let go, ever after Ellie’s breath returned to normal.

“I’m sorry,” Ellie muttered into his chest, when she could speak.

“Don’t apologize,” Joel said. He went quiet, and Ellie knew what he was going to say before he said it.

“If you ever wanna talk about it…” He trailed off. He was used to hearing no.

But this time, Ellie nodded, and said, “okay.”

She pulled away from Joel so she could look at him.

“My nightmares are always about you,” she said. When he recoiled, she clarified, “not about you scaring me. Never about that. But about me losing you. Or worse, me hurting you.”

Joel immediately pulled her back towards him and wrapped her up in a hug.

“That’s the stupidest goddamn thing I ever heard,” he said.

“Excuse me?!?” Ellie said. She tried to push away, but Joel held her firmly.

“Ellie, you really think you’re gonna hurt me?”

“I could.”

Joel sighed. Ellie was still struggling. He let her go.

“Ellie,” Joel said, his tone serious. “I ain’t tryin’ to make light of your fears or nothin’, but there’s no one in the world I trust more than you.” He poked a finger at her chest. “I know you would never hurt me.”

“I said the same thing about you earlier, and you told me I was wrong,” Ellie pointed out.

“That’s different,” Joel said. “I done a hell of a lot more bad stuff—”

Ellie cut him off. “Not really.”

Joel scoffed. “Yes, really. Ellie, what the hell did you ever do that makes you think you’re so bad? Smashed in some zombie brains? Killed some assholes that were tryna kill you? Maybe took some goddamn satisfaction in it from time to time?”
Ellie stayed silent.

“Well, baby, I’ve done all that and more. So, if you’re bad, I’m the goddamn devil.”

“Joel, I’m serious.”

“So am I. I ain’t gonna let you think like that about yourself. Remember what you said before – let’s just be happy? What happened to that?”

Ellie stayed silent, though it was becoming more and more petulant.

Joel huffed. “Fine,” he said. He turned and grabbed the gun from the nightstand and held out to Ellie by the barrel. “You gonna hurt me? Go ahead and shoot me now. At least I’ll die comfortable in bed with a naked lady by my side. That’s a hell of a way to go.”

Ellie was still annoyed, but a smile tugged at her lips.

“No? Not interested?”

“Joel, stop being a dick. I get it.”

“Come on. One last chance – you wanna shoot me?”

Ellie put up her middle finger. “Not right now, asshole.”

“Great,” Joel said. He put the gun back in the drawer in the nightstand. “If you’re not gonna shoot me, I think I’ll kiss you instead.”

Joel pulled Ellie close and kissed her, long and deep and slow, until her nightmare was forgotten.

He was an asshole about it as always, but Joel was right. Ellie knew Joel – she knew he could be cruel, and cold, and unrepentant. But she also knew this side of him, the one that was protective, and doggedly loyal, and could love with absolute abandon. She knew with more certainty than she knew anything else that Joel would never hurt her, or leave her, or give up on her, ever.

And if Joel said he felt the same way about her, well. She’d have to trust him.

Because that’s what you do when you love someone.

Joel kissed her more deeply then, and Ellie left her fears behind. They had spent all night having sex, but they made love then, facing each other on their sides, Joel’s hand on Ellie’s cheek.

Ellie looked into his eyes as they finished together, and just like when they killed the Infected together, it was like looking into a mirror.

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Joel fell asleep soon after they finished, snoring loudly, of course. But Ellie lay awake for a while longer.

How long did you have to wait around after sex?

Ellie didn’t give a shit anymore. She’d stay beside Joel until she died if she could, and she’d die fucking happy.
I just want to say thank you so much to everyone who has read and commented on this! In particular, thank you to The_Fallen_Sky for always leaving such detailed comments!

I'm jumping into another fandom now, so I won't be writing Ellie/Joel right now. But see y'all when TLOU2 comes out!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!