Here We Are, Come Join Us

by OrioleAdams

Summary

Allison, a recent Duke University med school graduate, has been hiding out in an Atlanta office building since shortly after the dead began to roam. When she is confronted by a quartet of men in search of a missing brother she has to decide whether to continue fending for herself or accept their invitation to join their ranks...
Chapter 1

Allison Harper ducked down into a crouched position behind the half-wall that formed a small, makeshift corridor at entrance of the corporate kitchen. Or break room. Or whatever this area of the office building had been before the world had come crumbling down. She heard voices. Human voices. The only sounds she'd heard in the past two weeks were the muffled shuffling feet and the grunts and groans that indicated Freaks approaching. But Freaks couldn't speak. There were people here.

"That's skin." She heard a voice near the oven accompanied by the sound of something metallic clinking against the stove top. "He cauterized the stump." Another voice spoke. "Toughest asshole I ever met, my brother. Feed him a hammer, he'd crap out nails." As she slowly stood up as quietly as possible to peek over the waist-high partition she simultaneously glimpsed a man aiming something in her direction and heard a voice yell "Freeze, motherfucker!"

"Don't shoot! Don't shoot!" Allison called out as she stood straight up and raised both hands over her head, her right hand clasping the handle of an 18-inch field machete. A jumble of voices responded.

"Who the hell are you?" asked the man who was pointing what she now saw was a crossbow at her. "It's a girl!" a young Asian man blurted, stating the obvious. "It's OK," a second man, dressed in some sort of uniform, assured her, holding up his hand in a reassuring gesture. The third man, a muscular African-American with a shaved head stared at her mutely, looking uncertain.

"Whoa, just chill, I'm stepping out from behind this wall to show you I'm unarmed," Allison said in a cautious monotone as she slowly walked around the barrier. "Oh, except for this," she glanced upward to the blade in her hand and waved it slightly.

"Have you seen my brother?" the crossbow guy demanded.

"Um, I'm sorry, but since I don't know you, then it stands to reason that I don't know whether or not I've seen your brother. But I probably haven't - you're the first real people I've seen since I've been here, if that's any help."

"How long has that been?" the man in the uniform asked.

"I got here about two weeks ago, I think. Haven't really been keeping strict track of time. Been holing up down the hall in the ladies' room. I'm Allison. Allison Harper. I, uh, was just coming in to use the stove….to heat up something to eat….when I heard you guys talking…" She was babbling in a haste to explain herself as quickly as possible.

"Rick Grimes," the apparent cop replied. "This here's Glenn, that's T-Dog, and this is Daryl. We're looking for Daryl's brother, Merle." As he spoke the other three other men gradually relaxed their stances. The one named Daryl regarded her for a moment then looked back down to the ground and started walking away. "We're wasting time," he muttered as he followed a blood trail on the floor.

"Where did y'all come from?" Allison asked as she finally lowered her arms.

"I was 'bout to ask you the same question," Rick Grimes replied.

"Well, since I'm outnumbered, I guess I get to answer first," Allison said after a pause. She could understand their wariness; she was scoping them out as well. "I was on my way to visit home… rode down with a friend from school – we went to Duke, we work together now at the hospital –
when all this started. We'd heard stuff on the car radio while we were still in North Carolina about
this, this…sickness that was spreading. The roads got worse with abandoned cars and these freaks
wandering around…took forever to get to the state line. Our cell phones had stopped working and
when we finally found a working pay phone….oh, you don't want to hear all that. Long story
short…"

"That ship done sailed," the man identified as T-Dog sighed and rolled his eyes.

"Sorry, I tend to go on when I'm nervous. Anyway, I found out that the person I was going home to
see was already sick with the fever. My friend couldn't get an answer at her parents' house, and we
ended up separating once we got to Atlanta. She took off in her car, and I went looking for the safe
haven that we'd heard was set up in the city. But all I found was wandering freaks and a lot of
nothing until I got here." She gestured vaguely around her. "Place still has running water, that stove
still has a pilot light," she nodded toward the burning flame, "and I've found a lot of usable stuff
while scavenging from all the offices."

Daryl, the man with the crossbow, returned to the group. "Blood trail ends over there by a smashed
window. Looks like Merle has left the building."

"Maybe he's with Elvis, huh?" Allison remarked as she looked down at the floor and noticed the
blood for the first time.

"This ain't no time for jokes, blondie," Daryl snarled.

"I meant no offense," Allison apologized, looking directly into the rugged man's piercing blue
eyes. "Sometimes humor is the only way I can keep from crying or feeling hopeless. It's an old
habit, maybe a bad one I guess." She shrugged.

Daryl grunted in response. Allison looked back down at the ground and followed the blood trail to
the stove, careful not to step in the evidence. "This is an arterial bleed," she observed, stopping at
the oven. She picked up the flat iron and grimaced. "Great, I used to use this to cook my food!" She
set it down. "Guess I won't be doing that anymore." The rest of the group stood in place while her
gaze returned to the ground and she followed the blood trail to the window. She paused then turned
and looked at them. "Looks like he managed to staunch the arterial flow, but he's still lost a lot of
blood. Depending upon his size and overall health, he could make it a ways before he either passes
out or at least has to stop for some serious rest and rehydration."

"Are you a nurse or something?" Glenn asked.

"No, I'm not a nurse," Allison replied evenly with a slight emphasis on the last word.

"Oh, well, um, you mentioned working in a hospital…" the Asian boy stumbled over his words,
sensing that he had somehow offended her.

"And who else works in hospitals?" she prompted him in a sarcastic tone.

"You're a doctor?" Rick asked.

"More or less. I'd just finished my first year of residency when this all started. I've graduated from
medical school, but I haven't taken my Step Three Boards yet."

"What the hell does that mean?" T-Dog asked.

"It means that technically I am not yet licensed to practice medicine without the supervision of an
attending physician."
"So it's just a matter of paperwork? I mean, you know how to treat sick people and all?" Rick pressed her.

"Yes I can treat sick people. I've been pulling 12-hour shifts in the Trauma Unit at Durham Regional for the past six months. Why?"

Rick exchanged a look with Glenn and T-Dog. "We've got a camp set up on the outskirts of town, over by the quarry. There's food and water and other people. We'd be pleased to have you join us, if you're interested."

"Thanks for the offer, but I'm doing OK here. Like I said, I've got supplies and an indoor toilet and a safe place to sleep."

"Can we just get the fuck out of here and find my brother before we lose daylight?" Daryl growled, impatiently pacing back and forth like a caged animal.

"Like the doctor here says, he won't get too far bleedin' like that," Rick reminded him. "We can't run off half-cocked. Let's calm down and take a few minutes to get a plan together."

"We can't go wandering the streets of Atlanta without weapons," T-Dog added. "We need to get those guns first."

"What guns?" Allison asked.

"I left a duffel bag filled with weapons out on the street when I got swarmed by walkers yesterday. We need to retrieve it before we can search for Daryl's brother," Rick explained.

Allison looked from one man to the other as if she was considering them. After a few moments she spoke. "I've got some guns in my room. I guess I can let you have one if it'll help. I try not to use them in here, the noise only attracts the….walkers? Is that what you called them?"

"If you can really spare one, that would be awesome," Glenn replied with a huge sigh of relief.

"This way," Allison turned and led them out of the break room down a narrow corridor. Near the end of the hall was a heavy wooden door marked "WOMEN". "Heads up, men coming inside!" she called jokingly as she pushed the door open.

"Man, no wonder you women take so long when you go to the john," T-Dog remarked as he sat down on a long sofa in the lounge area. "You could live in here!"

Allison unzipped one of several bags sitting on a low coffee table. "I picked these up at a Walmart in Dalton that had apparently just recently been abandoned." She set four handguns on the table as she spoke. "It was crazy – people were busy taking big screen TVs and laptop computers and high-end junk like that. The sporting goods section was hardly touched. I grabbed as much as I could carry." She dug further in the bag and brought out several boxes of different types of ammunition.

"I don't really know that much about pistols," she admitted, "So you can take one or two of those if you like. And any of this ammo that fits them."

"What about this Remington Versa Max?" Daryl asked, reaching past her and pulling a large rifle out of the bag.

"I'll keep that and the Speedmaster, if y'all don't mind," Allison said, taking the gun from his hands. "And leave me the .22 shells."
"What's a little whisper of a gal like you know about rifles?" Daryl snickered.

"Enough to knock that condescending smirk off your smug little face at 200 yards," she retorted. "As a matter of fact, my daddy had me out hunting almost as soon as I could walk. I bagged my first gobbler before I learned to ride a bike."

"If you truly don't mind parting with these, we could really use a couple of these Browning nine millimeters," Rick said, picking up one of the handguns.

"Be my guest. See if there's a box of ammo you can use….I didn't pay much attention to what all I snatched up, whether the ammo matched the weapons and such."

"We're good," T-Dog said, opening a box and filling the magazine of one of the Brownings.

"Listen, miss," Rick said in a serious tone that caught Allison's attention. "I have no right to ask you to leave this…this home you've made for yourself. But to be honest, it would really be a benefit to our group to have a doctor with us. Especially one with hunting skills. I wish you'd consider joining us. I mean, think about it, you'll eventually run out of food here, and the streets outside are crawling with walkers. There's safety in numbers and our group could offer you food and protection. I'm thinkin' it could maybe mutually beneficial." The pleading in his eyes was dynamic punctuation.

"Oh, geez, I dunno…" Allison was torn. Truth be told, she was enjoying talking to someone besides the rest room walls. And the Cup-a-Soups and cans of Beef-O-Roni she'd scrounged up and stockpiled wouldn't last forever. How much should she trust this male quartet? Granted, they'd been respectful for the most part, talking to her solely about the matters at hand and not making any lascivious remarks. She was 27 years old but looked much younger thanks to anime-like huge blue eyes and a slender frame stretched over five feet nine inches of height. Growing up she'd been accustomed to being compared to both Tweety Bird and Betty Boop, and never thought of herself as "pretty", despite her almost porcelain complexion (referred to as “pasty white” by her friends who tanned) and long blonde hair (that got too wavy when it was wet or humid outside). The average bystander probably wouldn't describe her as traditionally beautiful, but perhaps rather as "striking." In any case, since the world had started going to heck in a handbasket it seemed like every male she'd encountered en route to this safehouse had leered at her and offered assistance in exchange for…."favors." But these men in front of her had been as respectful to her as the people she'd grown up with in Toccoa, Georgia, where people still addressed one another as "Mr." and "Miss" and brought covered dish dinners to families in distress. She felt herself wavering.

"But how could I move all my stuff?" she asked somewhat incongruously – personal "stuff" surely had taken on a new, streamlined priority in recent weeks – making a sweeping gesture at the vast array of belongings she'd squirreled away.

"How'd you get all this shit here in the first place?" T-Dog asked, observing the many zippered nylon bags and one huge knapsack strewn on and around the coffee table.

"I liberated a shopping cart while I was at Walmart," Allison replied, walking a few steps beyond the lounge area down to the darkened area that housed the actual toilet stalls and returning with a wheeled buggy. "I've got clothes and toiletries and canned food and my medical supplies and equipment and… all sorts of things in all these bags. Nothing is really organized, I'd need to take everything with me and sort it out later…" Feeling overwhelmed she paused and looked at the group with a resigned shake of her head. "Y'all go on ahead, I'd be too much trouble with all my stuff." She sat down on an overstuffed chair with an air of dismissal.

"If we could manage to carry all your belongings with us – divide the bags between us – would you
be willing to come with us?” Rick asked, starting to pick up bags before she could answer.

Allison was silent for several moments before finally uttering "Um…well…OK…I guess so. Safety in numbers like you said, right?” She looked at him questioningly, as if seeking reassurance that she was making the right decision.
Allison hoisted the enormous backpack onto her shoulders and picked up the "call bag" that contained her stethoscope, antiseptic wipes, bandages, and other tools of her trade. Rick, T-Dog and Glenn carried her other bags out to a conference area of the building. Everyone hunkered down on the floor as Glenn mapped out a complex escape plan that overwhelmed her. "Whoa, you've lost me already," she protested, pointing at Glenn's diagram. "Am I the eraser or the paperclip?"

"I think the best way to get you out of here is to have you wait inside for us until we bring the van back," Rick suggested. "Keep a sharp eye out 'cause you're going to have to move fast once we pull up."

She watched out a window as Glenn and Daryl went one way and T-Dog and Rick another. When they were all out of sight she sighed and wondered for a moment if they really were coming back for her. Maybe it was better if they didn't; she felt safe inside the office building. She'd been practicing with the machete for hours every day (it helped pass the time), swinging and slicing at upholstered office chairs and file boxes until she'd mastered the feel of it and had developed some impressive upper body strength in the process. She didn't know how much time had passed when suddenly the men came rushing back inside.

"Glenn! You've changed!" she remarked to the young Latino man whose hands were tied up.

"They got Glenn," Daryl growled as he shoved the boy into a chair.

"They? They who?" Allison asked, confused.

"Group of vatos hanging out down the alley way," T-Dog explained.

"You're not gonna give 'em our guns, are you?" Daryl said to Rick. "Guns are better than gold these days; can't feed folks with gold."

"Didn't say I was," Rick drawled.

Rick and Daryl proceeded to interrogate their prisoner, firing angry questions at him which he defiantly refused to answer at first. Then Daryl reached into a backpack and removed something wrapped in a bandana.

"This is what we do to assholes who piss us off!" he shouted, throwing a severed hand into the vato's lap.

"Well, that loosened his lips," Allison thought to herself as the kid started babbling and confessing to everything except for maybe the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

Many hours later, the ragtag group was on foot, walking back to this Shangri-la of a camp they had described to Allison earlier. Even though the others were each carrying some of her baggage, she was wearing her overstuffed knapsack and carrying a bag in one hand, a loaded rifle in the other, her sheathed machete on her hip, and she was growing weary. The heat was oppressive and her body was aching. "Tell me again why joining this crew was a good idea?" she asked herself silently. They were walking because apparently Daryl's brother had appropriated the group's van and was headed back to camp, which is why they were all double-timing it. Apparently Merle was a bit of a loose cannon and had a grudge to settle. Nevertheless, there were snippets of conversation...
exchanged among the members of the group as they trudged along, most likely to take their minds off the Bataan Death March they were engaged in.

"I have to ask you, dude, where'd you get that hand?" Allison inquired of Daryl.

"It's Merle's. He must've sawed it off after Officer Friendly handcuffed him to a pipe on the roof and left him."

Allison considered that for a moment, trying to form a mental picture of someone abandoned and confined by a pair of handcuffs with a hacksaw nearby.

"Why didn't he just cut off his thumb? Why his whole hand?" she asked.

Daryl looked at her as they trotted toward camp. Her wide eyes made her look like she was genuinely curious, and not being a wise-ass for a change. "My brother's a tough son of a bitch, never said he was smart." He grunted succinctly.

Suddenly the still night air was filled with the sound of gunshots.

"Come on!" Rick yelled, waving his arm for the others to follow him as he broke into a run.

Allison obediently started running and then was momentarily taken aback a few moments later when she approached a bizarre scene...there were tents and an RV and screaming people and the telltale muzzle flashes of guns being fired in the dark. "Walkers!" someone yelled.

Allison dropped her baggage and started shooting at any creature that had the typical halting, staggering gait of a walker. Her eyes and hands went into the "muscle memory" mode her daddy had taught her so many years ago while stalking and hunting. She was still a crack shot and knocked off half a dozen walkers while progressing further into the camp. People were running every which way and the sounds of painful screams and directive shouts were assaulting her ears. Minutes later, an eternity later, the camp was suddenly still, save for the muted sounds of whimpering and crying.

Daryl and T-Dog immediately went to work, taking whatever implements handy – a baseball bat, an axe – and proceeded to smash the skulls of any walkers who were still quivering or growling on the ground. Allison went back to one of her bags and retrieved an axe she'd taken from a fire safety station in the office building. Wordlessly she followed the lead of the two men and started hacking away at walker heads. As daylight broke it appeared that the majority of the walkers had been properly dispatched and the new task at hand was to stack them and burn them. Allison again dashed back to one of her bags and donned a pair of latex gloves from the box of 1,000 she'd packed when all this started. She returned to the scene of the massacre and helped to drag bodies to the pile that would eventually become a mass cremation site.

"No," Glenn suddenly piped up as the body of a camper was being carried to the pile. "We only burn walkers. We bury the others."

Allison dropped her end of the body and stood up straight. She looked at Daryl, who'd been carrying the foot-end. "Is that a good idea?" she asked.

"I think it's a mistake not burning these bodies. It's what we said we'd do, right?" Daryl said to no one in particular.

Allison didn't know these people, so she kept quiet when Lori, whom she'd deduced was Rick's wife, told the group, "We need to mourn our dead and bury them. That's what people do." Allison had been a fan of cremation long before the Zombie Apocalypse had started...she'd met many a
funeral director and mortician during her years in medical school, and to a one they'd all admitted that when their own time came, they wanted to be cremated. That the funeral business was just that—a business. Ridiculous prices charged for a fancy box and a hole in the ground. Allison had decided long ago that when she died, she didn't want anyone to waste money on a funeral. It still irked her to remember Granny spending money she didn't have on a fancy casket for Granddad when he passed. …

"A walker got Jim! Jim's been bit!" an African-American woman suddenly cried. A skinny bearded man shrank back and held out a shovel in defense. "I'm OK, I'm OK, I'm OK…" he repeated.

"Show us!" Daryl demanded. T-Dog grabbed him from behind and Jim's shirt was lifted to reveal an obvious bite wound.

The surviving members of the group adjourned for an emergency conference. Noticing the curious looks directed at the new girl in camp Rick made a quick introduction. "This is Allison, she's a doctor we found when we were in Atlanta."

"How do you do," Allison said with a straight face. "I hope y'all don't mind that Rick invited me to join you. I believe he described it as a 'safe place,'" she couldn't resist adding. She then took mental notes, trying to remember names with faces as folks curtly identified themselves. "Dale." "Shane." "Jacqui."

"What are we going to do about Amy?" Dale asked, nodding toward a blonde woman who was embracing a younger blonde girl, the victim of a walker bite.

"I say we put a pickaxe in her head and Jimbo's and be done with it," Daryl said with a look in his eyes that challenged anyone to defy him.

"I hate to say it… I never thought I would… but maybe Daryl's right," Dale told the group.

Allison's hackles were automatically raised. "Why would you 'hate' to agree with what's right? With what's beneficial to the group's survival? Why is an opinion suddenly subject to special analysis based on who expressed it, fer cryin' out loud?"

Dale was momentarily rendered speechless, but Lori wasn't. "We are talking about people," she spoke in measured phrases. "People we love. I don't know how or when you doctors lose your humanity, but if you'd stop and think for a minute about something other than how you can pad a bill….."

"I am talking about people," Allison replied. "About you and me and us and people that aren't even here yet. You're burying these infected bodies in the ground when we don't know what exactly caused this sickness - is it a virus or a mutant bacterium and what is its incubation time or how long can it lay dormant. Who knows what will leach into the soil, and eventually affect anything grown here in the next 20 years, including vegetables that people might ingest in the future. Maybe you've heard about Love Canal and the Rocketdyne spill near Simi Valley?"

"Jim's not a monster," Rick interjected, "or some rabid dog… He's sick. A sick man. We start down that road, where do we draw the line?"

"I think the line's pretty clear," Daryl stated. "Zero tolerance for walkers, or them to be."

"Jim's sick," Rick repeated. "Maybe we can get him help. I heard the CDC was working on a cure…"

"If the CDC is still operational," Allison answered, "What makes you think they're accepting new
"They're probably overrun with survivors asking for help."

"She makes a good point," Shane said. "I there's if any shelter or protection to be found, it would be at the army base. Fort Benning."

"The military was on the front lines of this thing," Rick argued. "The CDC is our best chance and Jim's only hope."

The argument continued on for a bit and Allison went off to collect her belongings that she'd dropped when all the shooting had begun. She glanced at the woman identified to her as Andrea, who was still holding her sister and looked to be in a state of shock. Allison wondered what it would feel like to love someone that much, to be that devastated when someone died. She was an only child and her parents had died when she was 11 years old. She barely remembered being sad when the state trooper had come to the house with the news; everything became such a jumble, packing things, moving to her grandparents' house, learning new house rules, a new daily routine...

She shook her head as if to clear her thoughts and moved her bags near the RV, since that seemed to be the epicenter of the camp. She then walked over to where Daryl was using a pickaxe to finish the last of the dead walkers so she could help transport the bodies. As he raised his arms over the head of a large male, the woman with the buzz cut – Carol – took it from him. "I'll do it. He's my husband." She brought the weapon down on the man's skull with such ferocity that Allison took a few steps backward in surprise.

"If that's how she treats her husband, I hate to see what she does to people she doesn't like."

Daryl muttered quietly "I think her ol' man used to smack her around. Wasn't exactly a Love Connection."

"Oh," Allison digested this information and then asked "So do we put him on the 'burn' or 'bury' pile, then?"

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

"Everybody listen up. Those of you with C.B.s, we're gonna be on channel 40," Shane told the group as they climbed into various vehicles. The majority of the group had decided to go with Rick's suggestion and were headed to the CDC. The Morales family exchanged sad farewells and left to make their way to Alabama in search of their missing relatives.

Allison observed the line of vehicles in the caravan and finally walked over to the truck that Daryl had loaded his brother's Harley into. "Um…mind if I ride with you?" she asked somewhat timidly.

He tossed a bag behind the driver's seat and shrugged at her. "If you want to. Makes no nevermind to me."

"I don't mean to be rude and invite myself along, but I really don't want to ride in the Winnebago… it's already crowded, and that sick guy is in there….

"Like I said, makes no difference. Just get in if yer goin' to, I ain't got all day."

Allison stowed her luggage, and climbed into the passenger's seat. The conga line of vehicles slowly pulled out of the campsite and onto the main road. She glanced at her driver and decided that she'd keep quiet for now and let him talk if he wanted to. She stared straight ahead in the meantime, wondering what they'd find at the CDC. If they found it, that is.
Chapter 3

Allison and Daryl had ridden in silence for about 20 minutes before he finally spoke.

"So you're a doctor and you're afraid to ride with Jim 'cause he got bit? Do you know something about this sickness that the rest of us don't?"

"No, no, not at all. It's just…." She sighed. "He's in pain and he's not going to get any better. It probably would've been more humane to …. do what you said back at camp."

"I thought doctors were used to seeing people in pain."

"We are, but that doesn't mean it still doesn't make us uncomfortable. Besides, in a traditional setting, we'd have painkillers and other palliative care to treat his symptoms, take the edge off of his pain."

"You think it's a lost cause, hopin' for a cure for Jim at the CDC," Daryl stated with a touch of questioning in his voice.

"Again, I know as much about this disease as you do, but to my mind any 'cure' would have to come as immediately as possible after a bite, just like a rabies shot. At the progress we're making, by the time we get to the CDC the infection will have had hours to invade and infect him."

"So what the hell are we all goin' there for?" Daryl asked, as if confirming in his own mind that this trek was a waste of time and gasoline.

"I dunno," Allison admitted. "Maybe they'll at least offer shelter or tell us where we can find shelter…"

"I gotta tell ya, this conversation is depressing the hell outta me. I think I liked it better when you were quiet."

"I can be quiet, if that's what you want, or you can choose a new topic of discussion. Whatever."

"OK, new topic – how come a fancy-ass rich girl like you knows how to hunt? Was that your daddy's idea of slummin', or did he teach you at his country club?"

Allison regarded him with surprise. "What makes you think I'm rich? Or ever was?"

Daryl snorted with sarcastic laughter. "Even us backwoods hicks know that it costs money to go to Duke."

"Unless you get an academic scholarship," Allison amended. "For your information, I grew up in a small house in Toccoa, on a couple of acres of land that my daddy inherited from his daddy. He worked for the local power company, stringing electrical lines and fixing traffic lights. Not exactly life in the fast lane. I studied hard, darned hard, to make grades and get a scholarship. Wasn't gonna get to college any other way, I knew that from when I was a kid."

"How come you say 'darned' instead of 'damned'?" Daryl asked. Of all the information she had just revealed, he'd latched onto that one word? He just wasn't paying attention, Allison decided.

"I never cuss. My granny used to smack me upside the head any time I used foul language, as she called it. So I just never picked up the habit…I guess in the back of my mind I can feel that big ol'
wooden spoon of hers whacking me if I so much as think of a bad word."

"Your grandma lived with you?"

"Actually, I lived with her. And my grandpa. My parents were killed in a car accident when I was 11 – big pileup on the 441. I didn't have any other close relatives, so they took me in."

"Oh." He was silent for a few minutes. "Must've been tough," he finally said.

Allison shrugged and then busied herself with a hangnail that was suddenly bothering her. "It wasn't so bad... Granddad was a sweet old man, and I felt sorry for him sometimes. Granny could be mean. He used to take me fishing, which I didn't like so much, but he enjoyed it so I went along. He got sick later with cancer, and I'd take care of him as best I could which is probably what first got me interested in medicine."

"Your grandma didn't help care for him?"

"Her idea of caring was reading Bible verses to him and telling him that if he hadn't sinned he wouldn't be sick. Anyway, I'm sure my life story is boring you, let's do another New Topic. Umm... tell me about when you were a kid."


"Ohhkay," Allison drawled, realizing that she'd apparently hit a nerve. She scanned her mind for a neutral topic. "Have you ever heard of Fred Bear?"

"Of course, everyone knows Fred Bear."

"Everyone who bow hunts, you mean," Allison smiled, happy to have found something that piqued the redneck's interest. "I went to the Fred Bear Museum up in Michigan when I was a kid. We were visiting relatives up near Grayling and my uncle took us there. I remember Daddy was just fascinated. He was always going to teach me to bow hunt..." Her voice trailed off. "I did get as far as some longbow target shooting."

"Longbow's a pain when it comes to huntin'. Need arm guards and shit—er, I mean stuff. Crossbow's closer to a gun, especially for short-range shootin'. You just pull the trigger."

Allison tried to conceal her smile at Daryl's sudden obvious attempt not to swear in front of her. She was almost tempted to describe it as "cute" before she remembered that this was the man who had carried a severed hand with him. OK, maybe he wasn't cute, but deep down inside of that rugged, red-necked exterior there were traces of good ol' Southern gentility. A man who had picked up on one subtle conversation cue and then hastily attempted to temper his vocabulary so as not to offend her, even at The End of the World, couldn't be all bad.

Allison awoke with a start when the motion of the truck changed suddenly. They were coming to a stop.

"Nice nap?" the voice beside her asked.

"Huh...? Oh, God, I must've fallen asleep," she sat up straight, embarrassed. She immediately patted down the front of her T-shirt. "Did I drool or anything?" she murmured.

"Nope. Snored pretty good, though," Daryl answered with a very slight smirk.

"I do not snore!" she protested.
“Well, maybe I should check see if I've been dragging the muffler for the past half hour then.” He threw the gearshift into “park” as the caravan pulled to the curb. Everyone slowly emerged from their vehicles, weapons in hand and gathered as a group on the sidewalk. Rick gave a hand signal that indicated they should follow behind him. As they moved toward the imposing concrete and glass building looming ahead of them, they stepped gingerly around the bodies of dozens of dead walkers.

“This doesn't look very promising,” Andrea remarked sotto voce, nodding towards a burned-out military tank.

“Place looks pretty deserted,” T-Dog agreed.

The doors were locked, unsurprisingly. Rick called out "Hello?"

“There's nobody here,” T-Dog stated, shoulders slumping in defeat.

“Another dead end,” Shane agreed.

“Then why are the shutters down?” Rick asked.

“Walkers!” Daryl called out and aimed his bow in the distance, prepared to shoot if any of the geeks got too close.

“It's going to be dark soon, we should get out of here,” Lori fretted.

“No! The camera moved!” Rick said suddenly, pointing to a CCTV camera mounted over the front door.

“You imagined it," Shane replied. "Come on, everybody back to the cars!"

“No, I saw it move!” Rick insisted. "Hello! You – in there! I know you can hear me! We're desperate. We have women, children...no food...nowhere else to go. Please help us!" His voice rose to strangled scream. "If you don't let us in, you're killing us! You're killing us!"

"Rick, come one, buddy, let's – " Shane stopped mid-sentence when the shuttered front door slid open. With sighs of relief all around the group quickly shuffled into the lobby of the CDC. A sandy-haired man in a T-shirt and sweat pants was standing above them on a balcony, gun in hand.

“What do you want?” he asked.

“A chance,” Rick replied.

“That's asking an awful lot these days,” the man stated, slowly lowering his weapon. "Any of you infected?"

"One of us was; we had to leave him behind." Allison thought of poor Jim who had been in such pain that he'd eventually begged to be left in a field by the side of the road while they were en route to the CDC.

Rick agreed on behalf of the group that they all would submit to blood tests as a condition of entry, and everyone quickly retrieved their belongings from the various vehicles and returned inside to this strange, Inner Sanctum-type place. Dr. Edwin Jenner introduced himself and then made some mention of "once these doors close, there's no going out" that Allison vaguely heard.

The entire crew crammed into an elevator and Dr. Jenner took them underground, to a long corridor
that led to a large fluorescent-lit room filled with computer terminals. As everyone looked around, taking in their surroundings, Rick asked "So where's everyone else? All the other doctors?"

"I'm it," Jenner replied, going on to explain that the "woman" named Vi that he'd conversed with in their presence earlier was actually a voice-activated computer system. "Everyone else either left when the outbreak started or….opted out." He quickly changed the subject as he led the group down another hallway. "The couches in these rooms are comfortable, but there are cots in the storage area, if you'd prefer…. The kids might enjoy the games and puzzles in the rec room, but I ask that you not turn on any of the video games so that we can preserve electricity."

Jenner continued to lead the group and gesture left and right. "You can shower in here, but I do ask that you do so quickly to save as much hot water as possible."

"Hot water?" Glenn asked incredulously.

"That's what the man said," T-Dog replied with a grin so wide it almost split his face in half.

Several hours later the freshly scrubbed members of the group straggled one by one into the main dining area and gathered around a long table where seemingly unlimited wine and liquor was being served. Endless toasts were offered accompanied by much laughter.

"Keep drinking, little man. I wanna see how red your face can get," Daryl laughed, pouring Glenn another shot from a bottle of Southern Comfort. Allison joined in the laughter, even though she didn't understand the joke. Everything was funny at the moment.

"So, Doc, what happened to the others here?" Shane abruptly asked Jenner.

Jenner had been keeping up drink-wise with the rest of the group all evening. When Allison later reflected on that night, she supposed that that was why the good doctor was suddenly so forthright, so blatantly honest – he was pretty pie-eyed. Or maybe it was because she was still somewhat of a freshman in the profession and it had been drilled into her daily to always think before speaking, to couch your words when discussing a "situation" with anyone other than a colleague. Some of the attending physicians she’d worked with took that philosophy to an extreme, in her opinion; rather than telling a family that their loved one was terminal, they’d say instead that the patient "may not reach his wellness potential." So she was surprised when Jenner admitted that the CDC was as clueless as the rest of them as to what was happening and how it could be stopped, and that these trained specialists, supposedly the best of the best, had committed suicide rather than address the plague that confronted them.

"Dude, you are such a buzzkill," Glenn remarked and then downed another shot. The tentative silent glances exchanged among the other people at the table indicated that Glenn had spoken for the majority of the group.

As the evening wore on, many of the group left the dining area and eventually only T-Dog, Daryl, Glenn and Allison were left. Glenn and T were sharing yet another bottle of wine, passing the bottle back and forth, while Allison allowed Daryl to repeatedly pour generous shots of Southern Comfort into her glass.

"I have to ask you," T-Dog said to Allison, "are you part camel or what?"

"Huh?" Allison asked, her head already foggy.

"I mean you keep refilling that glass", he replied, nodding toward the other wine glass Allison had in front of her, "with water every five minutes. I never seen anybody that thirsty!"
Allison awkwardly sat up straighter in her chair and picked up her water glass. "Every five minutes is an exaggeration, but for your information I'm keeping hydrated. I'm trying to prevent a hangover tomorrow."


"It sure doesn't hurt. Most of the hangover symptoms you feel are a result of dehydration," Allison replied, her voice suddenly taking on an Authoritative Doctor Tone. Although she sounded articulate in her own head, who knows if the others noticed that she was speaking somewhat slowly, careful to pronounce each word because she was getting truly sloshed. "Ethanol causes diuresis, which is excess urine production to you and me…." She suddenly caught herself and brought a hand to cover her mouth in embarrassment. "I can't believe I said 'urine' in front of y'all…." And she dissolved into a fit of giggles.

"This girl is gone," T-Dog laughed, taking another healthy swig of wine.

"What she needs is some more…ethyl-nol," Daryl stated, pouring Allison yet another shot.

"OK," Allison choked, slowly composing herself, "the thing is…where was I? Oh yeah, if you keep drinking lots of water while you're on a bender it reduces your hangover symptoms later." She drained her liquor glass then took a few healthy sips out of her water glass.

"You couldn't have told us that without all those technical terms?" T-Dog laughed.

"Well, I just…um….what?" Allison blinked several times, trying to clear her mind. It had been years since she'd drunk to excess. And once upon a time, back at Duke, she would have never felt comfortable being the only female engaging in a drunken night out with three men. But somehow she felt safe with these men; she had the sense that they were drinking for the same reason as she – to forget, to relax for the first time in a long time. They weren't out to get her unconscious and take advantage of her.

"I do think we have officially got Miss Prom Queen shit-faced!" Daryl stood up and raised his bottle in triumph. "Boo-yah!" He took a long draw off of the bottle and then looked at Allison and said "Oh, I forgot that Miss Prom Queen doesn't swear. We got her poop-faced, then!"

"What exactly is this 'Prom Queen' business?" Allison asked indignantly. "As Clair Huxtable used to say, let the record show that I not only did not attend my high school prom, I never even went to any school dance."

"Why not?" Glenn asked in all innocence.

Allison shrugged. "Never got invited."

"You're kidding, right?" Glenn persisted. "I mean, you're…well, um, the way you look…."

"Exactly, the way I look," Allison was suddenly taking the not-uncommon sudden drunken swing from laughing to almost crying. "My weird big eyes and pale skin got me called all sorts of names growing up. I always looked like one of those featherless baby birds that fall out of the nest during a storm. And then there was middle school….when girls like Debbie Jo Karnes got all the attention…." She downed her glass and held it out to Daryl for a Southern Comfort refill.

"Debbie Jo Karnes," she continued, "Was the only girl in the sixth grade to wear a C-cup." Allison looked downward at her own chest, which was still nowhere near the need for underwire support. She sighed. "Boys can be so cruel…." She downed the shot Daryl had just poured her and reached out for yet another. "They literally would remark on your breasts – or lack thereof – right there in
the hallways at school. I'm talking in front of a hundred other people. I still remember that day when Richard Shackleford announced in front of a bunch of his greaser friends that I was so skinny, if I stuck my tongue out I'd look like a zipper."

She got up and walked to the sink to refill her water glass.

"Um, I think that men look at women's...er, breasts," Glenn blushed even redder than the liquor had colored his face, "because they think of them as nurturing. It's a maternal thing."

"Yeah, I'm sure that's the case," Allison snorted as she sat back down at the table. "That's why they call them 'hooters' and 'headlights' and what have you." She sipped from her water glass.

"It didn't help that I was a geek – not a geek like a walker, a geek like a Poindexter, a bookworm," she continued. "Even in college guys would always put me down just because I got good grades. I was a kiss-up, a woman who wanted to be a man, you name it. Men just didn't want to date intelligent women, even in med school. So long story short, if you must know, I've never had a boyfriend."

"I disagree," T-Dog spoke up. "I think most men appreciate a smart woman, a lady with a brain."

"Is that why they have all those Wet Hat contests in bars?" Allison asked snidely. Daryl actually laughed out loud at that one. Maybe it was the alcohol, but he was rapidly revising his opinion of this so-called pampered uppity college girl. She could not only hunt and handle a machete, but she was almost as quick with an acid-tongued comeback as he.

The other men also laughed despite themselves at her remark and it suddenly occurred to her that she'd admitted something very personal, that bit of information about never having had a boyfriend. Yes, she was a virgin at the advanced age of 27, but did she really need to tell the world (or at least these three men who comprised a major part of her current world) of her sexual status? Maybe they wouldn't put two and two together... Oh, God, she was going to be sooo embarrassed tomorrow, she had a feeling...

"So, T-Dog," Allison announced, to change the subject, "What did you do before all this happened? I'm guessing, looking at your biceps, professional body builder."

T-Dog convulsed in laughter and momentarily lowered his head onto his crossed arms on the table. He finally came up for air and said "No, I worked in a fulfillment warehouse for Amazon in Marietta. I was a supervisor and shop superintendent."

"Lifting books made you all buff like that?" Daryl asked.

"Amazon sells a hell of a lot more shi – er, crap than books," T-Dog replied. "But actually I used to work out at the gym every day, seven days a week. My father and his father both had high blood pressure and diabetes, so I was trying to cut all that off at the pass."

"Did you know," Allison raised a pointed hand drunkenly, "that both high blood pressure and diabetes are more prevalent among African-Americans than any other race in the US. There are many theories as to why this is, but nothing conclusive thus far...." She took a big swig out of her water glass. "Just like Jews getting Tay-Sachs Disease...no one knows quite why...." She put her head down on the table and studied her glass intently.

"I think someone has had enough," Daryl stated, picking up Allison's drink glass and putting it in the sink. "Probably time for bed..." he staggered slightly as he made his way back to the table to help her up.
"I'm fine," Allison waved away any assistance. She refilled her water glass and carried it away with her. "See y'all tomorrow," she called over her shoulder as she slowly negotiated the corridor leading out of the dining area.

A zillion drunken thoughts assaulted her mind as she made her way down the hallway in search of her bedroom, but one thought took precedence... she was suddenly reminded of that last time, years ago, when she'd gotten stink-faced and had spent the night puking in a spinning bed. She decided that that was the key to not getting sick -- don't go to bed when you were this drunk. "I'll go to that recreation room and read a book or something... something to keep myself awake for an hour or so..." she thought to herself.

She walked slowly and unsteadily to the rec room and plucked an old Reader's Digest off the shelf. She first sat on one of the sofas, but that was too comfy... too easy to drift off to sleep and get nauseous... She staggered over behind one of the couches and sat down hard on the floor, leaning against the upright, unforgiving back of the sofa. She was deeply involved in "Humor in Uniform" when she heard voices. She was too tired to get up and look but after a few minutes she recognized the speakers as Lori and Shane. Moments later she crouched down even further in her hiding place, because she realized that this was some sort of very private conversation that she should not be privy to. However, when she heard Lori's voice protesting and Shane talking over her she couldn't help but to stand up to see what in the world was going on. The scene she took in was surreal -- Shane was forcing himself on Lori, all the while proclaiming his love, until Lori then raked her nails across his neck.

Allison couldn't help but call out "Lori, are you OK?"

Lori suddenly sat bolt upright and Shane took several steps backward and looked in the direction of Allison's voice.

"This ain't what it looks like," he immediately defended himself.

"Are you OK?" Allison asked again, walking toward Lori.

"Yes, yes, I'm fine, it's OK," Lori said burying her eyes into the palm of her hand.

"You have to understand, this ain't what you think," Shane said again, gripping one of Allison's hands for emphasis as she approached. He looked into her eyes for several seconds and then left the room.

"Allison," Lori clutched her shirt around her throat, "You have to promise... not to tell anyone."

"But -- "

"It's OK, I'm alright, I promise you. I can work this out with Shane later. I just need your word that you won't tell anyone what you saw here."

Allison tried to focus her sluggish mind. She knew that what she'd seen wasn't right... but what did you do when the victim -- yes, Lori was a victim, wasn't she? -- was holding your hands and begging you not to do or say anything. Did the Hippocratic Oath or HIPAA apply in this case? Did any of those previous rules matter right now? Her head was swimming as she looked into Lori's eyes.

"As long as you're sure you're OK..." Allison replied reluctantly, giving Lori a long look. "No, I won't say anything."
Chapter 4

Morning couldn't have come soon enough for Allison. She'd slept fitfully and intermittently, not just because of some slight dizziness, but because her mind kept replaying that scene in the rec room. Shane's face pressed against Lori's, pushing her backward and Lori striking out at him. My God, what was going on with these people? We're supposed to be a group. She's married to the sheriff, no? What was Barney Fife doing almost raping her? From what Allison had surmised in the short time she'd been with the group Shane was Rick's best friend and on-duty partner. And, most confusing of all, why didn't Lori want anyone to know of the incident? This seemed like it should be some sort of red flag alert that needed to be conveyed to the other women in the group – don't be caught alone with Shane; he may be a cop, but he is dangerous and not to be trusted. Yeah, she'd promised Lori she'd keep quiet, but she was drunk when she'd made that spur-of-the-moment vow. Now that she'd had time to think about it silence didn't seem like such a good idea.

Tired of tossing and turning, Allison finally got up and wandered to the communal ladies' room. She glanced at the digital clock on the wall. Six o'clock. The one morning she could've slept in, should've slept in, and she's up with the sun. She washed her face and was just finishing brushing her teeth when Lori walked in. Upon spying Allison at the sink she immediately turned as if to leave.

"Lori, wait," Allison tried to articulate as she spat toothpaste into the basin. She stood up straight and faced the dark-haired woman. "We need to talk."

Lori removed her hand from the door handle and turned toward Allison. "There's nothing to talk about," she said, her eyes wide with either fear or surprise.

"Oh, I think there is," Allison said very pointedly. "I know I wasn't supposed to be there last night, but I also know what I saw. Shane attacked you. Cripes, he looked like he would've raped you if I hadn't interrupted!"

"It's not what you think," Lori said, her face now pleading as she stepped toward Allison. "Shane and I….well, we have sort of a special…relationship…" She paused and sighed. "It's very complicated."

"Sexual assault is complex?" Allison stated incredulously, not quite believing what she was hearing. After a few moments of silence Lori spoke again.

"Please, Shane didn't mean anything, I'll take care of it. I just need you to promise me that you'll never tell anyone what you saw, what happened… Really, everything is OK."

"No, it's not OK. He's dangerous. I think the other women have a right to know that."

"He's not dangerous," Lori insisted. "He would never hurt any of the women here. What happened last night happened because he loves me…" her voice trailed off.

"He loves you," Allison repeated in a sarcastic monotone. "You know," she continued, shaking her head slightly in revulsion, "I've read romance novels about women who enjoy their strange little brutal rape fantasies, but I've never had the pleasure of meeting such a woman in person - how do you do?" She extended her hand for a mocking handshake.

"Allison," Lori repeated, grasping Allison's hand with both of hers and pulling it tightly to her chest, "I need you to promise not to tell anyone about what happened. Please."
Allison released her hand from Lori's grip and went back to the sink to gather her toiletries. "Don't worry, your sick little secret is safe with me, lady, if that's what you want," she sighed with disgust.

"Thank you," Lori whispered and then fled from the room.

When Allison arrived in the dining area, T-Dog was already hard at work dishing out breakfast.

"Hey, Doc, I hope you're feelin' better than the rest of our crew," he laughed, handing her a plate. He nodded toward the long table where Glen and Rick were both showing the obvious signs of a nasty hangover.

"My head feels fine," Allison told him as she found a seat, "but my stomach sorta feels like I've swallowed a warm, fuzzy mitten."

"Oh, God," Glenn moaned, "don't talk about that."

"A hearty serving of the Dog's famous powdered scrambled eggs will fix you right up," their shiny-headed chef assured her.

Shane entered the room and staggered to the stove. "Dude, what happened to you?" T-Dog asked.

"What?" Shane asked sleepily.

"Your neck." Everyone's attention was turned toward the very red jagged scratches on the side of Shane's neck.

"Oh," Shane was momentarily caught off guard. "Must've scratched myself in my sleep." Allison didn't miss the look he exchanged with Lori and wondered if anyone else in the room had noticed it.

When Dr. Jenner walked into the room he'd barely had time to sip his coffee before Dale and Andrea started peppering him with questions about the blood tests he'd taken and the overall situation. What exactly was going on and what was being done about it? Jenner eventually led them back into the "control center" – the room with all the computer terminals and Vi at the ready to answer questions.

"Vi, show TS-19," Jenner called out, and the group turned their attention to a huge video screen.

"What is that?" someone asked.

"It's a human brain," Allison commented before Jenner could reply. "It looks a little like an MRI, but not quite..."

"It's an enhanced time-lapse MRI of Test Subject 19," Jenner explained. "An employee who agreed to be studied after becoming infected. See those white bursts of light blinking? Those are synapses – electrical impulses that transport messages through the brain and make us who we are. They store memories, they help us to reason, to move our various muscles, to see, to speak...."

Suddenly the blinking lights went dark on the screen. "The virus slowly invades the brain and kills everything, all the electrical impulses." The group stood silently and watched as a small portion of the brain re-illuminated. "We're not sure why, but after a period of time – anywhere from three minutes to eight hours or more – a small portion of the brain stem re-ignites, becomes re-animated."

Suddenly an obvious diagonal line cut through the picture on the screen. "What was that?"
someone asked.

"A bullet. Someone shot them in the head," Andrea replied.

"How did you manage to introduce a metal object like a gun in an MRI machine without totally distorting the picture?" Allison asked.

"As I said before, this was a very highly specialized, enhanced machine," Jenner explained.

"OK, I can understand that," Allison stated. "But what I can't understand is how a person with such limited brain function can actually stand upright and walk and know to follow sounds or light to find food. I've seen anencephalic babies – infants born with nothing more than a brain stem – and they rarely survive past their first birthday, much less ever learn to walk or feed themselves."

"That's part of the mystery of this disease, whatever it is," Jenner admitted. "We lost our lines of communication with other institutions before anyone really had a handle on this thing. The last we heard was that France was starting to isolate some important information before they lost power, too." He sighed and sat down in his swivel chair.

"I have to ask," Dale piped up, "what exactly is that clock that seems to be counting down backwards?" He pointed to a display on the wall.

Jenner spoke very deliberately as he explained that those minutes ticking away on the digital clock were all that were left as far as the CDC was concerned. Once the clock hit zero, the entire building would instantly incinerate. As the group processed that information panic started to set in and a dozen frantic questions were asked. Rick directed everyone to retrieve their belongings, to prepare to evacuate. But Jenner remained strangely subdued, almost hypnotic, as he tried to convince them that this was the best solution – that burning to death in one quick blaze would be painless.

"Are you kidding?" Allison shouted as Daryl and Shane pounded at the door that had suddenly closed and locked. "Have you ever seen a burn victim?" She shuddered as she recalled the mandatory rotation she'd spent in Durham Regional's burn unit. Fire victims who had almost literally cooked to death but had had the misfortune of surviving…their body fat literally melting until the skin surrounding it split open. The skin, the body's largest organ and protective layer, laced with nerve endings, flayed wide open leaving the patient in unbearable, unrelenting pain that even near-lethal doses of morphine didn't begin to ease. Even if death occurred in a matter of seconds, as Dr. Jenner claimed, those last seconds would be spent in agonizing pain she believed.

Shouts filled the room, Carol hugged Sophia and sobbed, Shane threatened Jenner with bodily harm, Rick tried to restrain him and simultaneously reason with the doctor and Daryl kept attacking the locked door with an axe. Chaos reigned for the next few minutes and then Jenner finally relented and punched in a code that opened the door. Allison grabbed the bags she'd packed earlier and rushed out as quickly as her feet could carry her only to be met by yet another set of locked glass doors. More panic, more shouting and she sat down on the floor and wondered if she should have stayed behind with Jenner, Jacqui, Andrea and Dale after all. Was it better to die in a group hug or die screaming and clawing helplessly at the front door? Somewhere in the distance she heard Rick yell for everyone to get down and the next thing she heard was a massive explosion. But her flesh surprisingly wasn't on fire; instead she was being pulled to her feet by someone and she heard voices calling "Go! Go! Go!" Her feet started moving automatically and she ran outside toward the vehicles they'd left behind only a day ago. Seconds later she was in Dale's RV, gasping for breath. She looked out the windshield and saw a massive fireball in the distance with two crouched figures running toward the vehicle. Apparently Dale and Andrea had changed their minds at the last minute.
Allison moved to the back of the RV, found a bench-like seat and curled up in a semi-fetal position. She was physically and mentally exhausted and quite frankly didn't care where they were headed or whether or not there was even a plan in place. She dozed off into a dreamless sleep as the caravan made its way back onto the freeway. She was eventually awakened by footsteps and activity around her.

"Are we there yet?" she asked sleepily as she sat up, not knowing what “there” they were searching for.

Receiving no response she simply got off the bench and followed everyone outside. She heard the "hiss" of the RV's overheated radiator over the chattering voices of everyone else.

"I knew this would happen eventually," Dale said, very close to throwing his hat down on the ground in frustration.

"Maybe we can find a hose to fix it in one of these other vehicles," Glenn stated, shielding his eyes against the sun as he gazed down the road.

"We can at least scavenge some supplies from these cars," Daryl muttered as he strode off, peeking into windows.

"This is a graveyard," Lori spoke up. "I don't know if I'm comfortable with this."

The group froze in place for a moment and digested her comment. Allison was the first to reply.

"Are you kidding? OK, when your son is starving to death in a day or two please be sure to tell him that we don't have any food because you didn't want to desecrate the dead…" She shrugged and strode off, machete at the ready in one hand as she opened the passenger door on a nearby car.

The rest of the group seemingly silently agreed with her since they began wandering among the stranded vehicles searching for anything that might be of use. T-Dog returned to the Winnebago and retrieved a gas container and length of hose and he and Daryl began siphoning precious fuel from the stalled cars. Allison was rifling through a woman's purse she'd found in one car and pocketing the Midol and Handi-Wipes she'd found when she heard Carol speak. She pulled her head out of the car and looked to where Carol was browsing through suitcases in the back of an SUV.

"We're going to need clothes," Carol commented, pulling out a red short-sleeved shirt. She caught Allison's glance and then said, almost sheepishly. "Ed never let me wear nice things like this."

Allison presumed that "Ed" was the abusive husband whom Carol had made mincemeat out of with an axe back at camp. She instructed Carol, "Hold it up under your chin." She then took a step back and considered the garment with a critical eye. "That color suits you," she told Carol. "You should take it."

Dale kept watch atop his Winnebago while the others (save for Andrea) made their way along the road. Suddenly he alerted Rick, who whisper-yelled to those nearest him – walkers were approaching! Everyone took cover as best they could underneath various vehicles, but T-Dog accidently cut his arm on some jagged automobile metal while ducking for cover, leaving a nasty and profusely bleeding gash. Allison watched from underneath a minivan as Daryl emerged from his hiding place to kill a walker and then place its carcass on a prone T-Dog as a cover.

The huge group, or "herd" as they would later describe it, of walkers slowly passed by as everyone held as still as possible in their various safe places. As the last one shuffled by, Sophia, Carol's daughter, started to wriggle out from underneath a car. The very slight noise she made attracted
two walkers who were lagging behind the herd. Frightened, the child ran toward the nearby woods, clutching her doll, her mother's screams stifled by Lori, who was lying beside her beneath a vehicle.

There was a flurry of confusion as everyone slowly emerged from their hiding places. T-Dog was bleeding profusely, Sophia had disappeared into the wilderness and Andrea had killed a walker that had made its way into the RV. Carol was beside herself even though Rick had run off in search of Sophia.

"Let me see that," Allison told T-Dog, grasping his arm and examining the angry cut. Blood was spewing from the wound every time his heart beat and her mind was racing, wishing that she had some sterile gauze pads and antiseptic handy. "We need to clean this to prevent infection…" she mumbled to herself.

"I got a tetanus shot two years ago at the shop clinic after a damned nail sticking out of a pallet sliced my shoulder," T-Dog told her, his face contorting in pain.

Without thinking twice, Allison removed her cotton T-shirt and wrapped it around T-Dog's forearm. She took his other hand made him grip the makeshift bandage, saying "Here, hold this in place and press hard." She led him over to the tailgate of a nearby van. "Sit down and try to keep this arm elevated."

Dale, ever the protective patriarch, rushed over with a small first aid kit. He produced a gauze pad and a bottle of isopropyl alcohol and handed both to Allison. She removed the bloody T-shirt, refolded it so that a clean portion was available and poured the alcohol onto it. "This is going to hurt, but I have to do it…." She cleansed the wound as best she could and T-Dog swallowed his screams of pain, knowing that any noise might attract walkers that might be lurking nearby. His forehead broke out in beads of sweat as he clenched his eyes shut. Allison then covered the wound with the gauze pad and strapped it into place with the duct tape Dale handed her.

"Good thing you don't have hairy arms for when she rips that off later," Dale joked, hoping to lift T-Dog's spirits. He then noticed that Allison was now wearing nothing more than a flimsy cotton camisole. "Here," he said, taking off the faded Hawaiian-print shirt that he'd worn over his wife beater. "You might want to put this on."

"Thanks." She slipped into the oversized garment. "I'll make sure to return it." To T-Dog she said "Are you – or were you - on any daily medications? Baby aspirin? Anything at all?"

"No," he replied, breathing heavily.

"Diabetes runs in your family, you mentioned before, have you been tested recently?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm good, it's all good," he gasped. "I get an annual physical….""

"OK, just sit still for a few while I go get another shirt." She gestured with her head for Dale to follow her as she went back to the truck to rummage through her bag. She found a short-sleeved pullover among her things and slipped it on. "A tetanus shot is fine to guard against infection from soil or feces," she said quietly to Dale as she handed him back his shirt, "but there's a whole mess of other bacteria that could make him sick from that cut…" Her voice trailed off when she noticed that Dale was not paying strict attention to her.

"Andrea, are you OK?" he asked the blonde woman anxiously as she stepped down out of the RV trying to stifle her sobs. "Yes," she barely spoke, holding up a hand warning him to keep his distance. "I'm fine…"
Lori cradled Andrea in her arms as Shane and Daryl pulled the dead walker from the Winnebago and tossed it unceremoniously on the side of the road. Moments later Rick emerged from the forest and stepped over the metal highway barrier. Carol slumped in sorrow as she stepped toward him, her entire posture pleading. "You…didn't find her…?"

Rick tried to explain that he'd tucked Sophia away in a hollow log and had given her instructions for making her way back to the road while he lured the walkers away from her. Carol broke down into sobs, asking "How could you leave her?" while some of the others tried to explain how Rick had done his best to save Sophia's life. For heaven's sake, Allison thought to herself, we're all flying by the seats of our pants, acting on instinct with no script. Rick had certainly displayed more logic under pressure than most folks if he'd taken the time to tell Sophia to keep the Sun over her left shoulder. But Carol was inconsolable.

When Daryl and Rick announced that they were headed back into the woods to search for Sophia, Allison piped up "I'll go with you."

"No," Rick said. "Daryl and I can handle it…I need you to stay here so you can – "

"So I can what?" Allison asked him pointedly. "I can't fire my rifle, that would attract walkers. I can't help T-Dog without any antibiotics…"

"Why didn't you say something earlier?" Daryl said impatiently, stepping over to his motorcycle. "Keep your oily rags off my bike," he told Dale, tossing a cloth his way. "Merle's got a whole pharmacy here," he mumbled as he picked up a large Zip-Loc bag. "Crystal, X, Doxycycline…" he tossed a bottle of the last to Allison. "That's the good stuff, the name brand, not a generic. Merle used to get the clap on occasion…"

Allison opened the bottle and handed T-Dog a caplet. "Where's that bottle of pink water?" she asked, looking around. "You need to pump fluids with this pill." Dale approached with a full bottle of water. "You also need to try to stay out of the sun," Allison told T-Dog as he chased the pill with a large slug of water. "It could make you sick to your stomach and you can't afford to barf up that pill."

She handed Dale the baggie of medications to store away in a safe place and then faced Rick. "I can track, maybe not as well as Daryl, but two sets of eyes are better than one when it comes to reading signs."

"OK," Rick relented. Allison quickly slipped her backpack on and followed the two men into the woods. She walked carefully, simultaneously trying to not disturb any evidence while also not stepping on any twigs that might snap or rustle and alert any nearby walkers. She silently followed Daryl's soft whistles and gestures indicating which way to proceed. Rick, less experienced when it came to following someone in the woods, peppered Daryl with questions until the veteran hunter finally asked in exasperation "Do you want a lesson in trackin' or do you want to find this little girl?"

The trio spread out ever so slightly when a lone walker approached. Daryl easily pierced the geek's skull and brought it to the ground. Allison and Rick approached it and exchanged glances. Rick finally reached a gloved hand into the walker's mouth. "There's some flesh in its teeth," he announced. "It's eaten something recently."

Allison dug into her backpack and pulled out a pair of gloves. "Is it human…?" she began to ask as Daryl reached upward with his knife grasped in both hands. "Only one way to tell," he stated, bringing the blade down in a vicious chop. "Hold on, hold on," Allison pushed him back at the wrists. He withdrew his knife from the walker's chest cavity with a questioning look on his face.
"If we're going to examine its stomach contents, we have to do this carefully," she explained. She looked up at Daryl. "May I borrow your knife?"

He sat back on his heels and handed the weapon over to her. Allison hovered over the carcass. "I think the most efficient way is a Lazy 'S' incision if we want to preserve the stomach contents...." She dramatically cut into the walker's abdomen and then carefully peeled the tissue back. She stole a brief sidelong glance at Rick, who was (to her amusement) rapidly turning an alarming shade of green. "Whew!" Allison paused and sat back for a moment. "You never get used to that smell, do you?" She saw Daryl looking first at Rick then at her; she could've sworn the outdoorsman was suppressing a grin. She returned to the task at hand, digging both her hands into the abdominal cavity and enjoying how the squishing sounds were making the veteran policeman audibly gag. She pulled out a large, semi-solid maroon-colored blob and held it aloft.

"Ever seen a liver like this?" She asked before setting it aside.

"Not since breakfast," Daryl commented, playing along with her. Rick suddenly turned and crawled away on all fours a few steps before retching.

"You're one sick chick, you know that?" Daryl said to Allison with a slight shake of his head.

"Hey, sometimes you gotta find laughs where you can when the situation is desperate. Lightens the mood a bit, helps to break the tension."

"If you think a missing little girl is a laughing matter, I guess," Daryl's mood turned somber once again.

"Sometimes laughter the only thing that keeps a person from completely breaking down..." Allison murmured as she probed the walker's innards once again and pulled a pinkish organ out of the cavity as far as she could. It undulated in her two hands and Daryl asked "Is that the gut bag?"

"Yeah, I believe that's the medical term for it..." she replied. "Can you grab the knife and cut that connective tissue -- she inclined her head "- so we can remove it?"

With a few deft movements Daryl had severed all the connections and took the stomach from Allison. He set it on the ground and sliced it open. Rick had recovered and was now watching with guarded interest. "Hoss had a big meal not long ago," Daryl commented, groping inside the stomach with a gloved hand. He pulled out a piece of bone, something that appeared to be part of a small animal's skull. Daryl was having trouble grasping the slimy contents so he used his knife as a probe and pulled out a small piece of fur matted with blood and other bodily fluids. "Gross bastard had himself a woodchuck for lunch."

Everyone slowly stood up as Daryl cleaned off his knife. "At least we know," Rick commented. "At least we know," Daryl affirmed.

The trio returned to the highway where the rest of their group stood waiting. Carol's anxious face broke Allison's heart as Rick shook his head and indicated that their search hadn't turned up anything.

"Is that...blood?" she asked, looking at their spattered clothing.

"Took down a walker," Rick explained.

"It didn't get her, though," Daryl quickly reassured Carol.

"How can you know that for sure?" she asked, her eyes tearing up.
The three trackers exchanged glances. "Field autopsy," Allison finally said over her shoulder as she headed to the water truck Shane had discovered earlier to rinse herself off.

"It's getting dark," Rick told Carol. "We'll pick the search back up tomorrow at first light."
Early the next morning Allison elected to stay on the highway with T-Dog and Dale after hearing the petty arguing going on about who should carry a gun while searching for Sophia and who shouldn't. Gunfire would just attract walkers and probably frighten Sophia, if she was within earshot, but some folks (I'm looking at you, Andrea, Allison thought to herself) just didn't seem to get it. Some folks (Andrea again) seemed to think it was a concerted effort by the men in the group to demean the women, keep them in their place, make them seem weak and unable to protect themselves by denying them guns. Or, in terms Allison would never dare speak out loud - remembering the pain of Grandma's wooden spoon against the side of her head - Andrea was desperate to be all bad-assed, like this was some sort of Rambo sequel.

She fetched some more water bottles from the delivery truck and handed one to T-Dog with another Doxycycline tablet. "How come you didn't go out huntin' for that little girl with the others today?" he asked her after downsing a healthy slug of water.

Allison shrugged. "Didn't seem like I was needed. They've got what, seven or eight pairs of eyes all walking in a big ol' clump together. A more productive search would mean everyone spreading out, but I suppose that's too dangerous right now. So, not to sound too self-absorbed or anything, but I didn't see any need in exhausting myself traipsing through the dense Georgia woods in this heat when I won't do any good. I can better use my time browsing through these vehicles for supplies."

"Well just don't wander too far," Dale cautioned her. "Let's all stay within visual distance of one another, shall we?"

T-Dog struggled to his feet from his perch on the steps of the RV. "At least I can help scavenge for shit…sorry, I mean 'crap'. I keep forgettin', Daryl told me not to swear in front of you."

Allison couldn't help but smile. That good ol' boy Daryl reminded her of so many of the rough-hewn men she'd known while growing up. She remembered stopping by Loot Starkins' Truck Stop Saloon many a late Sunday afternoon with her granddaddy when she was a little girl after they'd spent the morning (after church, of course) fishing. The place would be filled with rednecks who cussed and spat and talked about things they'd done with women that she didn't really understand, but which made many of them wander over to their table and buy her an ice cold Coca-Cola or a small bag of potato chips while apologizing to Granddaddy "I'm sorry the little lady heard that." And they always left in time to get home for Sunday dinner 'cause their Mamas were expecting them and would be upset if they were late after she'd spent all day cooking.

"T, you've got an infection and you need to rest. Ideally, you should be in bed."

"This is ridiculous, my fever's broke, I feel much better, I need to be doing something…"

Allison sighed and put her hands on her hips. "It's always the same with you men – I'm fine, I'll rub some dirt on it and walk it off" – like it's an insult to your manhood to actually take care of your body when you're sick. Well, listen up; you need to rest and let the antibiotics do their thing. I don't want to scare you, but without blood tests I can't tell if you have sepsis or not and it's better to err on the side of caution. Septic shock can cause blood clotting and organ failure. Hopefully we got you the doxy in time, but this is not the time to overtax yourself. Not to mention that you probably need stitches in that arm and if you move it around much more you're going to rip that incision open and start bleeding again."

T-Dog muttered something about women being overly dramatic, but he stayed put.
"I'm going to go back upstairs," Dale told Allison, gesturing to the roof of the Winnebago, "and keep watch. Don't wander too far away, OK?"

"OK," she replied and began rifling through the purses and handbags and small carry-on type bags she found in nearby cars. She knew that that's where she'd find things like Tylenol, tampons, Midol, wet wipes, batteries and other small necessities. She'd filled three satchels quite full when she heard some commotion up the road. Pulling her head out of an SUV she saw Glenn, Andrea and the others stepping over the guardrail and talking to Dale.

"And you just let her go?" she heard Dale ask.

"Climb out of my ass, old man," Daryl retorted. "She knew Lori and Carl by name."

"What's going on?" Allison asked as she approached the group.

"Carl got shot, apparently," Glenn answered, sounding like he was still trying to work out what had happened. "Andrea got attacked by a walker, and this girl on a horse just appeared out of nowhere, like Zorro…."

"Are you OK?" Dale asked Andrea anxiously, but she just pushed passed him silently and disappeared inside the Winnebago.

"She gave us directions to her farm," Glenn went on. "It's not far from here."

"I'm not leaving while my daughter is still out there," Carol stated.

"We could stay the night, give us enough time to rig some kind of sign, leave some supplies for Sophia," Daryl suggested.

"I'm in," Andrea said, stepping back out of the RV and raising a hand as if voting.

"If the RV stays, then I stay," Dale announced.

"Well, if you're all staying…" Glenn started but Dale cut him off. "I think T-Dog needs to get to that farm. It's a safe place where he can rest. He's got a raging blood infection…" He looked at Glenn pointedly.

"Aw, geez, why is it always me…?" Glenn muttered.

"Because you know the way there, and I can't drive a stick," Allison told him.

Glenn opened the driver side door of Carol's Jeep Cherokee and got in while T-Dog slid into the passenger seat. Glenn started the engine and put the Jeep in gear. "Hey!" He stuck his head out the window. "This has an automatic transmission, not a stick!"

"Oops, my mistake! Well, you're already in there and set to go, so you might as well go on ahead," Allison replied with a shrug and a slight smile.

It was after midnight but Allison hadn't slept a wink on the bench-style sofa in the RV. The heat and humidity were stifling and Carol's muffled sobs only made the atmosphere more that much more depressing. Apparently Daryl had been tossing and turning, too, for suddenly he clambered to his feet and announced "I'm gonna go out, take a look around for Sophia…maybe she'll notice the light." He threw his crossbow over his shoulder, picked up a flashlight and grabbed a revolver. "I'll need my clip," he told Andrea, who was sitting nearby at a table noisily fussing with the parts of her disassembled handgun. "I'll go with you," she volunteered. "I can't sleep, either," Allison said,
standing up and slipping on the belt that held her sheathed machete, "mind some extra company?" Daryl grunted in response and exited the RV followed by Andrea. "Carol?" Allison called out softly. "Will you be OK alone for a little bit if we go looking for Sophia?"

"Mm-hmm," Carol murmured with a sniffle. "Dale's right upstairs if you need him," Allison added as she left.

"Do you think we'll find her?" Andrea asked aloud as the trio stepped carefully through the woods.

"You got that look on yer face the same as everybody else," Daryl replied with an edge of irritation to his voice. "What's wrong with you people? We just started looking. This ain't the mountains of Tibet, it's Georgia."

"But she's only 12 years old…" Andrea continued.

"Hell – um, heck, I was younger 'n that when I got lost in the woods for nine days, eatin' berries and wiping my….butt with poison ivy."

"And nobody found you?" Andrea asked.

"My old man was off on a bender with some waitress and Merle was doin' another stint in juvie. No one even knew I was gone. Finally got home and made myself a sandwich. I itched something awful, though."

Andrea snickered. "I'm sorry, but that's an awful story."

"Yeah, well, at least Sophia has someone lookin' for her, I'd say that's an advantage."

"What kind of sandwich did you have?" Allison, who had remained silent during Daryl's story, asked a few moments later.

Daryl stopped in his tracks and looked over his shoulder at her. "What?"

"You said you'd been lost for nine days and when you got home you made a sandwich. I was just curious what kind of sandwich you made."

"What the heck kind of stupid question is that?" he spat and continued walking. They walked in silence for a few minutes then Daryl muttered "Peanut butter and bologna."

"Yech," Allison murmured.

"It's better than thinking about his itchy ass," Andrea told her.

Allison felt herself blushing. She wondered what the others would think if they'd known how many times she had actually surreptitiously studied the hunter's firm backside when he wasn't looking. Her thoughts were interrupted by a familiar snorting and gurgling sound.

"What the hell…?" Daryl mumbled as they approached a walker dangling by its neck from a tree branch. He shined his flashlight on a nearby note. He read it out loud. "Got bit, fever hit, world gone to shit, might as well quit." He shook his head. "Moron didn't even have the sense to shoot himself in the head."

"At least he had the presence of mind to write his suicide note in rhyme," Allison commented, somewhat impressed. "I couldn't compose a poem right now, when I've got all the time in the world. Can't imagine coming up with one if my brain was about to fry up from a fever."
"Looks like the walkers ate most of his leg muscles..." Daryl observed. The sound of gagging made him and Allison turn and look at Andrea. "You OK?" he asked her.

"I think I'm going to be sick," she moaned.

"Go ahead, if you gotta," he replied.

"I wonder if he feels pain, is that why he makes all that noise...you know, it's amazing that they can walk and respond to noise with nothing but a brain stem. Medically speaking, with so much of the brain destroyed, they should all be more or less comatose." Allison mused, remembering the MRI Jenner had showed them. "And why are they always hungry? How are they even digesting food...?"

Andrea interrupted her by bending over and retching. "I thought we were going to change the subject," she complained, wiping her mouth.

"Just getting' you back for laughing at my poison ivy story," Daryl told her.

"Besides, that isn't nearly as gross as a bologna sandwich," Allison added, gesturing over her shoulder to the struggling walker.

"What's wrong with bologna?" Daryl asked. "Not fancy enough for you? Sorry, but I was fresh out of watercress that day."

"Has nothing to do with 'fancy'...I've just always loathed bologna for some reason. I like salami, ham, corned beef, even Spam...I can stomach almost any type of lunch meat, but bologna has always turned my stomach. Don't know why. Oh, and head cheese disgusts me, too. It's so gelatinous and chunky..."

Andrea turned away and silently held out a hand in a "stop" gesture. Daryl couldn't resist. "What about olive loaf?" he asked Allison. "Or - "

"Enough!" Andrea yelled before squatting down and dry heaving for several minutes.

"You two are both a couple of shits," she snapped at them once she'd gained her composure. She turned as if to leave and then paused. "Are you just gonna leave him like that?" she asked Daryl, inclining her head toward the walker.

"Why not? He ain't hurtin' nobody." He paused and studied Andrea for a moment. "Why are you so concerned all of a sudden? You decided you wanna go on livin' in this world now?"

"An answer for an arrow," she responded. "Deal," he agreed and shot the walker neatly between the eyes. He looked at Andrea expectantly. She pondered a moment and then told him "Maybe."

"Not much of an answer," Allison commented as the trio simultaneously started heading back to the RV. "Waste of an arrow, too," Daryl snorted. "'Maybe,,' he echoed mockingly.

"Were you really serious about staying behind at the CDC?" Allison asked as they walked. "Or was that just a spur-of-the-moment grief thing? I mean, because of your sister..." her voice trailed off, realizing too late that she might've struck a sensitive nerve.

Andrea sighed. "I think I would've stayed, had it not been for Dale. Even before Amy died, I wasn't exactly hopeful about life the future...and by the future I mean tomorrow and the day after. I think the only reason I didn't pack it in before that because she was looking to me to take care of her. But in the back of my mind I kept wondering why were we bothering to struggle so? What is there out
there for us in the end? Just a constant never-ending 24/7 worry about finding food and shelter and not getting bitten? I still wonder about that sometimes…” She looked at Allison. "Seriously, hasn't 'opting out' ever crossed your mind?"

"Honestly? No. Just like the bologna, it's something that I can't really explain. Maybe it's because I'm extremely curious…or as my Grandma used to always say 'nosy'…and I want to see what's going to happen next. What caused this thing? Will it get worse before it gets better? Who else is out there alive? I'd like to stick around to find out the answers. I can't really imagine many scenarios where I'd want to snuff myself."

"Really? What if you had a terminal disease or something? I'm sure you saw plenty of that, working in a hospital."

"Not as much as you'd think. The majority of people hold out hope no matter how bleak the prognosis. That's why there's so much money to be made in quack remedies. Folks going to Mexico for coffee enemas and such when their cancer has metastasized to the liver and pancreas, things like that. Very few people sign a Do Not Resuscitate order, even though when they're young and healthy they always say 'when my time comes I don't want to be kept alive by machines.'"

"The survival instinct is the strongest instinct in animals, including humans," Daryl commented. Then, with a sidelong glance at Andrea, he added "most humans, anyway."

"Anyway, it's hard to say unless you're actively going through the situation, but off the top of my head I think the only two cases where I'd prefer not to live is if I was diagnosed with ALS – Lou Gehrig's Disease - or if I suffered a very severe burn over more than 50 percent of my body."

"Seriously?" Andrea persisted. "Not terminal cancer, or Alzheimer's Disease…?" "Everyone has different pain thresholds," Allison replied. "Chemotherapy is nasty, but not intolerable. And there's always that glimmer of hope in the back of your brain that maybe a new treatment or a cure might be found in the next few months. Alzheimer's? Once it gets to a certain point, the patient isn't even aware of what's going on. It's more painful and taxing for the family members and caretakers than for the patient. But ALS…the mind stays intact while the body fails. Eventually you can't even breathe on your own, or swallow, but your mind is alert and fully aware as you very slowly waste away." She shuddered involuntarily.

"Well this conversation is really freakin' uplifting," Daryl complained as they approached the highway. His mood suddenly turned sour. "And now we gotta tell Carol that we didn't find her daughter. Sweet dreams, everyone." He strode into the Winnebago wordlessly, not meeting Carol's eyes as she peered down at them from the roof of the vehicle. "Anything…?" she asked, her voice barely a whisper. "Sorry," Allison replied quickly, as she ducked into the RV. "We'll look again tomorrow," Andrea promised as Carol sank back into her lawn chair. Dale, seated next to her, wordlessly reached over and gently patted her hand.
Their arrival at the Greene property was a whirlwind of activity and confusion. Hershel, the obvious family patriarch and owner of the land, was conflicted and uneasy about this huge group of new arrivals suddenly camping out on his property. The first group activity was a memorial service for someone named Otis, who'd apparently taken Shane out to find medical supplies for Carl. It would take a couple of days before Allison was able to figure out that the woman named Patricia, who'd been a nurse in her "previous life", was the wife of Otis, a hired hand who'd worked the Greene farm more years than Patricia could remember. That Otis had accidentally shot Carl while hunting a deer, and had experience as a volunteer EMT which is why he'd taken Shane to some nearby FEMA place to collect surgical supplies for Carl. And that Shane had returned from the mission alone.

"Otis was such a good man," Patricia said to Allison during a conversation they'd had when Allison approached Patricia shortly after arriving at the farm to thank her for stitching up T-Dog's arm and had casually asked her about her nursing experience. "I met Otis almost 15 years ago at the hospital…I was working as ER nurse and he'd occasionally arrive in the ambulance with a patient…he'd always wait and see what happened, what the prognosis was…" She paused and sighed. "He and I would sit and have a cup of coffee during my break and we'd talk…I finally asked him once why he bothered to find out what happened to the patients he brought in. He just sorta shrugged and said that he was concerned. And then he said that he knew a lot of the families in the area and saw them at church every Sunday and he liked to be able to tell someone's mama that Charlie Jr. was doing just fine after he'd dropped him off at the emergency room and that the doctors were takin' real good care of him." Patricia paused and tried to stifle a sob. "He cared so much…about everybody…"

Allison impulsively hugged the woman. "It sounds like you lost a very fine man. I'm so sorry."

Lori sought Allison out after the memorial service and gripped Allison's arm urgently. "Have you seen Carl yet? Why not? Why didn't you come yesterday with Glenn and T-Dog?" She steered Allison toward the house as she spoke. The two climbed the porch stairs and when Allison reached the top step she turned around to face Lori one step below her.

"Please calm down." She grasped Lori's forearm for emphasis. "I have some, but not a whole lot of, surgical experience, so I didn't think I could be very helpful here. I thought I could be of more use searching for Sophia. I'm sorry if you feel that I let you down."

"Hershel's a damned animal doctor," Lori hissed at her. "I've got a veterinarian operating on my son."

Allison didn't see that Hershel Greene was now standing just inside of the screen door behind her, looking out onto the porch. "Lori," she explained, trying to calm the woman, "a person has to go through just as many years of medical school to become a veterinarian as well as an MD. Sometimes more, depending upon the state licensing requirements. Without X-ray equipment handy, an old-school vet is probably the best person you can have taking care of Carl. The basic internal workings of humans aren't all that different than animals, and an old guy used to caring for big, expensive farm animals like horses and cows knows what he's doing."

The screen door swung open and Hershel stepped onto the porch. Allison pivoted around and greeted him. "How do you do, Dr. Greene, I'm Allison Harper." She extended her hand.

He shook it and replied succinctly, "Name's 'Hershel.'"
Allison suddenly wondered how long he'd been within earshot and apologized "Um, sorry about that 'old guy' remark. It was just a figure of speech...." She could feel her cheeks coloring.

Hershel smiled and put a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "No worries, Doctor. When you get to be my age, being called 'old' is a point of pride."

"Name's 'Allison',' Allison responded with a grateful smile.

"Your boy is doin' just fine, m'am," Hershel said to Lori. "He'll be asleep for a little while but you're welcome to go sit with him." Lori pushed past the two on the porch and entered the house.

"I don't mind at all if you want to take a look at him...give a second opinion, so to speak," Hershel said kindly to Allison.

"Thanks, but I trust your judgment completely." She paused while the two of them were strolling along the length of the porch and stopped to gaze out over the railing.

"If you don't mind me asking, what is your background?"

"Duke Medical School, class of 2010. Had just completed my first year of residency when all this..." she gestured vaguely with one hand "started. I haven't taken my Step 3 boards yet."

"What had you planned to specialize in?"

"Well, out of all my rotations I liked Emergency Medicine the most and was planning to make that my specialty. I just had a real knack for it, you know? Doing triage, asking just the right interview questions to pinpoint the problem as quickly as possible... It seemed like it would be a good fit."

"Interesting choice. Seems like most young women fresh out of medical school these days want to work in either labor and delivery or pediatrics."

"Nah, not me." Allison shook her head.

"Why not?"

"Same reason I could never work with animals. They can't tell you what's wrong and they don't understand why you're hurting them, that you're only trying to make them better." She paused. "I'm too soft-hearted for that, I guess. It's easier to stay detached when you only see the patient once."

At that moment a very pale Rick emerged from the house and attempted to walk down the porch steps.

"Where are you going?" Hershel asked.

"Gotta get out there and look for Sophia," Rick replied.

"You're in no condition to be out anywhere," Hershel told him.

"Just how much blood have you given in the last 24 hours?" Allison asked, noting the black circles under Rick's sunken eyes.

"Too much," Hershel responded before Rick could speak. "Son, what you need to do is rest. Your body can't stand this much abuse much longer."

Rick was quiet and considered Hershel's statement. "Alright, can I at least organize the search? Gather the others together and plot this thing out on the map?"
"As long as you're not on your feet and out in that sun too long," Hershel acquiesced.

"Allison," Rick turned to her, "Do you mind goin' out and gatherin' up anyone who wants to help search? Have 'em all meet me over by Carol's Cherokee right away?"

"Off I go," Allison responded as she sprinted off the porch.

About 20 minutes later most of the group was gathered around the hood of the Jeep watching Rick's slightly trembling hands point out areas on a large land survey plat. "I want to help search, too," a new voice piped up. Heads turned to find Jimmy, Beth's beau, standing nearby. "We appreciate that," Rick nodded, "But I'll have to check with Hershel first, get his OK."

"He already told me it was OK with him," Jimmy reassured the man.

"He can come with my group," Andrea offered.

"I'm going to borrow a horse and head up to this ridge right here," Daryl stated, circling a spot on the map with his index finger. "Get a bird's eye view of the whole grid. If she's up there I'll spot her."

"Good idea," T-Dog agreed. "Maybe you'll see your Chupacabra up there, too."

"Chupacabra?" Rick asked.

"You never heard that story?" Dale asked. "Our first night in camp, Daryl tells us that this whole thing reminds him of the time he went squirrel hunting and he saw a Chupacabra."

Jimmy snorted with laughter.

"What're you braying at, jackass?" Daryl challenged him.

"So, you believe in a bloodsucking dog?" Jimmy asked with a smirk.

"You believe in dead people walking around?" Daryl retorted as he turned and stomped off toward the stable.

"I don't get it," Allison said, confused. "What's a Chupacabra?"

"It's a mythical creature," Rick explained, "sort of a wild dog or wolf that attacks sheep and goats like a vampire and sucks their blood."

"Are we gonna give history lessons or are we gonna search for Sophia?" Shane interjected impatiently.

Everyone returned their attention to Rick's map except for Allison, who was suddenly distracted by a tap on her shoulder. She looked behind her to see Lori giving her a "come here" gesture. She followed the woman several steps away from the Jeep and then looked at her questioningly.

"I need to ask you a favor," Lori stated.

Allison shrugged. "Sure, what can I do?"

"I need you to go into town and get me something." She pressed a crumpled piece of paper into Allison's hand. "Glenn's going into town today, you can ride with him. But please don't tell him or anyone else what I asked you to get or why I asked you to go."
"OK, I guess," Allison replied. There was a part of her brain that couldn't help but notice that the sheriff's wife had never uttered the word "please" while making her request. Maybe it was petty, but it nevertheless was a tiny informational tidbit that was involuntarily tucked away in the "reasons Lori irks me" portion of her brain's filing cabinet. "I'll ask him if he doesn't mind taking me along with him...."

"I'm sure he won't," Lori assured her. "Just tell him I asked you to go." She started to walk away but then paused and turned around. "But don't tell him why!" she reiterated.

Allison unfolded the note in her hand while she walked toward the house and read Lori's scrawl. Home pregnancy test. "Oh, geez," she sighed, "that's all we need right now. Princess Pushy full of baby hormones."

Glenn and Maggie were just descending the front steps as Allison approached the porch.

"Hey, Glenn," she called to him. "Lori says you're planning a trip into town. Mind if I tag along? She asked me to pick up something for her."

He looked at Maggie questioningly and then back at Allison. "Well, um, actually Maggie was taking me there...I don't quite know the way yet."

Maggie eyed her and asked, "Ever ride a horse before?"

"It's been a while," Allison admitted. "Hopefully it's like riding a bike, though; you know, once you learn, you never forget...?"

"You can ride with me, I s'pose" Maggie said and started walking toward the stable.

"We're taking horses into town?" Allison asked Glenn as she fell into step. "Not a car?"

"Conserves gas," Maggie threw over her shoulder. "Leaves us more for the generator."

After two horses were saddled up Maggie climbed atop one and looked down at Allison. "You waitin' for an engraved invite or somethin'?"

"Oh, you meant 'with you' as in on the same horse?"

"You ain't ridden in a while, I ain't trustin' you to solo on one of our horses," Maggie said as she half-heartedly reached one hand down to assist Allison up. Allison had a feeling that Glenn, the Atlanta-dwelling pizza delivery guy, probably wasn't any more at ease in the saddle than she was, but she noted that Maggie trusted him to ride alone. Maybe the farmer's daughter had a soft spot for the shy Korean, she thought to herself.

"So what does Lori want that she didn't trust Glenn 'n me to fetch for her?" Maggie asked when they dismounted at the pharmacy in town and tied their reins to a railing.

Allison took a few tentative steps before answering, trying to get her sea legs back. Squeezing with all her might to maintain her perch behind the saddle....she was really going to feel this in her thighs tomorrow. Not to mention she already stunk like horse.

"Um, she just needed something for....well, a personal item. She asked me not to discuss it, sorry."

"Oh, for pity's sake, she's too shy to ask us to pick up Vagisil or Monistat or whatever for her
delicate lady problems?" Maggie asked in a mocking voice as they entered the store. Glenn's face turned crimson – Daryl should've been here to see just how red an Asian's complexion could get, Allison thought wryly – and he excused himself to look for "um, supplies or whatever." He scuttled off like a hermit crab looking for its shell. Maggie gave Allison an exasperated look, shook her head and said "I'll be over by the pharmacy counter. I've got a list of things to pick up for Patricia and my dad."

Allison nodded and wandered a few aisles, looking for the feminine products. And, as luck would have it, she bumped right into Glenn who had accidentally stumbled his way to the same set of shelves. "Oh, um, hi again," he stammered. "I wasn't really looking for, um, this kind of stuff – " he gestured toward a shelf containing tampons and pads – "I was just browsing up and down all the aisles."

"S'OK," Allison said. "I don't know where anything is in this place, either. Gotta learn by looking, right?" Nevertheless she wasn't going to be able to discreetly put a Clearblue Easy in her knapsack with him hovering nearby, so drastic measures were necessary to send him on his way. "Oh, look," she said loudly and with enthusiasm. "A box of menstrual cups! I didn't think a small-town store like this would carry them!" She picked up a box of Instead disposable cups and held them out for Glenn's inspection.

"Oh, cool," he muttered and backed away. "I'd better go see if Maggie needs any help."

Allison smiled with satisfaction and tucked the Insteads into her knapsack along with the pregnancy test and some other feminine products. As she poked among the packages on the various shelves she discovered a 12-pack of condoms. She chuckled as she remembered a time, many years ago, when she'd found a single condom on the floor of the ladies' room at Loot Starkins' truck stop. She'd unwrapped the curious package and then announced loudly when she returned to where her grandpa was sitting "Hey, Granddaddy, lookit the funny balloon I found!" She left the box of Trojans there and walked to the pharmacy counter to see if there was anything there worth taking.

"I'm takin' mainly the antibiotics, but let me know if there's anything I can help you find for Miss Lori. I'll gladly turn my back while you take it," Maggie said with more than a hint of sarcasm as she examined the labels of the array of bottles.

"Look," Allison said, "it's not my idea to be so secretive. Lori asked me to get something for her and not to tell anyone and I gave her my word." She shrugged. "I mean no disrespect, it's not some statement that I don't trust y'all… I just prefer not to get on Lori's bad side if at all possible. It just makes life at camp easier, y'know?"

Maggie's face softened somewhat. "Yeah, I get ya."

"Hey, when we're done here do y'all mind if we stop at that saloon next door right quick? There might be something there worth taking."

"My dad doesn't allow liquor in the house," Maggie cautioned.

"That's fine, I can abide by that," Allison agreed. "It's just handy to have some whiskey or bourbon handy for medical emergencies."

Glenn laughed. "A whiskey emergency?"

The trio headed into Hatlin's as Allison explained "Whatever anesthesia Mr. Hershel has on hand won't last forever. If you don't have any other type of sedative handy, a couple of good belts will
take the edge off the pain. Or, if you get a bout of food poisoning, a shot of Wild Turkey works as well as Imodium in a pinch."

"Come to think of it," Glenn commented as he stuffed a fifth of Old Granddad in Allison's backpack, "my mom used to put a little whiskey in our tea when we were kids when we had the flu. Stopped the cough and helped us sleep."

"Like NyQuil, but better tasting," Allison smiled. When there was no more left in any of their bags, the three got back on their horses and rode back to the farm.
Chapter 7

After they returned Allison sought out Lori. She found her near her tent. "Here you go," she said quietly, removing her backpack and digging through it. She found the pregnancy test and handed it over.

Lori took the box from her and stuffed it into the back of her jeans.

"Um, Lori," Allison hesitated, "if there's anything I can do to help…"

"What I need you to do right now is keep quiet about this," Lori stated bluntly before turning around and disappearing into her tent.

"You're welcome," Allison muttered under her breath. She started back toward her own tent when she saw some sort of commotion going on near the RV. She started jogging to it when she heard Dale's voice yelling "No, Andrea, no! Don't shoot!"

As Allison got closer she saw Andrea lying in a prone position atop the Winnebago, aiming for something in the distance. But three figures appeared to be in her line of fire – it looked like Rick, T-Dog and Glenn. She was just nearing the ladder of the vehicle when Andrea pulled the trigger. A fourth figure, one she hadn't noticed before, dropped to the ground and she heard a chorus of "No!" from the other men.

"What's going on?" Allison asked Dale as he descended the ladder.

"I'm not sure," he replied, raising his binoculars. "Is that…Daryl?"

"What?" Allison gasped. She grabbed the glasses out of Dale's hand, nearly strangling him with the neck strap. "Oh my God, you shot Daryl!" She dropped the binoculars and they bounced back against Dale's chest. Allison took off running to the men who were now half-carrying Daryl back to the house. "Is he OK?" She asked frantically when she caught up with them. She fell into step with them and looked at the blood on the side of his head. "Looks like it just grazed him. My God, what was she thinking…." She then noticed the blood soaked through his shirt. "I only heard one shot, what happened here…." She mumbled as she tried to pull open his shirt while they stumbled up the steps.

"Let's get him inside first," Rick told her. "Oh, and you'd better hang on to this." He handed her a string with three discolored ears hanging on it. "Hershel doesn't need to see this."

"Glenn, can you please run to my tent and fetch the black leather satchel that's near my sleeping bag?" Allison asked as she looked for a place on her person to hide the bizarre necklace. She finally stuffed it down the front of her shirt.

"In here," Patricia had appeared out of nowhere and directed the group into a bedroom. She spread out an extra sheet on top of the covers apologetically ("Sorry, but he's kinda filthy") before Rick and T-Dog eased Daryl onto the bed. Allison got to work stripping his shirt off. It was hard to see anything below all the dirt and grime.

"Patricia, could you please get me a basin of warm water and some towels or cloths?"

She was suddenly conscious of Glenn standing beside her, holding out her call bag. "You got rockets in your feet or something? That was quick." She smiled at him. "Thanks very much." She took the ears out of her cleavage and stashed them in the bag with one hand while removing a large
bottle of antiseptic gel sanitizer with the other. "I need to clean you off a bit," she told Daryl, who was already beginning to squirm, "so I can see what's what."

"I can clean myself," he grumbled, pushing her hands away.

"Not right now you can't," Allison told him. "Right now I need you to sit still and let me do my job."

Patricia returned with the basin, a stack of clean towels and Hershel.

"Are you the one who stole my horse?"

"You mean the nag that tried to kill me?" Daryl sneered.

"We call her Nellie, as in 'Nervous Nellie.' Would've told you that had you asked before you just took her. Any idea where she might be?"

"Headed to another state if she's got any sense," Daryl muttered.

"I'm surprised you people have survived as long as you have," Hershel muttered as he left the room. He returned a few moments later with a small bottle. "Y'all are going through the antibiotics a lot faster than I anticipated," he commented as he handed Allison the container. She read the label. "Are you allergic to penicillin?" she asked Daryl. "No," he muttered and she handed him two amoxicillin tablets. "We did bring some medications with us," she looked up at Hershel. "I don't know where they went."

"That Asian boy – Glenn? He gave 'em to me when he first arrived. They're in Hershel's office if you want 'em," Patricia replied.

"Not right now, as long as I know where to get them, that's fine. Can I maybe get a little more room and maybe a bit more privacy for a few minutes please?" T-Dog, who was still holding a doll in his hands started to leave the room before Daryl stopped him. "That's Sophia's. I found it over by the lake."

"I'll get the map and you can show us where," Rick offered. He and T-Dog left the room. Allison sat down on a chair and began removing things from her bag.

"He may need a few stitches," Hershel remarked, leaning over Allison to peer at Daryl's head.

"I've got some swages in here," she told the vet. "Hopefully should be enough silk to sew this up along with that belly wound." She slid Daryl's shirt the rest of the way off and tossed it to the floor. Daryl grabbed the edge of one of the sheets and attempted to cover himself.

Noticing the hunter's discomfort Hershel said "I'll be in the other room, then. Just call out if you need me or Patricia." They left Allison alone with Daryl and she went back to cleaning the puncture wound on his side.

"What happened here?" She asked as she worked.

"Horse threw me," he grunted. "Arrow went clean through me. Fell down a ravine." He winced when she applied pressure to the area.

"I sure hope you didn't fracture any ribs. I'll never be able to tell for sure without an X-ray," Allison sighed. She put the tips of her stethoscope into her ears and placed the diaphragm on his chest. "I need you to take a deep breath and then blow it out." He complied for a few breaths as she
moved the instrument around, but then griped "I don't need all this fuss!" and pushed her hands away from him.

Rick re-entered the room with a map and a pen. "Can you indicate on here where you found the doll?"

Allison sighed impatiently. "This isn't 'fuss', it's medical treatment which you very desperately need right now," she told Daryl. She stood up and took a few steps backward, allowing Rick to move closer with the map. "You've got two minutes," she told Daryl, "scribble quickly."

After Rick departed Allison continued with her examination. "Your lungs sound clear...I don't hear any extraordinary sounds and you're able to take deep breaths so I'm hoping that your ribs are just bruised and not broken." She removed the gauze pad she'd taped temporarily to his side and examined the wound closely. "Looks like just a couple of sutures should hold this," Daryl had been sitting on the edge of the bed the entire time so that Allison could better examine him. "I need you to lay down on your right side right now, and scooch as close to the edge here as you can." He complied, but not without grumbling under his breath. "Whoah!" He suddenly shouted. "What was that?"

"Just some lidocaine spray to numb the area I'm going to stitch," she explained.

"You could warn a guy. That stuff is ice cold!" He shot at her over his shoulder as he lay down.

"Oh, just calm yourself down and hush," Allison chastised him as she began to suture his side wound, which was larger and more urgent at the moment than his head wound, which appeared to be a nasty but shallow gash where Andrea's bullet had grazed him.

"So you found Sophia's doll, that's a good sign," Allison said to make conversation.

"Yeah, found an old burned-out shack where someone's been stayin', too," he answered. "There was an open can of sardines almost empty, and a quilt or somethin' in this small li'l closet."

"You think she might've holed up there?" Allison asked as she tied a knot.

"Whoever was there wasn't more than yay big," he replied.

"Kids tend to hide in small spaces when they're scared," Allison agreed. "I can't tell you how many little ones I saw in the ER who'd stowed away in a closet during a house fire instead of trying to escape..." She sighed.

She reached into her case for a fresh bandage to place over his stitches. After the wound was properly covered she reached up to his head. She very gently moved the few stray strands of hair away from the wound with her fingertips. Daryl remained still. Normally he would've flinched at someone touching him like that, but Allison's hand was somehow soothing...as her fingers lightly smoothed his hair back onto his scalp her touch reminded him of fluttery butterfly wings. He found himself involuntarily closing his eyes and relaxing.

"OK, I'm warning you this time," she spoke softly. "Here comes the cold again." She spritzed a bit of lidocaine around the cut on the side of his head. "This one isn't so bad," she murmured to him. The softness of her voice was like a caress and he sighed like a nuzzling infant despite himself. "A butterfly bandage or two would probably be enough for this little cut, but unfortunately I'm fresh out." Daryl didn't feel any pinpricks from her needle, just a very slight pressure from her hand. And it felt good. Her mention of "butterfly" just further enhanced the soothing feeling he was inexplicably experiencing. He forcibly banished thoughts of Merle's voice calling him a pussy...a
little baby aching to crawl back to Mama's teat…and he tried to just think of nothing at all and simply enjoy the moment. As Allison continued to stitch and talk to him in her well-modulated tone, he felt safe for the first time in a long time. The feeling wasn't sexual, it wasn't maternal, it was just… the experience of another human caring for him like none had done in his recent memory. For a few quick, fleeting moments he felt bathed in serenity.

"There, that should do it," Allison said as she snipped and tied off the end of the silk thread. She gently wiped the area again with some sanitizing gel and then taped a protective bandage over her handiwork.

Daryl struggled to clear his mind of its semi-hypnotic trance. Allison was just a doctor and just takin' care of him like a doctor is s'posed to. Right? But... he'd been to various doctors (albeit infrequently) as a kid and none had ever been so very gentle and had taken the time to actually talk to him and carry on a conversation while stitching him up or giving him shots. Still...he was being just stupid and...weird… thinkin' that a fancy doctor from Duke University would have any interest at all in some nobody redneck. Right? She was just taking care of him because he was her patient. Even though it seemed like she always talked to him more than any of the other men in camp, and often made little jokes and puns with him...puns that she didn't try to explain to him "That means...." She presumed he knew what she meant. She never treated him like he was stupid. But that didn't mean she *liked* him. Did it?

"You can lay on your back now if you're more comfortable that way," Allison told him as she started re-packing her equipment into her bag.

He rolled onto his back and pulled the sheet up over most of his torso. "They should be out there lookin' for her, we've got a damned trail now."

"Rick is outside organizing some of the others into search groups right now," Allison assured him. She paused and gave him a quick conspiratorial grin. "I heard Lori out in the hallway complainin' about him 'going out again' 'bout an hour ago."

She stood up. "I'm going to go find Merle's medicine bag right quick and get you some painkillers. But before I go," she paused and blushed ever so slightly, "Do you need to use the restroom?"

"What the hel – " Daryl spluttered. "What business is it of yours?"

"Because right now you are under official orders not to get up out of bed without assistance," she replied. "If you start flexing those abdominal muscles – like pulling yourself up into a sitting position - you're going to rip out some of my best knitting. So if you need to...relieve yourself, you best tell me so I can help you out of bed."

"Not only 'no', but 'HELL no!'" he shouted at her.

"OK, then," Allison said with an air of nonchalance, "I guess I'll just go back to camp and spread the rumor that you wear bright pink Hello Kitty boxer shorts."

"The hell?" He spat. "You ain't even seen my underwear!" He threw the cover sheet back to show that he was still wearing his slacks.

"You know that, and *I* know that," Allison smiled innocently, "but when I open these baby blues extra-wide I can look amazingly sincere. Who do you think they'll believe?"

"That's one heckuva freakin' bedside manner you've got, doctor," he muttered.

"Anyway, you think on it, unless you really need to go right now..."
"Thanks but I went before I left the woods and got shot," he shot back sarcastically.

"Alright, you get comfy and I'll be back in a bit with your pills."

She left the room and paused after a few steps to lean against the wall. For the first time in a long time during her medical career, she had to physically compose herself. And for the very first time it was for a reason that felt very unsettling. She was feeling…something…for a patient. By God, had she actually been flirting with him during treatment? How wrong was that? Granted, in a traditional hospital setting if you encountered a patient whom you already knew and maybe had had a high school crush on, you could simply turn him over to another attending doctor. Keep any possible ethics violations at bay, never treat anyone you know. But she had been in close quarters, so to speak, with Daryl Dixon for – how long had it been? – the past month? She'd exchanged quips with him and hunted with him…eaten meals with him… That was partly, she had to admit to herself, why she hadn't stripped him of his trousers and examined him further. She knew she would've outright blushed if she'd seen that handsome huntsman who sometimes turned her knees to mush with just a glance of those piercing blue eyes in his underwear.

"This is so wrong," she mentally smacked herself upside her head. But what could she do? Ask Hershel to take over? And for what reason? "Oh, Mr. Hershel, would you mind taking care of Daryl. I am unable to look at his naked body because he makes me all hot." ? Way to never get your license if the world ever does get back to normal! She took a few deep breaths and then made her way to the front porch. She'd go to the pump and splash some cold water on her face and compose herself before returning to Daryl's room with his painkillers. As she stepped through the front door she encountered Dale in mid-conversation with Andrea.

"Don't be too hard on yourself, we've all wanted to shoot Daryl." He was apparently trying to comfort a distraught Andrea.

Allison slammed the door behind her, her mind suddenly filled with fury. "Excuse me? Did I just hear you correctly, Dale? Was that supposed to be funny?"

Both Dale and Andrea looked up at her in surprise and confusion.

"You're making jokes about her," Allison bent down to look Dale in the eyes and gestured toward Andrea, "shooting Daryl? How is that at all humorous?"

"Allison, I didn't mean – " Dale stammered.

"The heck you didn't! I heard your tone of voice. For some reason shooting Daryl versus, say, Rick or Carol, is fine and dandy? As long as she didn't kill him?"

Dale started to respond but Allison cut him off. "Did you even stop to consider that Rick, Glenn and T-Dog were in her firing line when you yourself, by the way, told her not to shoot? That the noise of a bullet when several men with knives were closer to the walker might attract other walkers? No, suddenly little facts like that don't matter. It's much easier to discount Daryl because he's a redneck. That's right, I've heard you refer to him as a redneck."

"Allison, please, if you'll just calm down…" Dale tried to reason with her. His grandfatherly manner did nothing to appease her, though. His comment had unleashed something inside her, maybe something that had been simmering a long time…since childhood.

"For your information, my daddy was a redneck. Do you by any chance even know how the term 'redneck' originated? It came about because honest, hard-working, dirt-poor folks would work outside all day doing whatever manual labor was available rather that going on Relief. 'Relief.'
That's what the hard-working rednecks in my county called Welfare. Anyway, their necks and every other part of their exposed flesh baked red from the sun. My daddy worked for the county power company stringing electrical lines all day and when he came home at night he still went out and worked in our fields, because his paycheck put meat on the table and kept the lights turned on and paid for our medical bills, but we still needed home-grown vegetables to fill in for the rest of our meals. And when Daddy fell off an electrical tower and broke his pelvis and couldn't work, it was our redneck neighbors who came and plowed our fields without us askin'. Some of 'em lived in trailers and couldn't even afford to buy a pair of shoes but they'd still bring us over a basket of home-baked biscuits because they knew Daddy was out of work. That's what dirt-poor Southern rednecks do. They don't think twice about helpin' someone in need, whether they're kin or not."

Allison paused to catch her breath.

"Daryl may not speak as eloquently as y'all, but he's been out there huntin' every single day and bringing back what little meat we've had for our meals. He's been searchin' harder for Sophia than any other man in camp just because she's a lost little girl and that's what rednecks do. They help people in need. They are not only unselfish, but selfless. So maybe he uses racist words, well, so did my Granddaddy…he didn't really hate on minority folks when it came down to it, he was just repeatin' what he'd heard growing up. I remember when the local 'Spic' farmer, as he called him, had a heart attack - Granddaddy and the other farmers in the area harvested his crops and took 'em to market for him. Everyone in the county referred to this guy as a 'wetback' and every other racist slur you can think of, but when he got sick they all made sure his family didn't starve."

She walked down the porch steps to the ground and then paused and turned to face the pair one last time. "Sorry to have gone on, but I just think that all things considered we shouldn't discount any person's worthiness. Any accidental shooting, whether the person survives or not, shouldn't be treated lightly." She took a step but then paused once again to turn her head and mutter under her breath "I just hope I don't make a noise sometime in the middle of the night when I'm out looking for a place to pee…Stable Mabel here might blow my head off."

Allison stomped off in the direction of the pump. Maybe an ice cold facial bath won't be enough to calm me down after all, she thought to herself. Her mind wandered to the several bottles of bourbon back in her tent.

Meanwhile, unbeknownst to her, Daryl had heard her entire diatribe as he lay in bed. The bedroom window was open and he had developed an acute sense of hearing after years of tracking and hunting. Plus, truth be told, she hadn't exactly tempered her voice while lecturing Dale and Andrea. He tossed and turned, despite the stitches in his side and the rib pain. It wasn't his injuries that were making him uncomfortable and unable to sleep….he'd just about convinced himself that Allison was only being nice to him because it was her job. Because she had to. But now, to hear her actually *defending* him to someone….hell, nobody ever spoke well of a Dixon. Especially if that Dixon wasn't within earshot and threatening to pound the speaker into a bloody pulp. Oh, shit, why did this woman insist on screwing with his mind…
Chapter 8

Allison was still sitting beside the pump, cooling off, when she heard a voice behind her. She'd been lost in thought, considering returning to her tent for a belt or two and perhaps sneaking some in for Daryl, in order to help him rest. But she knew that Mr. Hershel didn't allow liquor in his house and she really didn't want to risk getting the whole group kicked off of his farm.

"Allison?" Dale's spoke her name softly, questioningly. She wheeled around in surprise and he visibly blanched, as if he was afraid of her. Well, she had given him quite a dressing-down earlier, so his reaction wasn't entirely without reason.

"Yes?" she replied without much enthusiasm.

"I wanted to apologize for my remarks earlier," he said. "Andrea was so distraught, I was just looking for any words that might comfort her…but you're right, I shouldn't have done so at the expense of minimizing Daryl's injury or his value to the group."

Allison considered his apology and briefly wondered if Dale was truly sorry for his words, or simply sorry that she'd overheard him uttering them. He seemed a bit uncomfortable at her silence and hesitantly continued.

"You're right, we're all so careful with our words when it comes to minority groups and such….even people in wheelchairs aren't 'handicapped' anymore, they're 'differently-abled'….but yet we feel free to mock a hard-working underclass of people just because they live a different lifestyle than we're accustomed to," he finished awkwardly.

Oh, Lord, she inwardly moaned, I'd better put him out of his misery before he wants to join hands and sing "Kumbayah". "S'OK, Dale, we're good. I know now that you didn't really mean anything by it." She gave him a small smile to convince him that she held no animosity. "I'd better go back and check on our patient." Dale fell into step beside her as she walked to the house.

"I hear that Carol and Lori are helping to cook a big dinner in the kitchen for everyone to share tonight," he said conversationally. "Our way of thanking Hershel and his family for letting us stay."

If using up Hershel's food and his hot water to wash all those dishes afterward is any kind of "thank you", Allison thought to herself wryly. Out loud she simply commented "That sounds nice."

Once inside she opened the door to the bedroom a small crack and peeked inside to make sure he wasn't sound asleep. Seeing him fidget uncomfortably she called out "Knock-knock, you decent?"

"Can't remember anyone ever describin' me as 'decent', but come on in," he replied.

She placed her hand on his forehead and announced "No fever, which is good. And surprising, considering you had an open puncture wound in that swampy water."

"Wasn't no swamp, it was a river. Running water is clean water."

"Running water or not, the fish still use it as their toilet," she replied, placing the tips in her ears and reaching for his chest. "Put your arm around my shoulder and sit up with me, please. Deep breath." She listened to his lungs at several different points on his chest and then on his back.
"Everything sounds clear," she commented, putting the stethoscope back in her bag. "How do you feel? Have you been coughing at all? Are you able to take deep breaths without any sharp or stabbing pains?"

"No, yes, I'm fine," he said dismissively, as she eased him back into a prone position.

"I'm serious; now is not the time to be a hero – if you're feeling any sort of chest pain I need to know about it."

"Told ya, I'm fine!" He growled.

She untaped part of the bandage on his torso and peeked at his wound. She noticed one stitch was broken and that the injury was bleeding slightly.

"I thought I told you not to get out of bed without assistance," she tsked-tsks as she removed the bandage and daubed the wound with some antiseptic.

"I didn't," he lied.

"This popped stitch tells me otherwise," she replied. "I told you I wasn't going to actually follow you into the can and watch or anything, I would just help you up and onto your feet."

"One stitch, no big deal." He glared at her. "I'm bettin' that you don't announce it when you hafta pee...you're the type who'd get all embarrassed."

"Yeah, well, I'm a girl. I'm allowed to be shy. Plus I'm the doctor, so I'm also allowed to give you orders for the time being. And by the way, you want to talk embarrassing, try getting a pelvic examination some day."

"Sh-oot," he scrunched up his nose and pulled the sheet up under his chin as if defensively, like he didn't care to think about female-type problems.

"Well, I'm going to be by your side for a while, so you won't be able to sneak away again," Allison told him.

"What, I'm under prison guard now?"

"No, you're under a doctor's care. With a gaping flank wound and possible rib injury. Under normal circumstances I'd have all sorts of beeping electrical equipment monitoring you to alert me if you went into respiratory distress. But today we have to do this the old fashioned way."

"Well, ain't you just an angel of mercy?" he groaned sarcastically.

"Just ignore me, if you like. If you're tired, feel free to doze away."

"I can't sleep with someone watching me."

"Sure you can, folks do it all the time."

"Maybe one of your boring stories will make me drowsy," he said with a sideways glance at her and a barely concealed smirk.

"Excuse me? My stories? Boring...? Whatever do you mean?" She gave a look of mock dismay.

"I dunno...I remember back when we were in the truck drivin' to the CDC you told me somethin' about living with your grandparents in Toccoa."
"Well I'm obviously soo eager to tell you more about myself now that I know you find my past 'boring.'" She wasn't really offended; she knew that it was highly unusual for the lone hunter to invite someone to sit beside him and make small talk. She felt a small tingle of pleasure at being asked to stay instead of chased away. "But if it will help you to keep still and rest, I guess I can chalk my stories up to sound medical practice."

She stood and leaned over his head as she spoke. "Let me take a peek at these stitches while I'm at it," she said, gently lifting the bandage on his head. She smoothed back the hair from his forehead and gently pushed it up onto his scalp with her fingertips. He closed his eyes and sighed softly. "These are healing just fine, though this cut wasn't nearly as bad as the other one. Looks good." She pressed the bandage back into place.

"So," she sat back in her chair, "my grandparents…" Daryl opened his eyes and looked in her direction. "I moved in with them when I was 11, after my parents died."

"Were they nice to you?"

"My grandparents? Well, Granddaddy was very nice. He was an easy-going good ol' small-town Georgia boy. Sometimes I felt bad for him, the way Granny treated him. She grew up in Savannah, her parents had some money, and she was very reserved, very proper. She'd always give Granddaddy a hard time after he came home from fishin' because she knew he'd also stopped at Loot Starkins' place for a few beers. She was a regular Bible-pounding, foot-washin' Baptist, you see."

Daryl snorted in recognition; he'd known a few of those types when he was a boy.

"Funny thing about Granny, though…she didn't believe it when she saw Neil Armstrong walk on the moon on television, thought it was faked by the government or some such, but she fanatically believed that professional wrestling was real."

"If they was so different, how'd they get together in the first place?" Daryl was curious. Maybe there was a history in Allison's family of fancy city girls somehow hookin' up with redneck backwoods boys.

"I'm not sure. Granddaddy used to always tell me that his idea of the perfect woman was one who was deaf and dumb and had a daddy who owned a liquor store." She chuckled at the memory. "Granny was definitely none of that. But according to some of the stories Mama told me when I was little, Granny had a bit of a wild streak in her when she was younger. Used to go dancin' in beer joints, teased her hair, wore mini-skirts and everything, but I guess somewhere along the line she found the Lord and all that changed."

"You remember much about your parents, seein' as they died when you were so young?"

"I thought you were supposed to be going to sleep," Allison gently chastised Daryl. She impulsively reached over and gently stroked the front of his head from forehead to scalp. "But yeah, I remember a lot about them. Mama was a music teacher, worked for the Franklin County public school system. She used to tutor kids at our house, too, which is how I learned to play the piano and the guitar a little bit. Daddy worked for the power company stringing lines…I remember Mama pointing out one day one of those huge, tall antenna towers out in the country. She told me that Daddy got double-time pay if he volunteered to climb to the top of one of those and change the blinking warning light when it burned out, just because it was so hazardous. One day a high wind knocked him clean off one of those towers and his safety restraint kept him from falling to the ground but the whiplash fractured his pelvis. He was off work for quite a while." She paused for a moment, recalling those days when Daddy was so frustrated because he wasn't able to climb poles
"When he got well enough to walk, he'd take me out hunting," Allison continued. "We wouldn't have had any meat for the longest time if we hadn't brought home those deer. Mama was a genius at making different meals from venison…she had a hand grinder that she used to make venison 'burger' meat that she used in spaghetti sauce, in tacos, in chili, you name it. Anything to stretch the meat out."

"So that's when you learned to hunt?" Daryl asked sleepily, finally starting to relax.

"Not really, I'd been out huntin' with Daddy since I was a pup. But that was when I learned how to field dress a deer, and how to skin raccoons and rabbits and such. 'Don't give 'em a name, girl,'" Daddy would tell me as we gutted a furry little cuddly creature, "This ain't Bambi or Thumper, this is food so we don't starve."

Allison's story was interrupted by Carol poking her head through the door. "He must be starving," she told Allison as she nodded to the plate in her hand. "Can I have a moment with him?"

Allison shrugged. "Sure." She left the room but stayed just outside in the corridor, curious as to why Carol needed privacy just to bring Daryl his dinner. The woman spoke so softly that Allison couldn't catch all of it, so nosiness got the best of her and she peeked in through the cracked door. She saw Carol bend down to kiss Daryl's head and heard him protest "Careful, I got stitches."

She simultaneously felt an unexplained pang of jealousy at the older woman's familiarity with Daryl, along with a small chuckle at his little-boy-like protestations at her kiss. She took a few steps back to make it look like she hadn't been eavesdropping when Carol turned to leave the room. The two women nodded at each other as Carol headed back to the dining room and Allison returned to Daryl's bedroom.

His plate was still sitting on the bedside table.

"You need some help?" she asked him, picking up the plate.

"Been feedin' myself for years, don' need no help," he retorted, attempting to take the plate from her hands.

"Hold up there, what did I tell you about sitting up on your own?"

"Oh, fer Christ's sake…"

She set the plate back down and leaned over Daryl on the bed. "Put your arm around my shoulder and then pull up when I tell you."

He grudgingly complied. She handed him his dinner and sat back down in her chair.

He scooped up a forkful and then paused. "Ain't you gonna eat?"

"Not hungry just now," Allison replied.

"You should eat something, you're too skinny," he observed.

"Finish that and I'll grab something when I take your plate out to the kitchen," she promised. "Any boring stories of your own you care to share?" She asked to make conversation.

"Can't talk, eatin'," he stated, looking down at his plate. In other words, Allison thought, mind my
own business.

Even though he tried not to gobble his food, he was hungrier than he realized and his plate was clean in a very few minutes. Allison helped him to his feet, again under protest, and let him take himself to the bathroom. When he returned, she eased him back into bed and gave him his medications.

"This pain pill will probably knock you out for a while," she commented. "You seem to be breathing OK, doesn't seem like any lung complications, so why don't I let you get some rest. I'll check back in on you in a couple hours, 'K?"

"Whatever. Nighty-night," he said sarcastically.

Allison carried his plate and cutlery to the kitchen where Patricia, Beth and Carol were carrying in the dishes from the dining room table. Family meal time was apparently over. Allison went in to help clear the table and took a few bites off of what little remained on the serving platters.

"How's your patient?" Patricia asked as Allison set her dishes in the sink and looked around for a rag or sponge.

"He's just as ornery and cranky as ever, so I guess that means he's feeling better," Allison replied.

"We can handle the dishes," Beth told her. "Why don't you get some rest?"

"Well, I can help dry or put things away or something."

"I think we've got it all covered," Carol told her. "You look tired, you really should get some sleep."

"Well, if you're sure..." Allison politely excused herself and turned to leave the room. As she entered the living room she found Lori hovering nearby.

"At least you offered to help, I guess that's something," Lori said pointedly.

"Excuse me?" Allison was confused.

"Oh, it's nothing," Lori waved a hand in the air as if she was swishing away an annoying fly. "I just wondered if you ever planned to actually do something around here other than sitting around all day."

"I thought taking care of an injured man was doing something."

"Hershel can just as easily keep an eye on Daryl now."

"I'm confused – are you implying that I'm not doing my fair share or something?"

"I'm not implying, I'm coming right out and saying it."

"I – what? Um, I do hunt and skin and clean what we catch, you know... And I've helped search for Sophia until Daryl got hurt. And why am I defending myself to you, Allison thought to herself.

"The men can handle all that. You can be more useful elsewhere."

"So because I'm not doing laundry every day, I'm being a lazy lump?"

"Well, it does put an extra burden on Carol and Beth and Patricia and me."
Allison was sooo tempted to point out that Lori didn't seem to do much except give orders and supervise, but she didn't want to start a big fight. The camp was too small to start making enemies.

"Fine," she shrugged, "Wake me up early tomorrow so I can get to work. If I'm not in my tent, check the bedroom, I might tending to Daryl."

Lori left, probably anxious to make a "to do" list, and Allison returned to Daryl's room. She made herself as comfy as possible in an overstuffed chair in the corner and dozed. She wanted to be nearby in case he needed to get up during the night.
Chapter 9

Allison was awakened suddenly by someone jostling her shoulder.

"Hey, how's a man s'posed to get any rest with all that snorin'?"

"Huh?" She blinked several times and noticed that daylight was beginning to stream in through the windows. She slowly and stiffly unfolded herself from the pretzel-like position she had somehow curled up into. "I don't snore!" She then belatedly protested. She looked up as she worked her way into a standard sitting position and saw Daryl standing over her.

"Some Angel of Mercy you are, asleep on the job," he smirked at her.

"I wasn't asleep, I was just resting my eyes, and what are you doing out of bed?"

"Trying to avoid a busted bladder, which I woulda had if I'd waited around for you to wake up and help me."

"Oh, sorry, maybe I did doze off for a few…" She was embarrassed at being caught snoozing and for being accused yet again of snoring by this man. If she had one of her old girlfriends from school nearby, and she was ever to be honest and admit out loud that she was developing feelings for this rugged hunter with piercing blue eyes, she could just hear the taunts: "Way to impress a guy, sawing logs like a drunken lumberjack! What's next on your seduction list – gonna scratch yourself and crush a beer can against your forehead?"

"Here, let me look at your stitches while you're up…" She partially lifted the bandage on his side and was surprised to see no bleeding, no seepage, nothing. The bandage was still clean. She pasted it back into place and said "No damage done, so it looks you're mobile enough now to move back to your own tent without further injury. If you want to, that is."

"Hel – heck yeah, this place is like being cooped up in some old museum."

"Carol left you some clean clothes over on the footstool there," Allison gestured. "Get dressed and then holler when you're ready – I'll help you back to your tent."

"Can get there myself," he griped. "Just gimme some privacy for a change."

"OK, whatever, you're on your own," she said, holding her hands up in surrender. "For now," she added just before leaving the room. She met Patricia in the hallway. "Looks like Daryl is checking out of Hotel Greene this morning," she told the woman. "After he's settled back in his tent I'll strip the bed and wash those linens with the rest of my laundry detail."

"Oh, don't bother with that," Patricia said sincerely. "I'll take care of cleanin' up everything in the bedroom."

"Well, that's very kind of you, I appreciate it very much." Allison smiled sincerely at the woman who'd lost her husband so recently.

*****  *****  *****

Hours later Allison was hard at work with an old-fashioned washboard and a big metal washtub down near the river. Carol was standing about 20 yards away beside an ironing board, taking dry clothes off of a clothesline and actually ironing them with a flat iron she heated over a small fire.
that was burning nearby.

"Thought you were s'posed to come check on me," a petulant voice startled her.

Allison looked behind her and saw Daryl standing there, almost pouting.

"Sorry, been busy with my work detail," she apologized.

"Since when do you do laundry?" he asked.

"Since –" Allison stopped mid-sentence when Lori walked past them within hearing distance. She smiled sweetly at Lori and sang, "This is the way we wash our clothes, wash our clothes…." until Lori had gone over to talk to Carol.

Daryl looked from Allison to Lori then back again.

"Yer kiddin', right?"

"I don't kid about serious things like laundry." She hung up a T-shirt on the clothesline and then felt some of the other hanging garments to see if they were dry yet. "I don't know about you, but I sure as heck wouldn't want to be caught wearing a wrinkled blouse if a walker ever got me." She looked pointedly in Carol's direction as she finished her statement.

Daryl followed her glance and then said quietly, "Did you ever stop to think that maybe she's just occupyin' herself to keep her mind from worryin' about her little girl every minute of the day?"

Taken aback by his uncharacteristic perception, Allison felt a pang of shame. Of course Carol had her reasons for assuming the burden of the grunt work. Her brute of a husband had demanded it previously, and now she needed something to do to keep her mind focused on something besides Sophia as the days dragged on and hope was wearing thin.

"You're right," she said contritely. "Sometimes I speak without thinking."

"Sometimes?" he replied sarcastically.

"Maybe more than I should," she murmured, her normally ivory cheeks reddening. He felt like maybe he'd hurt her feelings so he changed the subject. "Y'know, we've got a damn trail, we should be out there lookin' for that little girl."

"You're in no shape for a long trek right now," Allison replied, as she started to remove some of the dry clothes from the clothesline. "Besides, Jimmy, T-Dog and Rick are out there now searching in the area where you found her doll and that abandoned house." She folded a pair of socks and directed Daryl: "Hold your arms out." He automatically complied before he thought to ask why.

"If you're looking for busy work you can help me deliver these clean clothes," she said placing a neat stack of laundry in his hands.

"How excitin'. Always wanted to be a Chinese laundryman. Might as well start practicin' sayin' 'no tickee, no washee' huh?"

"It's always refreshing to hear from the international voice of racism," she shot him a look and continued, "When we're done we can go out a little ways and check some of your traps, see if we've got any rabbit or 'coon on the menu for dinner tonight. But after that you are gonna have to go and get some rest, whether you feel tired or not."
When both of their arms were filled with clean clothes he followed her without enthusiasm to Dale's RV. She was just about to mount the first step when she paused. Daryl almost smacked right into her, she'd stopped so abruptly. She gave the hand signal they used to indicate "quiet" while hunting and he stood silently without knowing why. They heard voices coming from inside the Winnebago.

"Do you think that Andrea might be, like, on her period?" The hesitant, questioning voice belonged to Glenn.

"Why do you ask?" Dale replied.

"Well…it's just that all the woman are acting really weird. And I read somewhere that when women spend a lot of time together their cycles line up and they all get super crazy hormonal at the same time."

"I'm gonna advise you to keep that theory to yourself," the older man admonished him as Allison climbed the final few steps and announced "Knock-knock! Anyone home?"

She entered the RV to encounter Dale, who accepted a bundle of clothing from her with surprise. "Allison! I don't remember you ever having laundry detail before."

"Yeah, it's the weirdest thing," she replied, scrunching up her eyebrows in contemplation. "It's like I had a sudden, uncontrollable hormonal surge early this morning." She looked at Glenn and snapped her fingers as if a sudden brainstorm had occurred to her. "I should go ask Maggie if she's having her period! We rode into town together the other day, maybe she 'gave' it to me!" Glenn pulled his baseball cap down over his face as Dale chuckled and shook his head.

Allison descended the steps of the vehicle, where Daryl was half-laughing and half-averting his eyes from her, as if he didn't want to acknowledge that he'd heard her discuss women's monthly… things.

"You feelin' OK?" He asked her with a straight face a few minutes later as they walked toward Shane's tent with the last of their pile of socks and shirts.

"Yeah, I'm fine, why?"

"You just seem kinda, I dunno, a little cranky…maybe you should have Short Round pick up some of that Pamprin stuff for you next time he's in town."

She pivoted as if slapped from behind and took a step toward him, eyes blazing. Daryl playfully took a few quick steps to his left, dodging her and chuckling out loud, which made her even angrier.

"Hooo-wee, girl, you should see your face!" he laughed. "If looks could deep-fry, I'd be onion rings!" He continued walking, still chuckling at getting such a rise out of Allison.

"Oh, you are so funny, Dixon," she jeered at his back. "Just because you've got a chin all of a sudden you're Jay Leno."

Shane wasn't around, so Allison just stacked his clothes inside the open flap of his tent. "I hope he trips over them," she thought to herself. She turned to Daryl. "Well, if you're up to it - if you haven't ripped a stitch or two after having a big ol' belly-laugh at my expense – I can help you check those traps now."

"Heck, yeah, I'm up for it. Between hauling laundry and all this girly talk, things are starting to
"Oy, can we please talk about something above the belt line for a few minutes? Geez..." She giggled nervously, both a bit embarrassed to be mentally picturing his "shrinkage" area and also a little giddy that Daryl Dixon was making actual jokes with her. Teasing her, even. The teasing she'd received from boys back in school had never been playful, it has always been mean-spirited. She didn't quite know how to react; she felt so darned emotionally retarded sometimes. For the hundredth time she wished she had a best friend to confide in, to give her advice on what to say, what to do, how to not humiliate herself when she was in these situations.

Daryl, meanwhile, was staying several paces ahead of her as they walked to his tent to pick up some supplies before venturing out into the woods. Little did Allison know that he was afraid of her seeing his face, of seeing exactly how out of his element he was bantering so casually with a girl. The only small talk he'd ever made in his life was with his brother or sometimes the guys at the local beer joint, and then it was only about their cars, or maybe sports, the eight-point buck someone had bagged, the 15-pound catfish they'd landed, or the broads they'd banged. And in Daryl's case he was always greatly exaggerating or outright lying when it came to that last topic of discussion. But never had he joked back and forth with a woman like he'd been doing today. In fact he had always usually been pretty quiet around women; it had always bothered him the way his brother and his buddies would catcall and made lewd suggestions to girls they didn't even know, so he mostly just kept silent. Now he could hear Merle's voice taunting him: "Always knew you were secretly a woman, Darleena. Maybe later you two can swap recipes and comb each other's hair, you fuckin' little faggot." What the hell was wrong with him? He should be out hunting either for food or for Sophia, not playing Speedy Laundry Delivery with some skirt just because she was pretty and bothered to give him the time of day. She was making him lose his focus, something he'd been trained to do since he was a pup – always focus on the task at hand. Worse than that, she was somehow making him show off for her; suddenly he was always trying to one-up her, to try to top her sarcastic remarks and jokes. Since when did he care what some broad thought of him, much less make him act out like that to capture her attention?

They stopped at his tent and he gathered up some things – his hunting knife, a length of rope, a pair of gloves – and stuffed them into a backpack. He handed the bag to Allison, who slid it onto her shoulders without question or complaint. He picked up his crossbow, caught her disapproving glance, and told her "Just in case. For protection." They traipsed silently into the woods, Daryl a few steps in the lead. He tried to keep an eye and ear out for walkers, but part of his brain still insisted on fixating on Allison. Why did that woman occupy so much of his thoughts? Sure, she was pretty enough and she had a habit of looking up at him with those huge blue eyes of hers that made her look so innocent and vulnerable and trusting… His Ma surely woulda been impressed that he even knew such a girl – one who didn't cuss, who had manners like she'd been raised at Tara and who was a doctor to boot. Maybe that was it…this was a girl he coulda proudly taken home to meet his Ma, God rest her soul. He could almost hear his Ma tellin' him that Allison was a Nice girl, that he'd best always mind his manners and treat her right, like she'd raised him to do.

When they arrived at the first snare they found a good-sized hare caught in it. Daryl quickly dispatched it and slung it over his shoulder. "That's probably enough for dinner for everyone tonight," Allison commented when Daryl held the rabbit aloft. "You've been on your feet too long today, we really should head back." She was worried about him over-exerting himself, but she was also concerned about his sudden silence. He'd barely spoken one word since they'd dropped off Shane's laundry. She was probably getting on his nerves, the way she always talked too much. And what was she thinking, handing him laundry to carry. She'd been too bossy, that was it; she'd probably upset him.

As they walked back to camp Daryl's thoughts drifted back to that day he was laying in bed in
Hershel's house and he'd heard Allison outside hollerin' at Dale. What she'd said about rednecks. She had sure enough described his Ma…company didn't come over to their house often but when they did Ma always made sure there was a pitcher of sweet tea chillin' in the icebox and some kind of food on hand. You couldn't have guests over without offerin' 'em somethin' to eat, Ma always said. It just wasn't done. And he could still see her sittin' at the kitchen table, patching up a pair of jeans that he had outgrown to give to the Grogan family over on Royston Road. The Dixons didn't have much, but the Grogans had even less, with seven kids to feed.

He briefly fantasized a world where this sickness hadn't taken over, where there were no walkers and where his Ma was still alive and healthy and Pa was sober. Where somehow in his backwoods little town he had managed to meet and befriend Allison and got to know her well enough to invite her to his house, such as it was. Ma would've put out a tablecloth and everything. And Allison wouldn't have acted like she'd catch some disease by sittin' on their furniture. It was obvious to him that she'd been raised proper – he'd noticed how she always made sure to address that farmer as "Mr. Hershel" and that nurse woman as "Miz Patricia" cuz they were older than her – and she had been taught to treat everyone with respect and dignity, no matter if they lived in a trailer or a mansion. She would've sat and chatted away with Ma as if she'd known her forever, just like she'd done with him from that first time she rode in the truck with him. But his brief, warm feeling instantly turned cold when he realized that at the same time his ol' man and Merle woulda taken turns laughin' at him…"What the hell is some college-cooze doin' hangin' around with your ugly mongrel ass? Lookit her, she thinks she's Princess Diana or some shit doin' a good deed spending time with our poor downtrodden family. You're fuckin' ignorant if you don't think she's goin' back to her sorority sisters to laugh at the disgusting hillbillies she had dinner with." Hell, maybe they were right; damned woman hadn't said shit to him since they'd left camp. Maybe she only talked to him when there was an audience around that could appreciate her so-called sense of humor.

"You go get some rest now," Allison's voice startled him out of his reverie. They were back at his tent already. She held out her hand for the rabbit. "I'll get this cleaned up and give it to Carol to get dinner started." He relinquished the hare and noticed that Allison barely met his eyes. "I'll bring your dinner to your tent later, if you want," she offered, looking at her toes. Daryl shrugged in response. "No need to trouble yourself."

"No trouble," she replied, this time daring a glance up at his eyes. "I need to bring you your meds, anyway; you haven't had any all day."

"Whatever," he shrugged again and disappeared into his tent.

"Darn, darn, darn," she mentally chastised herself as she went to get a bucket and her hunting knife. "Why do I mess everything up all the time?"
"Knock-knock," Allison called out as she climbed the steps to the RV. Her hands were full with the freshly cleaned and cut up rabbit. "Carol?" She called out hesitantly as she poked her head inside.

"Over here," a voice said softly. Carol was sitting at the table with a needle and thread, patching a pair of jeans.

"Looks like the cleaning fairies stopped by," Allison looked around in wonder. The place was spotless; dishes all done and neatly stacked, beds all made, piles of clothes gone from the floor.

"I wanted it to look nice for her when she gets back," Carol explained. Allison knew that she was referring to Sophia. It was getting harder every day to look Carol in the eye and try to keep her hopes up.

"She'll love it," Allison grinned. "And then a few minutes later she'll probably say 'Mom, you didn't go through my stuff, did you?'"

Carol gave a small smile and then looked at the tray in Allison's hand. "Whatcha got there?"

"Dinner, maybe, if you already haven't planned on something else. Some rabbit. He was kind of big, so I don't know how tender the meat will be. Too bad we don't have garlic and flour and sour cream….we could make some hasenpfeffer. Folks don't mind eating Thumper too much if you cover it up in enough sauce."

Carol took the tray from Allison and carried it to the sink. "I can concoct some kind of stew, I'm sure. There's some leftover carrots that Lori chopped up for lunch, and we can probably borrow an onion from Hershel's garden…"

"Let me know if I can help," Allison offered.

"Oh, you've done plenty already! This will be a welcome change from squirrel, thanks for bringing it."

"No problem," Allison started to leave when she spied a white flower propped up in a beer bottle. "That's a nice touch." Carol looked at her questioningly and Allison pointed to the bloom. "Very pretty."

"Oh, I didn't do that, Daryl brought it for me."

"Daryl…? Really?" Allison couldn't have been more shocked if Carol had announced that she'd discovered a way to turn Grape Nuts into gold nuggets.

"Yes," Carol sat down at the table and looked at the flower tenderly. "He said it's a Cherokee Rose and he told me the legend behind it….how the Native American mothers cried for their lost children – " her voice started to tremble.

"Sure, I learned about the legend of the Cherokee Rose back in school. I'm a little surprised that Daryl knows the story, though."

Carol sighed and said almost reverently, "Daryl told me that he was sure that this flower bloomed for Sophia." She looked up at Allison. "Wasn't that thoughtful?"
"Very," Allison tried to force a smile, even though inside her guts were turning over. Daryl had brought this woman a flower?

"He truly believes that we'll find Sophia," Carol continued. "Sometimes I think he's the only one that believes it." She sighed. "You're a doctor, a person of science – what is your honest opinion? What do you really think her chances are?"

Allison paused and weighed her words. "Well, we were taught in medical school to never give patients or their families unrealistic hope. Keep their spirits up, but be honest. Of course, a lot of that is so that when the patient does recover, the family is so elated that they forget to complain about the slow nursing staff or the five-dollar aspirins." She smiled at Carol. "I saw a lot of kids come into the ER who were injured during a disaster situation – fire, tornado, whatever – because they hid somewhere when they were frightened. It's their natural inclination to curl up in a closet or under a bed when the house is burning because they feel safe there. It's usually a very dangerous habit, but in Sophia's case hiding is her best bet for surviving. Remember, Daryl found out that someone fairly small was camping out in the cupboard of that old house…. My honest opinion? Until we find her, um, well…to be blunt, find her body or find her as a walker, then I think we have to assume that she still is still alive out there somewhere."

"I hate to think of her alone in the woods, afraid and hungry…"

"She might've gotten confused and traveled in the other direction, maybe found other survivors and is holed up with them for the time being. You just never know… I heard talk about Shane and Andrea driving out tomorrow to the suburbs, couple of newer subdivisions over there according to Jimmy. There must be other people somewhere around this area, it's not just our group picking the drugstore in town clean. I guess what I'm saying is that until we find out otherwise, we can't presume the worst-case scenario."

"That does make sense," Carol said slowly. "It's sorta what Daryl keeps tellin' me, too, in his own way."

Isn't that adorable, Allison thought, her insides clenching up. You and Daryl have regular chats, and in your own little special language. She did her best to keep her face neutral, however, and not reveal the unreasonable jealousy that was starting to overwhelm her. "Well, I'd better go finish cleaning up my mess and return Hershel's bucket…" She'd already done both of those things, but she needed an excuse to get out of that RV.

"Thanks again for the rabbit," Carol told her. "I'll have Carl or someone find you when dinner's ready, OK?"

"Sounds good, see ya later then," Allison gave a small wave and walked back to her tent. She got her satchel and made her way to Daryl's tent with a heavy heart, even though she had no rational reason for feeling that way. Daryl wasn't her personal possession, he could certainly talk to whomever he wanted to, and what kind of wicked person gets jealous of a grieving mother, anyway? "Maybe he goes for the mature, caring, nurturing type," she thought to herself.

"Knock-knock, OK to come in?" she called into his tent.

"If you want," came the non-committal reply. He was lying on his cot eyeing her from behind a paperback book.

"Some light reading before bedtime?" she tried to keep her tone light.

"Andrea gave it to me," he said, setting the book aside. "Thought you'd forgotten about me. Ain't I
The words tumbled out before she could stop them. "Well, maybe I was here earlier to give you your pills and you didn't know it because you were out picking flowers."

"Huh?" He looked genuinely confused. "The heck you goin' on about? I been here since we brought that rabbit back."

She pretended to be busy digging in her satchel so that she didn't have to look him in the eye. "I saw the Cherokee Rose you gave to Carol. That was a nice gesture."

"That? I gave that to her early this mornin'. I found some growin' over there, by that old water pump when I went to wash up." He pointed at the tent wall.

"Oh," Allison now felt stupid for even bringing the subject up. "Well, anyway, you should see how she smiles when she looks at it, that was really sweet of you."

"I ain't sweet," he visibly winced. "Just saw the flower and thought of Sophia and thought maybe it might cheer Carol up. It was just a thing." He shrugged and looked away from her.

"Well, it was nice. Sweet. Thoughtful. Whatever you want to call it. You brightened up Carol's day and that's your cross to bear, I guess."

Daryl pulled the sheet up to his chin, as if he suddenly felt exposed even though he was wearing one of his trademark sleeveless shirts. "If you've got something official to do, can we just get on with it?" He asked crossly.

Allison pulled her stethoscope out and asked "Can I get a quick listen to your chest? Just to make sure you didn't fracture a rib with all your up and about today?"

He lowered the sheet and allowed her to unbutton the top two buttons of his shirt. "Deep breath, please. Now cough. Good. Now lean forward." She placed the stethoscope on several spots on his back, noting the very old scars and wondering what unspeakable ordeals he'd been through in his younger years. "Deep breath. Inhale through your nose, blow out through your mouth." She sat back on the small chair in his tent and told him "Everything sounds clear" as she put her stethoscope back in her bag. She poured a large caplet into her hand from a bottle. "You got some water handy to wash this down with?" He picked up a bottle from the floor on the far side of his cot and held it up in a salute. "OK, time to take your medicine, then."

He gulped down the pill and then asked "What was that?"

"Antibiotic," she replied.

"Just one pill? No painkillers this time?"

"You seem to be getting around pretty pain-free far as I can tell," she told him. "Might as well save the hard stuff for folks who really need 'em."

"True enough." He paused and then glanced at her sideways with those piercing blue eyes of his. "Just checkin' to make sure you were on your toes and actually botherin' to keep track of your patient."

"No worries there," she assured him. "I've been beaten over the head for years about prescribing opiates only when absolutely necessary. After a while you learn the subtle signs to tell when a person is legitimately in agonizing pain versus just trying to get a fix. You should've seen some of
the forged prescriptions we'd get at the hospital….some addict would manage to steal a sheet from his doctor's prescription pad and then write something ludicrous on it like '1 pound of morfeen', spelling it m-o-r-f-e-e-n." She chuckled as she reached back into her bag.

"By the way, I have something else for you," she told Daryl. She presented him with the "necklace" of walker ears that Rick had removed from him and handed to her back when Andrea had shot him. "It really doesn't go with anything in my wardrobe, so you can have it back."

Daryl grinned and held the macabre string up under her chin. "I dunno, I think maybe it suits you. Seems like you don't have much jewelry 'cept for them purple earrings."

Allison's right hand reflexively went up to touch her earlobe. The only "real" jewelry she owned was this small pair of amethyst stud earrings, which she'd been wearing for years.

"That your birthstone or somethin'?" he asked with uncharacteristic curiosity.

"No, I just bought these amethysts because purple's my favorite color." She paused and fingered her earring lightly again. "I do like jewelry, just never could afford it when I was younger, and then when I was older all the women I knew that wore rings and necklaces and such had gotten them from their husbands or boyfriends….oh, you don't wanna hear this. It's not important."

"Go on, your boring stories help me to sleep, remember?"

Allison sighed and was quiet for a moment. "Well, anyway, once I got to a certain age and had some spare money I saw a lot of pretty rings and bracelets on the Home Shopping Network that I really liked but I never bought anything because I was afraid when I showed up at work wearing it the gossipy women would ask 'Who gave you that? Is there a man in your life we don't know about?' – I dunno if it's just hospitals, but women can be very catty - and I'm ashamed to admit that I felt like I'd be embarrassed to admit that I didn't have a boyfriend and that I had to buy my own sparkly accessories. OK, there I said it. End of story, no further discussion."

She stood up to leave. She hadn't looked him in the eye since she'd started her story. "Carol's making some stew with that rabbit, if you're not up to coming out and dining with the rest of us I'll bring you a plate, if you like."

She exited his tent before he could reply.

‡‡‡‡ ‡‡‡‡ ‡‡‡‡

Early the next morning Lori approached Allison with a sense of urgency.

"I need you to do me a favor," she said, pressing yet another crumpled piece of paper into Allison's hand. "Glenn is making a pharmacy run today, I need you to pick this up for me and not mention it to anyone."

"OK," Allison said to Lori's departing back. She set off to find Glenn and see when he was leaving. She found him in the stable with Maggie who was saddling up a horse for him.

"I still don't think you should go to town alone," she was admonishing him. "I wanna come with you."

"I'll be fine," Glenn assured her. "I've done riskier solo runs in Atlanta and I always came back intact."

"He won't be alone," Allison announced her presence. The two looked at her questioningly. "I need
to get a few things…um, Lori asked me to pick up something…” She paused, flustered. "Can I please ride with you?"

"If you go, you ain't taking one of our horses," Maggie stated. "You'll ride behind him just like last time."

"Sure, whatever," Allison agreed, not relishing getting coated in horse smell again. "Let me go get my backpack and machete…." As she left the stable she sneak ed a quick glance over her shoulder and saw the pair entwined in a tender embrace.

"Um, I just want you to know I didn't mean anything bad about that….hormonal comment thing… back in the RV…" Glenn said after about 10 minutes of silence during their ride to town. "It's just that… well, I don't have a lot of experience with women. Except my sisters, and I never really thought of them as 'women', and besides, we never talked about that kinda stuff when I was growing up…"

"Don't worry about it, I was just messin' with you," Allison apologized. "I'm sorry, I really didn't mean to embarrass you. Sometimes I just get a little upset when I hear men charge off any female behavioral spike to 'hormones.' We are allowed to be emotional for no particular reason, too, you know, just like Shane or Daryl or whomever."

"I get it," Glenn said with an edge of irritation as they dismounted the horse and he tied the reins to a pillar.

They cautiously entered the drugstore and listened for a moment. The place was silent and seemed safe. Glenn headed to the pharmacy counter to pick up some things that Hershel had requested. Allison went back to the feminine hygiene section just to kill time until Glenn was done. What Lori wanted was also located behind the counter, but Allison couldn't very well pluck it off the shelf discreetly if Glenn was looking over her shoulder. She browsed the shelves and stuffed a few more packages of maxi-pads in her backpack, just in case any of the women in camp would need them. She rarely needed them herself; her own periods had been very irregular for years, most likely because of her job stress and erratic working hours. Plus her gynecologist had often chastised her for being underweight, and she knew that that could cause a woman to stop menstruating. In any case, she hadn't been visited by her monthly "friend" in a while, and considering the circumstances, that was probably a blessing. Nevertheless, she was glad that she'd taken that box of Instead cups the last time she was in town….in a wilderness situation such as they were now living, reusable cups were a godsend. Her eyes wandered to the lowest shelf and she noticed that that jumbo-sized box of condoms she'd seen last time she'd been in the store was now missing. Other scavengers? She wondered for a moment.

"You all set?" Glenn called out to her. He was walking sideways through the candy aisle, picking up some various remaining sweets and granola bars. His voice suddenly reminded her of the clinch she'd witnessed between him and Maggie. Oh wow, she mentally smacked her forehead, he was doing it with the farmer's daughter! She tried not to smirk when she looked up at him.

"Gimme a sec," she replied as she quickly scooted behind the pharmacy counter. She concentrated on the warehouse-sized bottles of prescription medications, looking for Mifepristone. She found one and took it. Surprising for a rural Southern drugstore…she'd heard about Bible Belt pharmacies refusing to carry the synthetic steroid that blocked the progesterone hormone. She was surprised to also find pre-packaged Plan B, or so-called "Morning After" pills on the shelf, and she stuffed a couple bubble-paks into her knapsack, since that was what Lori had specifically requested. She was reaching to turn the label of another large bottle so that she could read it when a ghastly hand grabbed her wrist from the other side of the shelf.
"Glenn!" She cried out. "Walker! Walker! Help!"

She clumsily removed her machete from her belt with her left hand and hacked away as best she could at the geek's arm. She had managed to sever its hand from its arm by the time Glenn ran up and began hacking away at its head. The walker wheezed and tried to retreat as both Allison and Glenn beat it into submission. Glenn finally cleaved its brain and the creature went silent. Allison and Glenn stood stock still for several minutes, catching their breath and looking at the freshly killed walker. He was the first to speak.

"Are you OK? Did you get bit?"

"No, I'm fine, it just grabbed me, no bites, not even a scratch." Her composure abandoned her suddenly and she collapsed into his arms. "Thank you, thank you…" she kept repeating.

He hugged her and patted her back. "It's OK, you're OK," he reassured her. A few moments later he pushed her gently away, looked into her eyes and said, "Let's get out of here." She nodded silently in agreement, picked up her bag and followed him outside.
Chapter 11

Glenn stopped the horse and let Allison dismount near the gate that led from the pasture to the grounds approaching Hershel's house. He then led the horse back to the stable to unsaddle it and rub it down or whatever the heck you had to do after riding. Allison started walking to Lori's tent when she noticed a figured approaching her out the corner of her eye. She turned and saw that it was Daryl, who was almost running.

He caught up to her in a few quick strides.

"Well, you must be feeling better if you're run—" she started to greet him.

"Where the HELL have you been?" he interrupted her, leaning forward and shouting in her face.

"Wh-what?" she took one step backward, confused.

"You got nuthin' better to do than worry folks sick? Just how stupid can you be to take off without tellin' anybody?"

He didn't raise a hand to her but the tone of his voice was threatening enough. However, she'd been screamed at by experts both at school and at work over the years, so she wasn't so much frightened as she was surprised by his outburst.

"Lori knew where I was, she asked me to get her something from the drugstore in town."

"What in the hell did she need that Glenn couldn't get? I'm sure he's seen a box of tampons before," he wasn't shouting quite as loud now but the tone of his voice was still filled with fury. "You got no business goin' into town – lookit yourself, you're covered in blood! What the hell happened?"

Allison had been busy digging through her backpack while he spoke and she produced the package of pills she'd picked up for Lori, presuming it would explain everything and he would calm down. She knew that he was really steamed if he was using Glenn's real name instead of some unflattering nickname.

"She wanted me to get these, and she wanted it to be a secret, so she couldn't tell Glenn and you're going to have to promise not to tell any – "

He ripped the package from her hand and read the label. "You have got to be fuckin' kidding me!"

He stormed off in the direction of Lori's tent.

"Daryl! No! Wait! Come back! I'm OK, really!" Allison trotted after him, still desperate to keep Lori's secret.

Lori was standing near a campfire boiling water. "Here are your fuckin' abortion pills!" Daryl hissed at her, virtually throwing the package in her face. "Next time you need shit like this, you best ask somebody else; Allison ain't your fuckin' messenger service!"

He spun on his heel and looked back at Allison. "And you – you better start usin' your fuckin’ head for a change and stop tryin' to get yourself goddamned killed!"

He stomped off, leaving Allison and Lori looking at each other in stunned silence. Allison was the first to speak. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to tell him, he just showed up when I was emptying my backpack…"
Lori held up a hand in reassurance. "No, I'm sorry. I should've never asked you to do something so
dangerous. I…for some reason I thought it was safe in town."

"It was just one walker that caught us by surprise. We took care of it. No harm done."

"Well, I thank you for getting these for me." She turned to go into her tent.

"Lori…" Allison called to her. The dark-haired woman paused and turned around. "I know it's none
of my business, and we're not close friends or anything, but if you ever want to talk…."

"I appreciate that."

"One other thing… I don't know how far along you are, but if you do decide to take those, please
let someone know, if not me then Hershel. Or Rick or Shane. Somebody. Don't sneak off alone and
take them."

Lori's eyes went wide. "You knew?"

It took a moment before Allison understood Lori's question. "About Shane? Well, nothing really
definite… until just now."

Lori's eyes closed in embarrassment, whether for cheating on her husband and having inadvertently
blurted out confirmation of same Allison wasn't sure.

"Lori, honestly, it's none of my business, I'm not the Morality Police. I'm just concerned that if you
are past a certain stage in your pregnancy then taking Mifepristone can be a very tricky business. I
mean, there's the danger of excessive hemorrhaging and maybe even you needing a D & C, which
we're not really equipped to do here."

Lori apparently ignored that last bit of information and instead was still fixated on her previous
admission. "You have to understand, I thought my husband was dead…. I just… I don't know, the
world was ending and I just needed to feel something…" Tears were forming in her eyes.

Allison stepped forward and hugged her tentatively. "Like I said, it doesn't matter. I just want you
to proceed very carefully, whatever you decide, for your own health, OK?"

"I promise," Lori said and started to duck into her tent.

"And I'm sure Daryl won't tell anyone about this, either," Allison told her. Lori turned and stuck
her head out of the tent flap.

"Who would he tell? You're the only person he talks to around here." She disappeared back inside.

"Except for Carol," Allison amended mentally as she started walking to her own tent. Halfway en
route she encountered a small group apparently returning from shooting practice.

"What happened to you?" Patricia stopped and looked at the blood on Allison's arm and shirt.

"It's nothing, just met a walker in town."

"You OK?" Rick asked.

"Yeah, fine, Glenn was with me. We took care of it."

Patricia took her hand and started leading her toward the house. "Let's get you cleaned up."
"I don't want to use up all your hot water," Allison protested when Patricia directed her to the bathroom. "I can rinse off at the pump."

"Don't be silly," the older woman told her. "There's towels in the cupboard in there. I'll be right back with a shirt for you. I'm sure Beth has something that will fit you."

Allison showered quickly and was toweling off when Patricia knocked at the door. She handed Allison a pretty lavender cap-sleeved cotton shirt with flowers embroidered around the collar.

"Really, I don't want to inconvenience y'all any more – I can wear my own shirt 'til I get back to my tent."

"Just hush. Beth has more clothes than she'll ever need. She'll never miss this, but I'll tell her I gave it to you."

"Well, I certainly appreciate this, Miz Patricia. I'm very much obliged." Allison slipped the top over her head and put the towel in a hamper in the corner. Patricia sat down on the edge of the bathtub.

"Where'd y'all go in town, anyway?" she inquired. "Daryl came to the house twice lookin' for you."

"He did?" Allison asked in surprise.

"Yeah, kinda shocked me since he tends to keep his distance and rarely comes up here."

Allison lowered the lid of the toilet and used it as a chair while she put on her socks and shoes. "Had to make a run to the drugstore for some supplies. Dunno why he was so concerned."

"He seemed pretty upset that no one knew where you were." She paused and then gave a small, shy smile. "I think he's sweet on you."

Allison snorted with laughter. "I doubt it. He probably just wanted his bandage changed or something. He always gives me grief if I don't check up on him every so often, accusing me of 'neglecting my patient.'"

Patricia's smile widened to a Cheshire cat-style grin. "Weelllll…...I did ask him if there was anything I could do for him – give him his medicine, check his stitches - and he very definitely said 'no.'"

"He's just shy, doesn't want a lot of folks looking at him or poking or prodding him."

"Maybe," Patricia said in an almost sing-song voice, "But I have to say that him naggin' you when he thinks you're ignoring him while he's sick reminds me of Otis. A mild case of the sniffles would have that man take to his bed and demand I monitor his temperature every half hour. Hershel would offer to check him, see if he needed antibiotics or anything, and Otis would refuse. Suddenly, when Hershel was present, Otis was fine and dandy and would be up tendin' to his his chores. But the minute it was just me 'n him he'd be back in bed, too weak to get up and get his own juice or aspirin."

Allison chuckled. "I remember my Grandma always sayin' that men are babies when they get sick. That she was expected to get up in the morning when she had pneumonia and make breakfast, but when Granddaddy had the flu he had to have his meals brought to his bedside and was always this close to death, according to him."

"Men only act like that around their wives or girlfriends or mothers," Patricia told her. "I'm a nurse..."
and could easily take Daryl's temperature and change his dressing, but I ain't the one he comes whining to when he thinks he needs doctorin'."

For a moment Allison considered confiding in Patricia, telling her about the flower that Daryl had brought Carol and asking her if she thought that that meant anything, but she reconsidered. She didn't want to sound like a bubble-headed schoolgirl just yet in front of the woman. Besides, Carol's daughter was still missing and Patricia was a recent widow…best not to bring the subject up, she decided.

"Thanks again for the shower and the shirt," she told Patricia as she prepared to leave. "I don't know how y'all are doing when it comes to feminine supplies, but I picked up some pads and stuff at the drugstore. If you want, I can bring some over later for you to keep in the house."

"If you don't mind sharin', it wouldn't hurt for us to have some extras on hand. Thanks."

Allison headed back to the camp area where she spied Carol hard at work, as always, with a washboard and bucket. She sighed and approached the woman.

"Need some help?"

"I'm just about done here, but if you wouldn't mind hangin' up these damp clothes, that would be great."

Carol nodded toward a huge metal wash basin where she'd tossed the freshly washed clothes. Allison lugged it over to where the clothes line was strung up and started pinning shirts and sheets and underpants and such up to dry.

"You got everything under control?" Carol asked after she dropped the last of the laundry in the basin. "I really should go get dinner started…".

"I'm fine, you go do what you need to do," Allison told her.

Her mind wandered as she went about her boring task, but not so far that she didn't eventually hear footsteps approach softly behind her. With one hand holding up a pillow case on the clothes line, she turned to face Daryl.

"Hey," he spoke first.

"Hey," she replied and returned her attention to her clothespins.

"Um, I just wanna…um," even with her back turned she could picture him looking at his feet at fidgeting, just from his tone of voice. He heaved a huge sigh and then said in a rush "I'm sorry about what I said before."

She put a clothespin in place and then looked at him. "Really?" she asked. It was a stupid question, but it was the first thing that came to her mind.

"Yeah," his focus remained mainly on the ground, but he glanced up at her eyes surreptitiously while speaking. "I didn't mean to cuss at you like that."

"S'ok," she replied. "And I want you to know that I do appreciate how you've been tempering your language when you speak to me. I know it's a conscious effort for you." He looked upward suddenly and held her glance. "But I have to say that what really hurt me was when you called me 'stupid.' Maybe it's a sore spot with me, I don't know, but… I may be many things – sarcastic, sometimes thoughtless or naïve, but I've studied too long and too hard throughout my life to sit back
and be called 'stupid.'"

"I didn't mean 'stupid' like that, like you ain't smart," he hastened to explain. "You're one of the most intelligent people I've ever known. I guess I meant 'stupid' like you didn't think things through, that you took a big ol' dangerous chance goin' into town like that and not even tellin' anyone where you were goin'. Some folks were worried 'bout you…"

"Lori knew where I was, she was the one who – "

"Oh, like I ever talk to Olive Oyl," he sneered. "You never gave me the impression of bein' her best friend, either, so it never occurred to me to ask her where the hel – heck you were."

Allison's emotions were caught up in an internal hurricane…she was still upset and confused that Daryl had yelled at her like that, she was hurt that he'd insulted her, but she was simultaneously touched by him actually taking the time to approach her and attempt to explain himself. Impulsively she reached her right hand out slowly and gently placed it on his right cheek.

"I'm sorry I worried you," she finally said softly and gently caressed his cheek with her fingertips. "I guess I just wasn't thinking."

Daryl didn't reply, but instead grasped her hand with his own and slowly moved it down his face to his mouth. He closed his eyes and kissed her palm. The softness of his lips and the tenderness of the gesture caused Allison to close her eyes and gasp. Encouraged by her reaction, he turned her hand around and brushed his lips across her knuckles. She impulsively removed that hand from his grasp and placed it on the back of her head and gently rubbed the crown of his scalp. He moved his entire body forward and met her lips for a tentative kiss. They both opened their eyes briefly and then simultaneously closed them and pushed their mouths together. He reached his left hand around the back of her neck and pulled her even closer. Though virtually inexperienced when it came to "making out," Allison reflexively parted her lips slightly and allowed his tongue to enter her mouth and tease her.

"Allison?" a falsetto voice from the other side of the clothesline brought her back to reality with a major *thump*.

"Yes?" she replied questioningly as she removed herself from Daryl's embrace and stepped out from behind a sheet.

"My dad wants to talk to you," Carl told her. He puffed his chest out in a proud posture. "He sent me out to see if I could find you."

"Be right there," she told him. She poked her head back around the sheet to say something, she didn't know what, to Daryl, but he was already in retreat mode.

"See ya later," he mumbled as scooted away like a cockroach suddenly caught in the light.
Allison followed Carl to an area where there was not much else but a fence, which Rick was leaning against. "I found her, dad!" he announced proudly.

"Good job, thanks. Now why don't you go find your mom and see if she needs any help."

Carl dashed off and Rick pulled something out of his pants pocket.

"My wife took some of these…" he held out a half-empty pack of Morning After pills, "but she says she threw them up. Do you think she'll be OK? I…I need a medical opinion right now."

Allison noted that the lawman was perspiring far beyond what the heat of the day might have caused and that his eyes looked unusually wide and almost frightened.

"Do you know how long after taking them she vomited? It takes at least 20 minutes for any pill to start digesting and get into your system, so if she did it right away, she should be fine."

"I'm under the impression that she threw them up very shortly after taking them," he replied, looking down at the package in his hand. He looked up into Allison's eyes. "So you don't think there's any danger…?"

"Not from those pills, no," Allison responded. "But I warned her when I gave her those not to go off and take them alone…"

"Wait a minute, you gave her the pills?"

"Yes, that's why I rode into town with Glenn this morning, Lori asked me to fetch them for her."

Rick started to pace in small, angry circles. "Here I thought Glenn had gotten 'em for her, but you – a doctor…!"

"No matter your personal belief, abortion is currently legal in the state of Georgia," Allison said quietly.

"And it never occurred to you to mention it to me, her husband?" he stomped his foot and rubbed a hand over his head in frustration.

"For what it's worth, I did urge her to discuss the situation with you before she decided anything, but in the end I have to respect patient confidentiality."

"I'm sorry but I don't think the old rules apply anymore," he shook his head.

"I'm sorry, but some rules will always apply," Allison replied. "As far as I'm concerned I would do the same if you or any other man in camp came to me with some medical condition."

"Even if it affects the rest of us?" Rick demanded.

"Yes, unless it's something that can potentially harm people like a walker bite or a venereal disease. But other than that, I'm not the Camp Tattle-Tale; it's up to the patient to disclose whether she's pregnant or he's diabetic or whatever."

"Who's diabetic?" he asked.
"No one that I know of, that was just an example."

The two were silent for several minutes and Rick seemed to calm down ever so slightly.

"So," he said, looking down at the ground, "can you help to take care of Lori? Do you know anything about...."

"About 'birthin' babies'? Allison asked in a Butterfly McQueen voice. "I've done rounds in the maternity ward, I've worked with OB/Gyns...it's not my specialty but I've had experience in that area, yes. And..." she gave him a small smile, "I did happen to grab some pre-natal vitamins and Folic acid while I was at the pharmacy just in case Lori changed her mind."

Rick took a deep breath and visibly collected himself. "I'd appreciate it if you'd advise her on what all she needs to take, vitamin-wise and such. And I'm sorry if I was rough with you, it's just...."

"Don't worry about it, we're good," Allison reassured him. "I know that you've got the safety of the entire camp weighing on your shoulders, which is stressful enough, not to mention organizing searches for Sophia... It's a lot for anyone to handle." She paused and looked at his face closely, noticing the weary lines around his eyes. "I do hope you know that we all appreciate how much you've done for us. I'm just as guilty as everyone else for not taking the time to personally thank you, but rest assured we...well, most of us are very much obliged for...well, for everything you've done for the group."

"Thank you," Rick said. "I'll talk to Lori about...what she wants to do and havin' her see you about vitamins and such." He nodded and headed toward camp. Allison returned to her clothesline and finished hanging up the last of the laundry. While she attended to her chore her mind finally rewound and focused back on what had happened the last time she was pinning sheets. Daryl had kissed her. And it was good. It had made her feel all warm and melty inside, her legs weak... something she had never truly experienced before in the few dates she'd had back in college. Her cheeks reddened and she smiled at the memory of his body pressed so closely to hers.

‡‡‡‡ ‡‡‡‡ ‡‡‡‡

Daryl didn't join the group at dinner, and Allison was disappointed not to see him. Had she upset him earlier? Everything was always her fault in her mind... She picked at her dinner and then helped with the cleaning up. It was dark when she retreated to her tent and changed into her sleeping attire – a tank top and a pair of sweat pants. Comfy but decent if she had to get up suddenly during the night and fend off walkers. She spread out one of the two sleeping bags she had on her camping pad (without proper bedding she used her unzipped sleeping bags as a mattress cover and a quilt). She was just about to extinguish her lantern when she heard a familiar voice call out softly "Knock-knock."

She unzipped the tent flap and said "Hey. Come on in."

"Hey," Daryl replied stepped inside somewhat hesitantly.

Allison couldn't help but notice that Daryl didn't look like his normal self; no, this was a freshly bathed and polished Daryl...his face was devoid of its usual grime and his hair was fluffy and dark blond. He was wearing a salmon-colored T-shirt that had probably once been bright red, but at least it had sleeves. Allison's heart did a tiny leap, thinking perhaps that he had cleaned up especially for her....?

"Didn't see you at dinner," she said for the sake of conversation.
"Was busy…ate on my own," he muttered.

"Glad you did, 'cause I don't have anything to offer in the way of food," she replied. She suddenly felt awkward being in such close quarters with him, something that she'd never really felt before. "Have a seat, if you like, maybe I've got something to drink." She gestured to the chaise lounge and then began rummaging in her duffel bag for one of those bottles she'd taken from the bar in town.

"No, I'm good," Daryl told her. She had half-removed a bottle of Old Granddad from her bag and Daryl amended his statement: "'less you're thirsty and don't wanna drink alone…." Allison didn't want to get into the habit of using liquor to relax her but right now she felt like she needed to have something to occupy her hands and she didn't smoke and didn't have any Coca-Cola handy…. She removed two small paper Dixie cups and offered both the bottle and cups to Daryl. He filled one, handed it to her, and then filled his own. She sat down in the chair next to him. He capped the bottle and then leaned toward her, holding his cup out in a toast. She bumped her cup against his and he said "Here's to…umm…whatever."

She laughed despite herself. "Tell me the truth – you're a Toastmasters graduate, aren't you?"

"You tell me the truth," he countered, holding his cup upward and looking at it, "are these specimen cups from your old office?"

She dissolved in laughter once again. "No, I grabbed a bunch of these from the dispenser next to a water cooler in that building where I was staying in Atlanta."

"Is that where you got this couch, too?"

"No, I found this over by the glider and the other lawn furniture. Maggie said no one ever used it anymore and let me borrow it."

They each sipped from their cups silently for a few moments. Allison was trying to think of a polite, non-threatening way to ask Daryl if he had come for a specific reason, or was this just a social call when he spoke again.

"What did the sheriff want with you before? Are you in trouble or somethin'?" He gave her a sidelong glance and a small smile.

The laughter and the liquor were both relaxing her a bit. She stretched her legs out in front of her and sighed. "Yeah, it was a bit like being called to the principal's office. He wanted to ask me about those….those pills I got for Lori."

"He probably didn't even know she was pregnant," Daryl snorted.

"You're right, he didn't," Allison affirmed.

"Gotta feel sorry for the guy," Daryl continued, his mood turning a bit somber. "Wonderin' if that baby she's carryin' is his or Shane's. And then her gettin' rid of it without even talkin' to him."

"You knew about Lori and Shane?" Allison asked in surprise.

"Gotta be blind not to see the looks those two been givin' each other, and them sneakin' off with one another back at the quarry…"

Allison was impressed yet again at Daryl's observational skills…she'd only suspected something going between the pair when she'd overheard Shane attack Lori at the CDC. But Daryl…he was always silently watching, absorbing…
"Gotta also be not only blind but downright stupid," Daryl downed the rest of his drink, "to not see that Shane ain't concerned 'bout anyone else in the group 'cept him and Lori and the boy."

"I've gotten that impression as well," Allison concurred. "I know he's Rick's friend, but I wonder if Rick realizes just what a loose cannon Shane is. I mean, sometimes I think that Shane has this vision of him and Lori going off to some remote place by themselves and repopulating the planet and to heck with the rest of us."

"If Rick doesn't see that it's only 'cause he doesn't want to," Daryl commented. Allison handed him the bottle and he poured them each one more shot. "I think this'll do it for me," he told her.

She put the bottle back in her bag and then said to Daryl, "Um, if you don't mind, I'd rather you didn't let anyone know I've got this little stash. The last thing we need is some hothead like Shane finding it and going off on a bender…"

"I ain't no gossip," Daryl replied gruffly. He took a small sip from his cup. "So, what else happened, does Rick blame you for Lori losin' the baby?"

"Lori didn't take the pills after all. After he calmed down he just wanted to know whether I had any obstetric experience and if I could help to manage her pregnancy." She sipped her drink.

"Ain't that nice," he said sarcastically. "Stick Woman walks all over you but you're gonna hafta go play Angel of Mercy for her."

"Well, what could I say to him? 'Your wife is meaner than Hitler with a hangover and I'd rather eat a live bug than deliver her baby?' Rick has been very fair and decent to everyone in camp so far, and I have no personal beef with him, so…." She shrugged and looked at her feet. "Besides, like you said, I feel bad for him – his wife cheating on him like that." She finished her drink. "Lori told me, as if I cared, that she'd only…um….been with Shane because she thought Rick was dead and the world was ending and she needed to 'feel' something."

"Hell, she could slam her fingers in the car door if she needs to feel something that bad," Daryl snorted. "Rick wasn't even cold yet, as far as she knew, and she's out there bangin' his best friend." He drained his cup. "Ain't no excuse for that…"

"Maybe they were already having problems…Rick and Lori, I mean…." "Then they should get divorced. You ain't s'posed to do that kinda thing when you're still married."

Allison couldn't help but smile. Who'd have thought that roughneck Daryl Dixon had such old-fashioned values?

"What're you smilin' at? I say something funny?"

"No, you just said something sweet. And I know you hate it when I call you that, and you probably didn't come over here to talk about Lori and Shane, so I guess we should change the subject." She paused. "Um, why did you come over?" She finally worked up the courage to ask.

He shrugged and looked down at a hangnail on his finger. "I dunno, just to hang out, I guess. Don't have guard duty tonight and it was too early to go to sleep…"

"Don't get me wrong, I don't mind a bit, I just suddenly realized that I might've been gabbing on and on when you needed something. I know you're not much for small talk….I just didn't want to annoy you or anything…" Her voice trailed off. She was babbling again. Darn it! Why couldn't she relax and be cool and sophisticated like those women on Sex and the City?
"I don't mind ya talkin'," he replied. "Now and then you even slip up and say something a little bit interesting." He shot her a quick glance from the corner of his eye and mock-ducked away from her, as if he expected her to punch him.

"Is it too late to retract that 'sweet' remark I made earlier?" she asked him with a wry grin.

He returned his attention to his hangnail. "Seriously, it's different talkin' to you…you don't get on my nerves like a lot of people do."

"Thanks. I think."

"Oh, heck, this ain't goin' right…" He ran his hand impatiently through his hair and turned to look at her. "You gotta cut me some darn slack, I'm not very good at this…at sayin' certain things…What I mean is you're smart but you don't lord it over people like some other folks, you're funny without being silly, and you just have this, I dunno, 'nice' way about you. You always look genuinely interested and concerned when other people talk to you, even if it's Lori." She was doing it now, in fact; looking at him with those huge blue eyes of hers and that gentle, expressive face like he was the most important person in the world at that moment. She did things to him when she looked at him; made him forget that he was supposed to be a hard-ass. Made him temporarily lose his mind and say Dr. Phil-type touchy-feely things he'd never said to anyone before, much less a woman. He was turning into a total puss but right then, at that moment, while holding her gaze he didn't care.

Allison smiled and rested her hand ever so gently on his knee. "I like talking to you, too."

"You do?" he blurted out. "Why?"

"Why would you be surprised at that? You're smart, you're interesting, and you've got a wicked sense of humor." He looked at her skeptically. "Maybe it comes so naturally to you that you don't notice it, but you're as quick with your sarcastic remarks and snappy comebacks as you are with that crossbow."

He smiled slightly at her confession. Someone actually appreciated his "smart-ass comments," as his old man used to call them…usually right before he rapped Daryl square in the jaw. He picked up her hand from his knee and gently entwined his fingers in hers. "To be honest, I've been wearin' my brain out since this mornin' after we…after by the clothesline, before the kid showed up….wonderin' why someone like you would even be with someone like me."

"Well, true confessions time…I've wondered the same thing about you. Why someone like you would give me the time of day."

He released her hand and his gaze turned steely. It was one thing for him to use "someone like me" to describe himself, but when someone else did it, he automatically got defensive.

"What do you mean when you say 'someone like me'?" he asked evenly.

"You know," she suddenly seemed embarrassed. She shrugged and searched her own fingers for a hangnail. Without looking up she continued, "Someone so good-looking and cool and everything. In my experience, guys like you always go for the prettiest, most popular girls…the head cheerleaders, those types."

Her reply was so unexpected that Daryl half-laughed, half-snorted. She thought he was "cool"?

"It's true," she insisted, "Did Fonzie ever date a nerd? No. He went for the pin-up girls in tight sweaters."
Now he was outright laughing. "Fonzie? From Happy Days? Geez, girl, how old are you?"

"Reruns, duh. I used to have Nick at Nite on TV in the background when I was studying," she explained. "Anyway, I guess that's why I sometimes get all nervous around you and why I felt stupid later for enjoying that kiss so much because I know I'm not your type and I don't wanna be chosen by default just because Lori's married and Andrea may well be a man...."

"You liked it?" he interrupted her.

She looked up at him tentatively. "Yes. Very much."

He wrapped an arm around her shoulders and pulled her into his chest, tucking her head under his chin. He kissed the top of her head. "I did, too." He pushed her back a bit, placed his hands on her shoulders and looked into her eyes. "And I don't go 'round doin' that to women just because they happen to be there at the moment. I ain't that needy."

Allison sighed and snuggled herself back into his embrace. "I'm sorry," she murmured.

"No need to apologize," he nuzzled her head. "Just don't think so much all the time."

She lifted her face to smile up at him and he dropped his down so that their lips met. She reached a hand around the back of his head and pulled him to her tightly. This time it was her tongue that teased his lips, begging for entrance, and he opened his mouth slightly and moaned as her tongue danced with his.

He slowly moved his mouth down her neck, kissing and gently sucking, until he got to the base, where it met her collarbone. She moaned softly and her head fell back involuntarily as she pushed her bosom up toward him. He supported her neck with one hand while the other started gently caressing her right breast over the fabric of her tank top. She danced her fingertips lightly on his ear as an "Oh, God," escaped her lips. He slipped his hand underneath her top and did things to her nipple she couldn't comprehend because her brain was too busy exploding in bursts of pleasure. She moved her hand from his ear down to his lap and found the place where the fabric was now straining. She tentatively touched his bulge and he moaned against her neck. He returned his lips to hers and they devoured each other for several minutes.

Allison paused suddenly and said softly into his ear, "This chaise can't be very comfortable for you." Her own back and neck were starting to ache just a bit from arching in this position with no support.

He kissed her cheek and moved to her ear. He teased it with his tongue and then whispered, "I guess we could move...." He sat up and then looked pointedly at her makeshift bed on the floor. She smiled and stood up. He followed suit, but before they took a step she was attacking his mouth again. He caressed her back and then slowly slid both hands under her shirt. She raised her arms and in one quick motion he had slipped it off of her. She buried her face in his chest and spoke. "I think you should know something...."

"What's that?" he mumbled into her hair.

"I've....um.....never....y'know...well, 'been' with man before."

"We don't hafta do anything you're not ready to," he looked into her eyes and stroked her right cheek with his hand.

She took his hand and kissed the knuckles.
"I'm not sayin' I'm not ready," she smiled shyly, "I'm just lettin' you know before I embarrass myself because I don't know what to do exactly...."

"If you're really sure," he tipped her chin up and looked at her for confirmation, "We can just take it slow and learn together."

She smiled at him, not a bit self-conscious at standing before him topless, and replied very softly, "I'm sure."
Chapter 13

Allison reached up to meet Daryl's mouth and he wrapped an arm around her head. She slowly slid her hands up under his shirt and caressed him both back and front. He raised his arms upward and she took that as a cue to pull his T-shirt up and off. He was taller than her so he had to help her by wriggling it up and over his arms. She took it from him and tossed it aside and placed her hands on his chest. "Mmm," a soft moan escaped her lips.

"What?" he asked softly, somewhat confused. "You've seen me without my shirt before."

"I have?" she asked, taking her attention away from the solid pecs in front of her and back up to his beautiful blue eyes.

"Yeah," he said gruffly, burying his mouth in her hair, "When you gave me stitches."

"Oh, right," she said in authentic forgetfulness. "That was different. You were a patient."

Daryl stopped nuzzling her head and looked down into her eyes. "You mean there's really a difference?"

"I guess so," she said thoughtfully, as if realizing it for the first time. "I've always heard that a doctor gets so focused that he or she looks at a body part as just that. But I really never thought about it before…." She gently stroked his chest with her hands and then leaned forward and planted a soft kiss. "It must be true, though," she continued her thought, "Because I surely would've remembered this." She buried her face against his sternum and tentatively teased it with her tongue. Daryl sighed and entwined his fingers in her hair. Slowly, with eyes closed, she almost instinctively moved upward and to the right until she found his nipple. She kissed it, then alternately sucked it and circled it with her tongue. Daryl groaned out loud, which excited and pleased her. She'd felt a slight tingling over the years while watching Johnny Depp and Brad Pitt in movies, but she'd never experienced such overwhelming sensations throughout her entire body as those that were washing over her in huge waves at the moment. This was all so new to her, yet somehow it seemed to come naturally…she'd almost consciously turned the logical part of her brain off and let the sensory portion take the lead. She didn't want to worry about "Is this sleazy of me? Will he think I'm a slut?" because It. Felt. So. Darned. Good.

Daryl gently led her to the bed area and she virtually collapsed into his arms as he lowered them both to a more comfortable sitting position. He aggressively kissed her neck and worked his way to her breast. While he sucking the nipple, he began caressing and squeezing the bottom of her breast as he forced more and more of it into his mouth. Allison was almost breathless with pleasure.

"Ohhhh, God…." She moaned. She grasped the back of his head and forced his face into her, which caused him to grunt and groan and reach for her crotch. He began stroking her outside of her sweatpants and she reflexively spread her legs slightly at his touch. She rolled onto her back and grabbed Daryl's head, pulling it back up to her mouth and kissing him deeply. He lay on top of her and kissed her back, grinding his hips into hers as she wrapped her legs around his waist. They continued to kiss passionately for several minutes until they simultaneously, as if prompted by some unseen cue, pulled apart and squiggled out of their pants and underwear.

Panting heavily, Daryl rolled back on top of Allison, one hand gently probing between her legs while the other grasped the top of her head. He kissed her, licked her and gently nipped her while she ever so tentatively reached down to his most private area and gently grasped him. The feeling of holding him was foreign but not unpleasant. He moaned at her touch and collapsed momentarily against her body. "Ooooh, woman, I can't take much more of that," he whispered into her ear. He
lifted himself onto his hands and knees and ever so gently rubbed his engorged organ against her opening. She sighed happily so he began entering her. She again wrapped her legs around him and pulled him toward her. "You OK?" he whispered gruffly into her ear. "Mmm-hmm" was all she could manage in reply.

He began thrusting into her, unsure at first when he felt some slight resistance, but at her urging he continued, gaining momentum. Allison felt a sharp, stabbing lightning bolt of pain at one point, but just that quickly it was gone and replaced by an indescribable pleasant feeling...something that seemed to disconnect her mind from her body. As Daryl's thrusts became more insistent, she raised her hips to meet him and their rhythm grew faster and faster until.... "Ohhhh Myyyy Gawd!" Allison tried to stifle her scream into Daryl's neck. Her response made him begin bucking like a bronco until he exploded inside her just a moment or two later while grunting like a gut-shot boar. Covered with perspiration, he collapsed on top of Allison, panting heavily. He finally caught his breath enough to speak. "You OK?" he asked.

Allison took his head in both of her hands and lifted it so she could look into his eyes. "I'm much, much better than OK," she whispered. He smiled and then leaned down to kiss her. They embraced for a moment and then fell apart, both basically trying to catch their breath. They lay quietly side by side for several minutes until Allison finally broke the silence. "That was....amazing." Daryl gently pushed her hair away from her eyes and replied "You were amazing." She smiled in response and snuggled closer to him.

The next thing that penetrated Daryl's drowsy mind was the harshness of the morning sun, already far past dawn, by which time, as a rule, he was usually up and out hunting. As he slowly blinked awake, he looked down at Allison, who was curled up against him like a tiny newborn kitten. He couldn't remember the last time he'd slept in so late, but he could certainly remember the last time he'd spent the entire night with a woman snuggled beside him...because that number was zero. He wasn't exactly, technically a virgin...well, maybe he was. His very limited sexual encounters were limited to a couple of quickies in a truck after a drunken night at the local beer joint and a lot of taunting by Merle. But truth be told, he'd involuntarily ejaculated in his pants just from the preliminary ministrations of the nameless woman crawling all over him. He'd never actually "slept" with a woman, and he'd certainly never had a night filled with actual passion with a woman who'd openly admired not only his physique but also his mind. An elegant, well-mannered, pretty, educated woman who'd told him that she didn't feel worthy of him – Daryl Dixon, a trailer trash redneck. Whenever his mind drifted to Allison's huge blue eyes looking at him and how she said so sincerely that he was cool and smart like Fonzie, he felt a physical tightening in his chest, as if a hand was squeezing his heart. He was so confused...when he looked down at the blonde resting comfortably beside him, he felt relaxed and somehow...safe, at home even. But thinking of her words also made him feel a physical ache that was totally foreign to him.

Allison began to stir and stretch and mewl slightly as she opened her eyes. "Hey," she greeted him when she noted that he was already awake. "I must've dozed off," she apologized scooching herself up into a seated position, when another thought struck her. "Oh, God, I hope I didn't snore..."

Daryl sat up, too, and leaned over to kiss her. "If you did, Angel, I didn't hear it. You about wore me out last night." Allison smiled as her cheeks crimsoned at his use of a nickname; he'd often referred to her as the camp's "Angel of Mercy", but using it this way, in such an intimate setting, made it extra-special to her. "I think you exhausted me, too," she told the hunter. "I can't remember the last time I slept this late."

The two suddenly became aware of noises outside the tent – the regular morning activity of folks
preparing breakfast, collecting laundry, changing watch and whatever. "Guess we'd best get dressed and get to it," Allison said softly as she rummaged through her discarded clothes. Daryl likewise started donning his boxers, cargo pants and socks. While they were both so occupied, Daryl casually asked Allison, without looking at her, "So what do we tell everyone?"

"Tell who what?" Allison asked, confused.

Daryl slipped on his boots and tied the laces. "'Bout us. It's a small camp, folks ain't stupid, they're gonna notice both of us comin' out of your tent late in the morning."

"Oh," Allison shrugged into a cotton sports bra and dug into her bag for a T-shirt. "I hadn't thought of that. I guess we tell 'em whatever we want to..." Her voice trailed off, not knowing exactly what Daryl was leading to.

Daryl pulled his T-shirt over his head and ran his fingers through his hair in a half-hearted attempt at combing it. "I guess I'm just askin' you if it would bother you if everyone knew we were together now."

"Of course it wouldn't," she replied, reaching out and stroking the top of his head. "I'm more concerned about what you think...I mean, to be honest, at my age it sounds kinda silly to say that I've got a 'boyfriend'...if in fact that's what you are..." She removed her hand from his head and covered her face in frustration. "I just don't want to force your hand or make you feel obligated if you don't have...y'know...feelings for me..."

Daryl gently grasped the hand which was covering her face and placed it on his cheek. "Like I told ya before, I ain't that needy. I don't take what happened last night lightly. I wouldn't have done that, much less spent the night, if I didn't have feelings for you." He moved her hand to his mouth and kissed her palm before letting it go. "I just don't want you to feel embarrassed or somethin' if everyone sees me comin' out of your tent."

Allison sat bolt upright and looked Daryl square in the eyes. "Embarrassed? Have you not been paying attention to what I've been telling you these past few days?" She stood up and towered over him. "Daryl Dixon, I would be proud for people to think that we're a couple, that I was your woman or girlfriend or however we want to phrase it."

Daryl stood up and pulled her with him in order to put his arms around her. "Calm down, Angel." He kissed her gently. "Just wanted to make sure. Last thing in the world I would want to do is hurt you."
Allison and Daryl finished dressing and stepped out of her tent. Both squinted at the harsh sunlight and then, without further discussion, headed together to the general "eating" area, where Carol was already frying scrambled eggs (courtesy of the Greene's chickens) and Spam. T-Dog had a pot of what he called "cowboy coffee" on the fire and he filled a metal cup when Daryl approached.

"Hey, looks like you could use an eye-opener," he said, extending the cup. "Usually don't see you 'round here at this hour, you're usually off hunting or some such."

"Slept late," Daryl mumbled and accepted the cup without further elaboration.

"Coffee, Doc?" T-Dog asked Allison as she settled onto a log next to Daryl. So far as she could tell, no eyebrows were being raised, no questioning looks…apparently no one had paid attention to the fact that she and Daryl had emerged from her tent together.

"Not that coffee, thanks," she replied. "I'm not looking to grow hair on what will one day be my chest."

T-Dog laughed heartily and reached into a nearby duffle bag. "How about some water, then?" He tossed a bottle to her.

"Thanks," she said as she caught it.

"You're lucky I'm sharin' my H2O stash after you dissed my own special brand of java," he teased.

Shane finished what was left on his plate and stood up. "I'll be havin' another firearms training class in a little bit…I suggest anyone who wants to practice meet me over by Carol's Jeep after you're done eatin' and we'll drive over to the shooting range. Dog, you gonna assist again?"

"Yeah, I'll be there just as soon as I help clean up – "

"Don't worry about doing the dishes, we'll take care of that," Carol told him.

"I'll go on up to the house and let Jimmy and the others know the plan," Rick announced.

"What for?" Shane asked, confused.

"Hershel's given his permission for his group to learn how to shoot. Apparently Otis was the only one who was handy with a gun."

Maybe she imagined it, but Allison could've sworn that Shane's face clouded over or somehow momentarily changed when Rick mentioned Otis.

"OK, anyway," Shane finally spoke, "after practice we'll break into groups and plot out a new search grid for Sophia."

The assemblage finished their food and began to disperse. Andrea, Rick, Carl and T-Dog all followed Shane to the Jeep. Carol, Lori and Dale began collecting the plates, cups and cutlery while Daryl confronted Glenn.

"You got any plans for the meantime?"

Confused, Glenn stepped backward and asked, "What do you mean?"
"I mean," Daryl explained, "That with Shane and his 'class' using up so much ammo practicin', we should stock up if we can. You know the way to town, thought maybe you could drive me there and we could scavenge through any gun shops or department stores there."

"I haven't seen anything like that so far," Glenn said contemplatively. "Just a bar, the drugstore…a barbershop…" He paused and thought. "There might be other shops in another direction, though."

"Why don't you ask Maggie right quick, then?"

Glenn dashed off and Allison approached Daryl. "You heading off with Glenn somewhere?" she asked, even though she'd overheard their conversation.

"Maybe. The way Shane's wasting bullets, we'll run out before long. Small town like this should have some sort of huntin'/fishin' shop."

"True that," Allison agreed. "Back in Toccoa, even the gas stations sold guns and ammo. But…" she paused and looked up at him with those huge blue eyes that turned his guts into mush, damn her hide.

"But what?" he asked impatiently.

"But I worry about you two going off to some unknown place…Glenn knows the layout of the downtown near here, but who knows what y'all will find if you go wandering off in the other direction?"

"Oh, fer Christ's sake, I've explored uncharted territory before and survived," he dismissed her. "I know how to take care of myself," he added.

"I know you do, I have no doubt about your ability to take care of yourself, but what if something happens and you get distracted protecting Glenn…." She grasped Daryl's right hand in hers and squeezed it. "I know you – you're the type to shine everyone else's shoes while yours go unpolished. You'd risk your life to protect him just because that's the kind of man you are and that's why….. " she let go of him and involuntarily clasped her hand on her mouth for a second and then removed it. "Nevermind."

"That's why what?" he asked, his eyes narrowing.

"You'll just get mad," she protested, shaking her head.

"You started it, you'd best finish it," he replied, stepping forward and grasping her wrist.

Allison looked first at the ground then into his eyes. She sighed deeply and then said in a rush, "And that's why I love you. OK?! Are you happy you made me say it? I know you, now you're just gonna go off and get all upset…."

He held on to her wrist and kept looking steadily into her eyes for what seemed like an eternity. He finally spoke. "I ain't upset." He let go of her. "I'll be OK, you don't need to worry yourself."

He turned and walked over to the pick-up truck where Glenn was chatting with Maggie.

"Maggie says there's a pawn shop over in Mooreville, not too far from here."

"Maybe about a 20 minute drive from here, in the opposite direction once you hit the main highway," Maggie added. "Make a left on the road after you leave our driveway and after about five minutes you'll see a sign that says 'Mooreville 15 miles'. You'll know you're headed in the
right direction when you see that sign. There's a big pawn shop and a grocery store and a Golden Pantry gas station right off the main intersection."

Allison watched as Glenn and Maggie embraced and kissed before he climbed into the driver’s seat of the truck. She wasn't completely disappointed that Daryl hadn't kissed or hugged her good-bye; she was actually more relieved that he hadn't verbally shot her down after she'd blurted out her declaration. She didn't want him to feel trapped or obligated or….or anything, but she couldn't help what her heart felt. She just wished she hadn't said it out loud so soon. The truck sped off and she watched the dust for a moment before she returned to her tent to get her medical satchel. Then she took a deep breath and walked to the Grimes’ tent.

"Knock-knock," she called out. Luckily Lori was at home. She invited Allison in but didn't offer much in the way of pleasantries. Allison decided to take the bull by the horns.

"Rick spoke to me yesterday and asked me to follow up with you regarding your pregnancy," she said, choosing her words carefully.

"I threw up the pills," Lori replied.

"Does that mean you want to continue this pregnancy?"

Lori sat down on a chair. Allison followed suit without being invited to do so.

"I – I guess so…” She buried her head in her hands for a moment. After a few minutes she raised her head to meet Allison's eyes and said "It's very complicated. I'm afraid for Carl as it is…what kind of life does a newborn baby have in this so-called world?"

"It has whatever life it's born into," Allison replied gently. "Think about it…women incarcerated during the Holocaust had babies and hid them and raised them despite overwhelming odds….and women during the Little House on the Prairie-type times had babies when there were no hospitals, no incubators, and when a squalling child might have attracted Indians or predatory animals…"

Lori actually sat up and seemed as if she was considering what Allison was saying. Allison took that opportunity to continue. "My Granddaddy was about Carl's age during the Great Depression. I'm sure his parents felt burdened every single day with questions – how will we feed our family? What if we lose our house? But all Granddaddy remembered about that time was how much fun he had running around barefoot out in the fields catching frogs, learning how to hunt, skipping school to go fishing, things like that. It was the only childhood he knew, and he didn't know that he was deprived of anything or that times were hard."

"I guess," Lori said slowly, "the new baby will be like that…adjusting to whatever world he's born into. Maybe I just worry about Carl and how his world has been turned upside down and how he's being deprived of a childhood…"

"Carl has two parents who love him, which is a heck of a lot more than a lot of kids his age had before the world went into the crapper," Allison told her as she dug into her bag for her blood pressure cuff. "Kids are far more resilient than we adults give them credit for…unfortunately, they were also exposed to a lot more blood and gore and death thanks to TV and movies and video games than we were at that age."

Lori extended her right arm and allowed Allison to wrap the cuff around it. Allison put the tips of her stethoscope into her ears and proceeded to take Lori’s blood pressure.

"I worry about Carl turning cold – getting immune to death and violence." Lori said as Allison
"Maybe it's making him grow up before his time, but that's not something you can control right now." Allison took out a small spiral notebook and jotted down Lori's numbers. "Sometimes it helps to think of the grand scheme of things – everything looked pretty bleak during the influenza pandemic of 1918, but because some people with inquiring or scientific minds survived it, a cause and a treatment was eventually discovered. Maybe Carl or your new baby will be the one to eventually find out what caused this particular epidemic."

Allison put her stethoscope and sphygmometer back in her case but kept her notebook and pen out.

"Your pulse and pressure are fine now," she told Lori. "Did you have any complications when you were pregnant with Carl?"

Lori paused and thought back. "No, everything was fine."

"No elevated pressure, elevated blood sugar, anything like that?"

"No."

"Did you deliver normally? No C-section, no breech presentation…?"

"No, it all went normally, except it hurt like hell. Rick and I opted for a drug-free natural childbirth."

"Well, it's easy as pie for the husband to choose a drug-free birth…he's not the one squeezing out a kid, especially through those narrow hips. Depending upon where we are and what's going on at the time you go into labor, I'm going to suggest an 'on all fours' delivery for you….on your hands and knees. It increases the pelvic space significantly."

"Oh my God, like doggy-style?" Lori asked, aghast.

"Yes, but we won't have Hershel the veterinarian attend if you don't want," Allison chuckled. "But yeah, that type of position is more like Nature intended and will be easier on both Mother and Baby."

"You're the doctor," Lori conceded, not entirely convinced.

"In the meantime," Allison said, digging into her bag again, "I want you to start taking one of these pre-natal vitamins twice per day, along with one folic acid capsule per day." She handed the bottles to Lori.

"OK, thanks," Lori said for once in her life.

"I'm going to monitor your blood pressure once per week, and if it seems high you're going to have to curtail your activities. No heavy lifting, no scrubbing laundry, that sort of thing. And you're going to need to eat more and put on some weight. If Hershel's family isn't up to sharing their potatoes with you, then I'll need to send Glenn or someone out to find you some carbohydrates."

"Understood," Lori replied.

"See you next week, same time, same channel," Allison joked as she left the tent.

Maybe it was talking to the pregnant woman that caused it, but walking back to her tent Allison's mind suddenly focused on what she'd done with Daryl last night. Without protection. Oy gevalt, as
her mentor Dr. Rosenthal would've said. True, her menstrual cycle had been irregular for years, and non-existent for the past….three? four? months. But that didn't mean she couldn't conceive. She had a sudden moment of empathy for Lori getting lost in the throes of passion with Shane, because that's exactly what had happened with her…being so close to Daryl had tossed every last bit of logical thinking out of her brain. Even if she squeaked by unscathed after last night's encounter, she had to do something about any future rendezvous. She remembered that the one and only large-economy-sized box of condoms had gone missing from the pharmacy, and even if Glenn had been the one to take it, she certainly couldn't picture herself approaching him and asking to borrow a few. She blushed at the mere thought. She entered her tent and sat down and then a thought occurred to her – what about those Instead menstrual softcups she'd picked up at the pharmacy? They weren't recommended as a birth control method by the manufacturer, but that was mainly for legal reasons…they weren't too dissimilar to a diaphragm, and any port in a storm…. Now the only problem was to sort of predict when Daryl might feel amorous again (*if* he ever would again after her ill-advised confession) so that she had time to discreetly sneak away and insert the darned thing….

‡‡‡‡ ‡‡‡‡ ‡‡‡‡

She was assiduously scrubbing Daryl's socks and drawers on a washboard when she heard him approach her from behind.

"Y'aunt my wife or mother, you ain't obligated to do my laundry," the voice said abruptly.

She turned around to face him. "Not doing it out of obligation, doin' it just 'cause I wanted to," she replied. "I've got my dainties here in the mix, too." She turned back to her laundry.

"Just meant I didn't 'spect you to, y'know, be my handmaiden or whatever just 'cause we was together."

She breathed a silent sigh of relief. At least they were still "together" in his mind.

"S'OK," she assured him without turning around. "I don't mind doin' a few little things for you…you do so much for everyone else in camp…"

"I, um…" he paused and cleared his throat. It sounded like he was struggling with saying something, so Allison turned around to look at him. "I got something for ya," he said quickly while holding out his hand. In it was a silver (or maybe it was white gold?) necklace with a charm hanging from it. The charm was an angel holding the outline of a heart, and her skirt was filled with tiny purple pavé amethysts.

"Oh, my," Allison breathed as she clutched one hand to her heart and the other over her mouth.

"I found it at the pawn shop, it reminded me of you…." he explained hastily.

"It's so beautiful," Allison finally gasped as she gently fingered the charm.

"Here, I'll help you put it on, if ya want," he offered.

She turned and lifted her hair from her neck. He fastened the clasp and she stood up and faced him.

"It's the most beautiful gift I've ever received in my whole life," she said as she wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him toward her lips for a kiss. "Thank you, Daryl."

"You're welcome, Angel," he replied gruffly.
Chapter 15

Allison fingered the charm on her new necklace gently and then asked Daryl, "Did you find any
ammo or weapons while you were in town?"

"Didn't have much of a selection at the pawn shop…couple of boxes of shotgun shells, but that
won't replace the handgun bullets Shane's usin' up on his practice range. Did pick up a nice Old
West-style Bowie knife, though. "

"That will definitely come in handy," Allison commented. "If we ever get ourselves a raccoon, I
could tan the hide and sew you a nice sheath for that knife."

Daryl looked at her skeptically. "You know how to tan 'coon hide?"

Allison stood up straight in a defensive posture. "I'll have you know that when I was a kid we
always had roast raccoon for Christmas Eve dinner, and my daddy let me watch while he fleshed it
and then 'brained' it."

"Well then maybe I'll have to catch a 'coon just so you can prove yourself," he replied with a slight
grin.

The pair stopped talking and simultaneously turned to the direction of the sound of approaching
footsteps. It was Beth.

"Hey, Allison?" she said questioningly as she got closer to them.

"Yes?"

"Um," Beth seemed hesitant, as if she hadn't planned to encounter Daryl. "Maggie and I were
thinking…and Patricia and Lori and Carol agreed…well…we were thinking of having a girls' night
tonight – a slumber party in the living room of the house."

"Oh," Allison was caught by surprise. "Well, thanks for the invite, but I don't think – "

"But it'll be so much fun! We'll bring sleeping bags and have snacks and…" she paused. "And it
will be like old times…y'know, before all this…"

"Gee, I dunno – "

"Oh, go ahead, you know you want to," Daryl unexpectedly chimed in.

"Great!" Beth almost clapped her hands in excitement. "Now we'll all be there, and it will be so
much fun…" She dashed off, probably to consult with Andrea, the last female holdout.

Allison turned to Daryl, disappointed. Since he was not only still speaking to her, but also
presenting her with gifts, she was hoping that she just might spend the night in his arms once again.
"What the heck was that?" she asked him.

He ruffled her hair with one hand and then pulled her face close for a quick kiss. "Obviously one of
the members of the Claw and Cackle Club saw me come out of your tent this morning and wants to
press you for details."

"But no one said anything this morning – "
He placed a hand under her chin and tilted her head up so that her eyes met his. "I guess this is why I'm the better tracker between us two. I can read things and I can read people. Just 'cause no one said anything doesn't mean that one Miss Nosy-Ass or another didn't notice."

Allison sighed. "But a 'slumber party'? For heaven's sake, I thought I was long past that age….besides, what the heck can we do? Usually a slumber party means styling each other's hair and doing nails and applying facials and goofy crap like that, and we certainly don't have…." She stopped when Daryl started chuckling.

"That explains it," he said.

"Explains what?"

"Explains all the shi - - er, stuff Short Round was picking off the shelves at the Golden Pantry. Nail polish, make-up, I dunno what else…all kinds of weird girly stuff. If I didn't know that he was makin' time with the farmer's daughter I'd have sworn he was some kind of cross-dresser the way he was stuffin' all that woman crap into his backpack. I guess Maggie must've given him some kinda list…"

"But still…" Allison's previously dormant hormones had been detonated the night before and she would much rather spend the night with Daryl than with a bunch of women…a couple of whom she didn't even really like…

"Oh, go get it over with, and talk me up good when they get to gossipin'," he told her. "Once they know about us, word will spread and we won't have to explain ourselves."

"I guess…" Allison sighed.

"Besides, a night of foolishness might be good for Carol. Take her mind off…things. Now you finish your laundry like a good girl, and I'm gonna go over and check out the new search grid with Rick and look for Sophia." He ducked as he made the "good girl" remark, knowing that it would anger Allison.

"Alright, I'll go to the slumber party and play adolescent games only if you promise to take it easy when you're out searching for Sophia. You're not completely healed yet, y'know. I'm asking you to not go out alone, and not to do any strenuous climbing or anything."

He looked at her for a minute, a momentary look of anger flashing across his face. It was his natural reaction to immediately contradict anyone who gave him orders or told him what to do. But her huge blue eyes and sincere face calmed him down and made him understand that she was just concerned about his health, about his well-being. He sighed. It would take him a while to completely comprehend that this woman actually cared about him.

"OK," he held up three fingers in a Boy Scout salute, "I promise that if my side starts to hurt, I'll come back to camp. 'K?"

"I don't know if that's truly OK, knowing your tolerance level for pain, but I'll take what I can get."

He gave her a quick smile before dashing off to collect his crossbow and meet with Rick and the rest of the search party.

‡‡‡‡ ‡‡‡‡ ‡‡‡‡

Allison walked into the living room of the Greene home dressed in her traditional bedtime attire of sweatpants and tank top and carrying her sleeping bag. She was surprised to see that she was the
last to arrive – lacking a watch or clock, she'd timed her arrival by the setting sun. But all the other women had already spread their sleeping bags on the floor and were sitting cross-legged in their sleeping apparel.

"About time you got here," Andrea called out.

"Everyone's finally here, now the party can begin!" Maggie shouted and the others hooted in agreement.

Oh, brother, Allison thought. For some reason she just didn't feel up to a raucous night with "the girls."

Everyone gathered their sleeping bags into a makeshift circle, and Maggie poured the two bags of potato chips that Glenn had brought back from the Golden Pantry into several small bowls which were passed around. She then produced a bottle of wine and announced, "there's more where this came from, so don't be shy, girls!" after taking a healthy swig and passing it to Carol. Carol giggled and drank from the bottle and passed it to Andrea. And so it continued. It turned out that Maggie had more magical treats from the Golden Pantry. She dispensed facial masks and a bunch of different hair scrunchies, barrettes and doo-dads and various nail polishes and all sorts of whatever….after the first bottle of wine was finished a second one was produced. That was about the time that the serious gossip started.

"Truth or dare!" Beth shouted, her back turned to Patricia, who was setting Beth's hair in giant foam rollers. "Andrea!"

Andrea answered with a mouth full of potato chips "Truth."

"Where is the weirdest place you've ever 'done it'?"

"Done what?" Andrea replied, which made everyone else convulse in laughter.

"You know what she means," Lori waggled her finger at Andrea.

"OK, I guess it would be…." She closed her eyes as if in deep thought…."On the hood of a car."

Everyone whooped and yelled and finally Carol's voice was finally heard: "Weren't you afraid of denting or scratching your car?"

Andrea replied, "I didn't say it was my car."

The yells and cheers became louder and Allison worried that they'd wake Hershel.

"Don't worry, my dad can sleep through anything," Maggie assured her. "Besides, I warned him that there'd be a bunch of noisy women in his living room tonight."

"Yeah!" Beth and Andrea yelled together and high-fived each other.

"Your turn, Andrea," Lori announced.

"Ummm…." Andrea took a large swallow from the bottle of wine as it passed her way, "Maggie. Truth or dare."

There were giggles as everyone looked in Maggie's direction.

"Truth."
"How is Glenn in the sack?"

The other women convulsed in laughter, except for Patricia who looked as embarrassed as Allison.

"Whatever do you mean?" Maggie asked innocently, not bothering to look up from the fingernails she was carefully painting. But she couldn't hold a straight face for long and she finally dissolved into a fit of giggles.

"Oh for God's sake, quit playing coy, girl. We've all seen you two hangin' out together and him mackin' on you," Andrea slurred as she smeared moisturizer across her face.

"Well, since I chose 'truth' I hafta say that he's….very good." Carol, Lori and Beth all squealed in appreciation. "Maybe even…amazing," Maggie added after hearing all that verbal applause.

After the subsequent round of cheers and laughter subsided, Maggie looked around the circle. "Allison. Truth or dare?"

Allison sighed heavily. She'd already allowed Beth to braid her long hair into two plaits. She'd even given in to peer pressure and had applied eye shadow and lipstick, even though it seemed a major waste doing so just before going to bed. Now she had to participate in this silly game? Maybe it was true what Granny used to always tell her, that she was old before her time. Everyone else seemed to be having a great time.

"Ummm…truth, I guess."

"Where did you get that necklace from?"

"Maybe I had it stashed away in my luggage and just recently found it," Allison said unconvincingly.

"Or maybe a certain hillbilly redneck picked it out just for you when he and Glenn were at the pawn shop in town," Maggie almost sang in a tell-tale voice.

"If you knew that Daryl gave it to me, then why did you ask?" Allison challenged her.

"'Cause we all want to know what's goin' on between you and him," Maggie squealed, falling backward onto her sleeping bag and stuffing a handful of potato chips into her mouth.

"I don't kiss and tell," Allison said quietly.

"Aha!" Lori cried out, wine bottle in hand. Despite her pregnancy, she'd taken a couple of sips as the wine bottles had passed her way. "So you admit that you've kissed him!"

"That's just an expression, a figure of speech," Allison said evenly, using every last molecule of her self-control not to call Lori out on the questionable paternity of her unborn baby.

Carol looked a little somber beneath the apricot scrub slathered on her cheeks. "Daryl's not the type to just hand out presents randomly," she said softly.

"Oh, so you know Daryl well enough to know his 'type'?" Andrea turned her attention to Carol.

"You know he's thoughtful, he gave you that flower after all," Allison retorted, then immediately regretted it. When would she ever learn to think before she spoke? That's all Carol needed right now was to be reminded of Sophia.

"Daryl gave you a flower?" Lori was intrigued.
"It was very sweet. He put it in a makeshift vase and everything." Carol began to recount the story and somehow made it sound more romantic than thoughtful. She barely mentioned the Trail of Tears or Sophia when she described Daryl shyly entering the RV and presenting her with the single white bloom in a bottle.

"Sounds like our resident redneck is a major player!" Maggie called out, looking pointedly at Allison.

The other women laughed and then Beth's voice rang out, "Your turn, Allison!"

"I don't think I want to play anymore, someone else can take my turn." She stood up and collected a few of the empty bowls and plates. "I'll just take these to the kitchen, get a jump on the clean-up…"

"I can clean up, you don't need to bother." Allison turned around at the sink to see Patricia behind her.

"I don't mind…guess I just needed a break."

"I don't blame you," Patricia sighed, filling the dishpan with sudsy warm water. "I wasn't much enjoying that game, either."

They worked side by side in silence for several minutes and then Patricia spoke without looking up from her work. "Daryl's a good man, you know."

Allison paused while drying a plate and replied, "I know. But it's nice to hear that someone else thinks so." She opened a cupboard and set the plate inside. "Someone besides Carol, that is…" she murmured.

Patricia grinned as if she'd expected such a comment. "You've got to understand, Carol is alone and afraid and missin' her daughter. I'm sure she knows that Daryl bringin' her that flower was just a friendly gesture and nothing more, but it gives her some pleasure to make it into something more in front of the group. Makes her feel important. You're so young and pretty that you probably don't know what it's like to be middle-aged and unfashionable in the middle of a group of attractive females."

Allison looked at the older woman in surprise. "Surely you're not including yourself in that group, Miz Patricia. You're…why, you're beautiful!"

Patricia chuckled as Allison blushed. "You're very kind, but livin' here with Maggie and Beth and seeing their trendy, stylish friends that used to come visit before…before all this…I realized that they all saw me as some frumpy ol' uncool woman who never wore the latest clothes and who never cussed or drank…"

"That's not 'uncool', that's just the hallmark of a fine Christian woman with a good upbringing. I mean, I haven't known you that long but you remind me of many of the women from our church back in Toccoa…" She looked down at her feet, momentarily embarrassed at her next revelation, "…and sometimes you just seem like the big sister I would have loved to have."

Patricia impulsively hugged Allison. "That's so nice to hear, baby girl." She pushed Allison back and held her by her shoulders. Looking into her eyes she said "I could tell just from the few brief conversations that we've had that you're also a nice girl with traditional values."

Allison visibly shrunk away at that comment and averted her eyes.
"What's wrong?" Patricia asked.

Allison sighed before confessing. "You won't think I'm so nice and moral when I tell you what happened last night….with me and Daryl…." She looked up at Patricia, her eyebrows knitted in consternation. "I've always thought I was a 'good' girl, like you said, but now that I've…well, I worry that I'm a…." She left the thought unfinished.

Patricia pulled Allison into a hug and stroked the top of her head. "Don't you worry 'bout a thing. I'm older than you and between working as a nurse and just life in general I've learned to read people. And Daryl reminds me a lot of Otis. He's rough around the edges, but deep down he's decent. If this was the Old World, there'd be time for Daryl to court you properly. And he would have, trust me – he'd take you out to dinner and meet your family. But times are different now. We don't have the luxury of goin' out to the Red Lobster and then takin' in a movie. You don't need to feel bad 'bout anything you've done."

Allison patted Patricia on the back and then pulled away from her. "Thank you. That was exactly the Big Sister talk I needed."

The pair finished the dishes and then Patricia retreated upstairs to go to bed. Allison was hesitant to enter back into the fray of the slumber party, so she quietly exited out a side door and headed back toward camp. She had planned to go directly to her tent, but as she approached the area she noticed Daryl, T-Dog, Rick and Glenn sitting around a small campfire. She walked over and joined them.

"Mind if a female disrupts your male bonding experience?" she asked. Daryl scooted over on the log where he was perched and patted the space beside him. Allison walked over and sat down.

Once her face was captured in the firelight the men all simultaneously either laughed or made a comment.

"What?" she asked, confused at the strange welcome.

Daryl grasped one of her braids and twirled it. "Oh, nuthin', 'cept that you look like Laura Ingalls, Lady of the Evening."

The other men laughed and Allison felt her cheeks reddening. "Well, that's just part of slumber party protocol; get your hair done…."

"That don't explain the raccoon eye shadow and the flaming red lips," T-Dog teased her.

"Oh, well, I didn't bother to look in the mirror….I just let Beth make me up…" Oh, geez, why didn't she take the time to wipe the muck off her face before leaving the house?

"Why'd you leave the party?" Rick asked, while sipping a can of beer.

"Want one?" Daryl asked. "Part of our haul from the Golden Pantry."

"Why not," Allison shrugged and accepted a can from him.

She opened the can, took a big swallow, and then addressed Rick's question. "I left because I've heard the story of the claw on the car door in Lover's Lane too many times, and I didn't feel like slow-dancing with a woman while listening to sad stories of loves lost…"

"Is that what girls do at a slumber party?" Glenn asked, genuinely curious.

"Well, yeah, that's where we were headed. Slumber party activities range from makeovers to scary stories to guy gossip to - - "
"But you actually dance with each other?" Glenn was intrigued.

"Well, yeah, sometimes, because as a rule men don't like to dance. So when we were kids – make a note of that, we were kids – sometimes at slumber parties we'd put on sad songs and slow dance with one another, and talk about how Susie loved Jeffrey but he didn't even know she was alive, stuff like that."

"So what did you gals talk about tonight?" Rick drawled.

"Nothing worth repeating," Allison replied. "Just girl stuff." Unfortunately, at that moment the combination of wine and beer kicked in. "Speaking of girl gossip, where is Johnny LongTorso?"

"Who?" T-Dog laughed.

"Shane," Allison explained. She wasn't really drunk, but the liquor had relaxed her tongue and she was contemplating teasing Rick the way Lori had done to her back at the house.

"He's over there up on the RV doin' watch duty," Rick said, suddenly a bit more serious. "Why do you ask?"

"Ohhhh, no particular reason," Allison muttered, her previous confidence suddenly diminished. "Um, where's Dale, for that matter?"

"He's asleep for a change, restin' up for his watch duty," Daryl responded. "And I think you could do with some rest as well." He stood up and offered a hand to her. She drained the rest of her beer and allowed him to hoist her to a standing position.

"Since you're not carrying any weapons, I'll walk you to your tent to keep you safe," he announced to the group as they left the campfire, as if to explain him accompanying her.

"Oh, darn!" Allison stopped half-way to her tent and exclaimed. "I left my sleeping bag back in the house," she explained to Daryl's questioning face.

He slowly smiled and reached a hand up to stroke her cheek softly. "I've got a sleeping bag back at my place, if you care to share," he said quietly.

She took his hand and brought it to her mouth and kissed it and then smiled broadly at him in silent affirmation.
Chapter 16

Daryl held the flap of his tent open for Allison to enter first. A true gentleman, she thought to herself. She stepped inside and he followed, zipping the "door" closed.

"Sorry it ain't real fancy or nuthin'," he apologized, lighting a lantern that was hanging from the ceiling.

"It's fine," Allison assured him, looking around. Then, turning to face him she said shyly, "Truth be told, it's the Ritz-Carlton in my mind when I'm next to you."

Daryl was glad that the light was dim, because he felt that he might've actually been blushing at her remark.

"I'd offer you a drink, but I think you've had enough," he said.

"I'm fine, you can skip the cocktails and snack crackers," she assured him. "I'm more tired than anything."

"Oh," he suddenly felt awkward, as if he'd misinterpreted her whole coming-to-his-tent intentions. He grabbed the sleeping bag off of his cot, unzipped it and laid it flat on the floor. "Go ahead and get comfy if you're sleepy…"

Allison tried to muster up what she hoped was a coy, sexy smile as she replied "I'm not all that sleepy…" She took a step to be closer to him, and he stepped forward to close the gap between them. She wrapped her arms around him and he smiled down at her. "Glad to hear it…I ain't really tired, either….yet." He grabbed one of her braids and tickled the end of her nose with it.

She pulled back in embarrassment. "Oh my God, I forgot my hair was still braided like this – I feel like the girl on the Swiss Miss box. Could I look any goofier?"

"Relax, Angel," Daryl stroked the top of her head with one hand while cupping his other hand behind her neck. "Unless you got yourself a set of them novelty teeth out of a gumball machine, you could never look goofy." He pulled her face upwards and met her lips with a gentle kiss.

"I've said it before and I'll say it again," Allison murmured against his lips, "you're sweet." She returned his kiss with a more forceful one of her own. She slipped a hand underneath his shirt and caressed his chest. Her fingertips danced across his nipple and he sighed heavily against her mouth. She parted her lips slightly to welcome his tongue. Both of his hands were now firmly entwined in her hair – slightly disrupting the symmetry of her plaits.

"I don't mind you sayin' it to me, but don't you ever tell anyone else you think I'm sweet," he growled as he moved his mouth to the side of her neck.

She raised her face to the sky and moaned quietly as he kissed and suckled her neck. "Right now I'd promise you anything," she whispered.

The tent was silent for the next several moments save for their heavy breathing. Well, gasping and panting was more like it. Daryl slowly moved his kisses down to Allison's breast, pulling down her tank top to do so. She responded by reaching for his crotch and stroking his bulge outside of his pants. Somewhere in the back of her mind it occurred to her that these movements somehow suddenly came naturally when Daryl was pressed against her. Her mind went on automatic and she responded in ways she'd never dreamed of while reading romance novels…touching actual male
body parts that had originally icked her out just a few months ago when she thought about it. But she wasn't embarrassed or even shy when Daryl touched her in her most private places. It felt…natural…it felt good….

She reached for the hem of Daryl's sleeveless shirt and he raised his arms over his head so that she could remove it. She tossed it aside and buried her face in his chest, not noticing the scars. If anything, they made him that much more manly and attractive…her handsome, rugged Hunter, more macho than any guy on a can of stew or Brawny paper towels. She kissed his sternum and then moved her tongue to his nipple. He removed his mouth from her breast long enough to slip her tank top off and throw it to the ground. He then used both hands to press her face against his chest and he groaned as she teased his nipple with her tongue. After a few minutes she stopped, head still in position, but eyes shifted up toward his. Without speaking she lowered herself into a kneeling position, never unlocking her gaze from his. She reached for the button of his pants and undid it, and then unzipped the zipper. "Oh, yeaah," Daryl moaned gutturally as she slid his trousers and boxer shorts down to his ankles in one movement. Without thinking about what she was doing, she took him into her mouth. Hesitant at first, she gently kissed the tip and then slid her tongue along his length. "Ohhh Gawwd…..feels so good," he moaned, a bit louder this time. He gently entwined his fingers in her hair, careful not to force her or push her. He massaged her scalp as she found a rhythm and slowly learned how to go just so far as to not gag herself. "Oooh, baby, I can't take much more of that," Daryl whispered a few minutes later. He oh so gently placed his hand under her chin and removed her from him and raised her face to look up to him. She slowly stood up at his silent direction and mashed his lips when he pulled her close for a kiss.

While their lips were still locked, Daryl tried his best to slide her sweatpants down her hips. Allison helped him out by wriggling out of them and her underpants and stepping out of them. He likewise kicked off the garments that were encumbering his ankles and slowly lowered her to the sleeping bag on the floor. They silently embraced and kissed before Daryl abruptly stopped. "Something wrong?" Allison asked anxiously. "No, just hold on a sec," he grumbled as he unlaced his boots and removed them along with his socks. Allison chuckled and then doffed her socks and sneakers. "These aren't like the high heels those women leave on in those X-rated movies, after all," she explained to him.

He pulled back in surprise and asked, "Exactly how many X-rated movies have you seen?"

Allison blushed and confessed, "Just one. It was a videotape I found in my granddad's stuff when I was cleaning up after he died. I didn't know it was X-rated until I popped it into the VCR. The title said Tillie Goes to the Dentist for a Drillin' and a Fillin'. Who knew?" she giggled and shrugged.

"But you watched the whole thing, even after you found out it was dirty?" he asked accusingly.

"Well, I won't deny that it was sorta interesting," she confessed, blushing.

Daryl cuddled up close to her and pushed the stray hairs that had escaped her braids from her forehead. "And here I thought my Angel was such an innocent young girl.."

"Well, I am, mostly," she protested, "I mean I haven't really been around the block, so to speak, but I guess I've been nearby…I've seen a few things...." Even in the dim light Daryl could see her cheeks crimson until they almost glowed.

"I'm just teasin' ya," he pulled her head alongside his and murmured into her ear. His hot breath made her gasp and press her body into his. He teased her ear with his tongue and reached a hand between her legs. She rolled onto her back while clasping both of her arms around his neck and pulled her heels close to her bottom, inviting him to explore further. He moved on top of her and kissed her deeply while tantalizing both of her nipples with his hands and grinding his pelvis
against hers. She reached a hand down and grasped him and guided him to her opening. He raised himself on his elbows and joined his hand with hers and gently glided himself inside her. "Oh, ooh, oooh," she whimpered as she arched her neck and closed her eyes in sheer pleasure. She encircled his waist with her legs and pulled him closer. "Oh, shit, you feel so damned good," Daryl mumbled as he increased his rhythm. She raised her hips to meet his and he began bucking like a bronco, grunting louder on each successive thrust. Allison gripped his hair with one hand and wrapped her other arm around his shoulders as she consciously pressed her lips together firmly to muffle her spontaneous cries.

"Ungh, oh, ugh, UHH!" Daryl exclaimed as he released inside of her. "Mmmmm," Allison sighed, having reached several peaks during the process. She pulled Daryl's face close to hers and kissed him tenderly on the lips. "That was…" she sighed "Amazing. Fantastic." She kissed him again and let go so that he could flop onto his back in exhaustion.

"You were amazing," he replied softly, running a hand across his forehead and through his hair.

Allison was tempted to tell him again that she loved him, but she'd already said it once and he hadn't replied. Even though she was completely satiated and cozy a part of her brain still held out hope that he'd express a similar feeling to her. But other than pulling her close to his side and kissing her cheek, he didn't remark any further. A few minutes later his steady breathing told her that he'd dozed off, and she cuddled into his side and eventually did the same.

It was still pitch black outside when Allison stirred. She'd somehow sensed that Daryl had awakened. She squinted at him through sleepy eyes and saw him lying on his back, staring at the ceiling.

"You OK?" She asked softly.

"I messed up," he replied, not looking at her. He was silent for a few minutes then sat up and grabbed a backpack. He unzipped a compartment, dug through it and then produced a handful of wrapped condoms. "I picked these up at the Golden Pantry and meant to use 'em…I don't have any diseases or nothin'," he hastened to assure her, "but I…I don't want you to end up like Lori." He clenched his fist and didn't look at Allison.

She sat up and reached an arm around him to gently stroke the top of his head, which she knew relaxed him. "It's OK. My….erm…my cycle has always been very irregular, and – I can't believe I'm discussing my 'monthly' with a man…" she buried her face into his chest in embarrassment.

"You can say the word, I know that women have periods," he assured her.

She sighed and then raised her face to look up at him. "OK, my periods have always been very irregular and my gynecologist once told me that I might have trouble getting pregnant because of that. And, if worse comes to worse, I've still got some of those 'morning after' pills that I picked up for Lori."

Daryl couldn't quite verbalize it, but Allison's use of "worse" upset something deep inside him. After a few minutes he asked her "You could do that?"

"Do what?"

"Get rid of a baby?"

"I've always been pro-choice," she stated firmly. "At least when it came to other women," she
added, her voice faltering a bit. "I never really pictured myself in that situation, though." She paused and then grasped his hand. "I would never want to paint you into a corner that way, make you feel obligated if….if something happened."

He let go of her hand and lay back, looking up at the ceiling. "I guess I can't blame you for not wanting to have my baby…Dixons ain't exactly the best breeding stock…"

Allison tilted her head in confusion and exasperation. "Hold on a minute….first of all, we don't know whether or not I'm pregnant. Secondly, my only point was to let you know that if, and that's a huge IF, I was, I wouldn't want you to feel obligated to be a daddy, or….well, I guess there's no such thing as a shotgun wedding these days, but you get my drift. If we….if we stay together I want it to be because you want to, not because you feel it's your duty because of a baby. And, for your information, if I did discover that I was carrying your child I wouldn't make any decision without consulting you first. I happen to think that you are a very good, moral, upstanding man, excellent 'breeding stock.' It wouldn't upset me one bit to have a baby with you, but *only* if it's something you're agreeable to freely, not because it's an accident and you feel pinned to the wall."

"I would never ask you to do something you didn't want to," Daryl finally said quietly, pulling Allison close to him and kissing the top of her head. "I do appreciate your honesty, and the fact that you'll talk to me if anything happens."

"Of course I will," she murmured, nuzzling into his neck. "I can't keep any secrets from you; you know that you can read me like a book."
'"Mmm," Daryl acknowledged Allison's comment sleepily into her ear, "I like it best when I read you in Braille...." He drowsily slung an arm over her and copped a quick feel of her breast, which made her giggle.

"Sometimes you're a very sassy boy, you know that?" She whispered as she took his groping hand, kissed it, and tucked it under her chin. She rolled on her side to snuggle against him.

"Sassy and sweet...that's some combination....sounds like a perfume commercial..." His voice was barely audible as he slowly dozed off.

Allison must have fallen asleep shortly after that, because the next thing she was aware of was Daryl slithering up into a sitting position.

"Darn, woman, you are becoming a bad influence," he told her.

"Hmph?" she mumbled, struggling to open her eyes. "What's the matter?"

"You're the matter," he said, not unkindly. He leaned down and kissed the top of her head. "I can only recall two times in my life sleepin' past sun-up, and both times I was with you."

Allison raised herself up slightly on one elbow and squinted out of the mesh window of Daryl's tent. Dawn had broken, but the sun was still low on the horizon. Not exactly "sleeping in", as far as she was concerned, but she knew that dedicated hunters and fishermen were always out and about before it was light. "Sorry," she mumbled. "Give me a second, I'll get dressed and make you some breakfast..."

"No, you just stay put and get some rest. I know you ain't used to gettin' up this early." He stood up and started pulling on his clothes.

"At least let me get you some coffee, or pack you something to take with you - "

Daryl was already fully dressed and lacing his boots. He must've been a quick-change artist in a previous life, Allison thought to herself. "Nah, I'm good. You go back to sleep. And if you go anywhere, make sure you take a weapon. I'll be back directly."

"OK," she sighed, falling back onto the sleeping bag, eyes already at half-mast. "If you insist..."

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

When Allison next awoke, the sun was much brighter and she could hear activity going on outside in camp. Oops. How long had she slept? She scrambled into her clothes and as she pulled on her top one of her now-haphazard braids whipped across her face. Suddenly she remembered the slumber party which now seemed days ago. Her hair. Oy. Her face...! She didn't have a mirror handy, but she imagined that the eye makeup she'd allowed to be applied now made her look like a bruised raccoon. She removed the rubber bands from her plaits and shook out her hair. She then peered outside Daryl's tent flap before making a beeline to the makeshift cold-water shower that Glenn and Dale had set up on the outskirts of the camp. Shivering behind the tarpaulin, she scrubbed her face and hair as quickly as possible lest anyone stroll by. She then grimaced as she realized that she hadn't brought anything resembling a towel with her and that she would have to climb back into her clothes while soaking wet. Oh well, it wasn't the worst feeling in the world....that was reserved for using the Great Outdoors as a toilet. Luckily the blazing Georgia sun...
was drying her off almost as quickly as a tanning bed. She went to her tent to grab her medical bag and then headed to the Grimes' tent. Lori was collecting a plate from Carl; apparently he was just finishing breakfast.

"Hey there, Lori, got a sec?" Allison called out.

Lori looked up, saw the black bag in Allison's hand and understood her meaning. "Get your math book and go over to the picnic table and start on those multiplication problems. I'll be over to help you in a couple of minutes." The young boy obediently disappeared into the family tent momentarily then emerged with a textbook in hand. He walked to the designated table without much enthusiasm.

"You feeling better?" Lori asked as she led Allison into her tent.

"Better?" Allison asked, confused.

"We were worried last night after you never came back from the kitchen. Patricia said you had a headache and had gone back to your tent."

"Oh, yeah…must've been the wine. I'm not used to it. But yes, I feel much better now, thanks." She removed the blood pressure cuff from her bag and Lori sat down on a chair.

"Guess you must be, seein' as I stopped by your tent early this morning and you were nowhere to be found. Must've been up and about somewhere…"

"Quiet, please, while I get your pulse and pressure…" Nosy wench, Allison thought to herself. She's just fishing for information.

She pulled her notebook out from her bag and made some notations. "Blood pressure is good, how have you been feeling overall?"

"Just fine…of course, I'm probably getting a lot more sleep than some folks…" she looked at Allison pointedly.

"I was probably out using the latrine when you stopped by," Allison said, pulling a stethoscope out of her bag and placing the tips in her ears. She placed the diaphragm on Lori's chest underneath her shirt and said "Deep breath, please. Now exhale through your mouth." She avoided Lori's glance as she continued to listen to her chest and then her back. "Step over to the cot and lay down, please." She began pressing on various areas of Lori's abdomen and asking if there was any discomfort. Having received negative responses she told her patient, "You can sit up now."

After Lori's insinuations Allison was dying to dig right back at her, but she struggled instead to maintain some semblance of professional ethics. Instead of outright throwing her affair with Shane in her face, she instead told Lori: "You've already been through one pregnancy, so you know that in a perfect world I'd be taking blood samples from you as well as doing a pap smear and pelvic exam to look for any STDs or abnormal cells or other irregularities. Obviously, I can't do most of that. Once you're further along I can do a pelvic to assure that your uterus is growing at an appropriate rate. But other than that…I can only rely on guesswork. I don't mean to presume anything, but if there is any chance of a sexually transmitted disease it is best to administer antibiotics by 10 weeks into your pregnancy. Again, I don't mean to pry or be indelicate, but if you think there is any risk at all…" She looked into Lori's eyes, willing her to understand that she meant "If you are sure that Shane hasn't been with anyone else without a condom…".

Lori was silent for several moments and then quietly asked, "What happens after 10 weeks?"
"Some STDs, like syphilis, can be transmitted to the fetus after the 10th week. Others, like Chlamydia, can be safely treated with certain antibiotics past the 10th week with no harm done to the baby. I wish I could give you a more definitive answer, but without proper laboratory equipment, this is the best I can do…” her voice trailed off. Even though Lori was the one playing fast and loose, Allison felt like the failure.

"I'm pretty sure everything is OK, but can I let you know for sure tomorrow?"

"That's fine, one day more or less won't make a difference," Allison assured her, packing her equipment back into her bag. Won't make a difference unless she doesn't have the proper antibiotics at hand, she thought to herself.

She left Lori's tent and headed back to her own to drop off her medical satchel. She started walking toward the RV to ask Carol what laundry detail she could help with when she was assaulted from behind.

"Way to stay on alert," Daryl taunted as he grabbed her around the neck with one hand and rubbed the knuckles of his other hand on top of her head. "I could've been a walker, for all you know."

Allison laughed and swatted at him. "If you were a walker I would've smelled you coming, not that you don't stink in your own way."

He released his grip and handed her a line strung with dead squirrels. "Here, make yourself useful, go clean these and make us somethin' decent to eat. I'm gonna find Rick and map out the new search grid for Sophia."

She took his kill from him and replied, "Get outta here, you maniac, before I skin you, too." They grinned at each other before heading off on their various missions.

Allison didn't notice, but Dale was atop the RV on guard duty, watching her exchange with Daryl through his binoculars. And Carol was a few yards away from the vehicle, on her way to collect dirty clothes. She, too, had observed the pair. But her reaction was vastly different from Dale's, as she found out when she called up "Dale? Collecting laundry, got anything for me?"

"Coming right down," he replied as he descended the ladder. He smiled broadly as he greeted Carol, knowing that she'd seen the same tableau as he. "Did you ever think you'd see the day? Daryl Dixon laughing and giving noogies?" He was pleased that someone in camp had managed to find a playful side lurking underneath that rough exterior. The two men in their group that had worried him had been Shane and Daryl, both loose cannons…but he'd always felt that Daryl had an innate humaneness somewhere deep within. Shane was a different story. If Dale didn't know better, he's suspect that Shane was abusing steroids, what with his musculature and hair-trigger temper. Yes, Daryl had a temper, too, but despite that he had always been concerned with the group as a whole, not just Lori and Carl. And now that he was showing a soft side, being actually whimsical…well, Dale had a newfound respect for and confidence in Daryl. But as soon as the words had escaped his lips he noted Carol's somber face. Apparently she wasn't enamored with the kinder, gentler Daryl.

"No," she replied without emotion, "I never thought I would see that. What do you need washed today?" She held out a sack to collect Dale's dirty clothing without further comment. She felt bad being so abrupt with Dale; how could he possibly know how much that exchange had bothered her? She couldn't hear their words but she saw the body language. How Daryl had pulled Allison close to him and playfully rubbed her scalp. She recalled his reaction when she visited him after Andrea had shot him…how he'd recoiled when she touched his head and had made the irrelevant excuse about stitches. The stitches were in his side, not his head, as far as she knew. But he had
cringed when she leaned down and kissed him, even though she'd assured him that he'd earned his place among the group. She was so confused. He'd brought her that Cherokee Rose, and he was one of the few who actively searched for Sophia every day... Why was he so stilted with her but so relaxed with Allison? A man didn't bring a flower to a woman just because he felt pity for her..... Did he? Maybe if her only experience with men hadn't been with Ed she could understand the situation better...but surely Daryl had some genuine feelings for her...

Dale noted Carol's somber face as she cinched up the laundry sack and clutched it in her arms, close to her chest.

"It looked like Daryl was on his way out to search for Sophia now, so he's not just goofing around, wasting time. He hasn't forgotten about her, you know."

"Yes, I know." She managed the smallest of smiles. "I appreciate his efforts. And everyone else's." Her eyes seemed to cloud over as she murmured, "I best get this laundry started."

Dale watched her walk away and then returned to his post on the roof of the Winnebago. He sighed and thought about the situation as he surveyed the perimeter of Hershel's property. That was part of the problem of watch duty – there was too much damned time to think. And if you didn't want to go crazy thinking about the perilousness of the current situation, your mind wandered and you distracted yourself contemplating things like the dynamics of the various group members. Of course, had Irma still been alive, she'd accuse him for the umpteenth time of being a gossipy old woman, worse than any of the ladies on her bowling team. She'd often teased him when they were working together in their real estate office about the way he'd "read" their clients. He'd overhear a couple talking to her about a particular property they were considering and then that night over dinner he'd tell her all about the problems that couple was having in their marriage and why they'd probably back out of the deal at the last minute. "I hired you to do the books, not to psychoanalyze our customers," Irma would laughingly remind him.

He smiled to himself, remembering how proud he was of Irma when she'd gotten her real estate license. She was a true "people person", warm and empathetic, and had done so well selling houses for a national firm that she eventually decided to open her own local company. Dale had grown weary of the daily suit-and-tie routine at the Big Eight accounting firm he'd worked for since being recruited right out of college, so it didn't take much coaxing from Irma for him to come on board with her and handle the "numbers" part of her new business. "Even after 20-some years with the same firm, with all these mergers and buyouts in the industry I'll never make partner, so I might as well be 'partners' with you," he'd told her. And, despite Irma's teasing, his uncanny ability to pick up on nuances in body language and verbal clues and just plain "reading" people turned out to be an asset. More often than not he was right when he warned her not to put too much work writing up a particular sales agreement because the husband was having an affair and that the wife would be filing for a separation before the closing. And Irma couldn't deny that years of dealing with a variety of people from all works of life had sharpened his senses in that regard. He sighed quietly. Damn, how he still missed that woman. They'd lived together and worked together and still never grew weary of one another. Not many couples married that many years and having spent so much time together shoulder-to-shoulder would still eagerly look forward to spending months at a time traveling the US in a cramped RV. Maybe that's part of why it gave him pleasure to see a previously taciturn and solitary person like Daryl Dixon suddenly find someone with whom he could "loosen up" and laugh a little and enjoy life every now and then. Every man should have an Irma, he thought to himself. And although at first glance a Duke-educated doctor like Allison might seem a major mismatch for the redneck, having talked to her and observed her Dale could see why the two had "clicked." She was from similar sturdy stock, raised in rural Georgia with not a lot of money, and was no stranger to hard work.
Dale thought about Carol’s reaction to seeing Daryl and Allison interacting and it confirmed something he had only suspected previously – that the older woman might have developed some misguided romantic feelings toward the hunter. She was obviously lonely and reaching out to grasp at something, anything – some kind of emotional attachment since her daughter went missing. But what she didn’t understand was that, it seemed obvious to Dale, Daryl saw her as an elder to be respected, a mother whose daughter was missing, a wife who’d been abused by her no-good husband. Daryl was a good ol’ southern boy who was raised to respect women and was treating Carol just like he would any older neighbor lady who was in mourning and needed support. Having seen Merle and Daryl together in the early days of camp Dale also suspected that Daryl knew what it was like to be beaten down and had a special type of sympathy for Carol. But he had a feeling that Carol, like many a lonely woman, was misinterpreting his caring and doing the “right thing” as something more. If only she could see that, despite her romantic fantasies, her personality would never mesh with Daryl's. She was too skittish, too submissive, too willing to play the victim. Allison wasn't overbearing, as far as Dale had noted, but she was a strong woman with a sarcastic sense of humor that could seem abrasive to some. Glenn had even confessed to him once that he thought Allison was "kinda scary and mean sometimes" simply by virtue of her occasional quips (like the time she’d overheard Glenn asking Dale about the women’s menstrual cycles). But Daryl seemed to enjoy and embrace her caustic comments, often trying to top hers with his own. And Allison apparently also had a soft side and somewhere along the line had learned the fine art of "mothering" a man to a degree without smothering him, because Dale noted that she'd been washing Daryl's laundry lately, a privilege he’d never extended to any of the other females in camp. But how to talk to Carol about all of this without sounding like a nosy busybody? He'd learned his lesson after showing concern for Andrea and being shot down. Best to let Carol learn things the hard way, even if it meant getting hurt yet again. His thoughts were suddenly interrupted by Glenn clambering up the ladder of the RV.

"Um, Dale?"

"What's on your mind, son?"

"You're old, um, that is, you - you know things…sooo…what if somebody told you something that somebody else should know…"

"Stop being so dramatic and just spit it out."

Glen sighed and then blurted, "There's walkers in the barn."
Chapter 18

Allison headed toward the barn with the string of squirrels over her shoulder and her hunting knife on her hip. She found what she was looking for – a large pail to use as a gut-bucket – in a pile on the side of the building and started toward the picnic table to begin cleaning Daryl's catch. She noticed Rick, Shane, Daryl and a few others out the corner of her eye while she mentally tried to think of a new, enticing way to prepare squirrel when suddenly Daryl's raised voice broke through her reverie.

"We're closing in on this girl, I just found her damned doll a few days ago!"

Allison trotted quickly over to see what had gotten him so agitated. Shane's condescending tone immediately made her skin crawl.

"That's all you found, Daryl, that's what you did, you found a doll."

"Man, you don't know what the hell you're – "

"If Sophia was alive out there and saw you comin', all methed out with your Buck knife and geek ears around your neck, she'd run in the other direction!"

Daryl attempted to pounce on Shane, but Rick stepped in between the two men as they kept shouting at one another.

Allison dropped the bucket and the squirrels and took gently Daryl's hand. "What's wrong?" she asked. "What is Shane going on about?"

Daryl used his other hand to dismiss Shane with a sweeping gesture. "Asshole don' know what the hell he's talkin' about, 'scuse my French."

Carol was biting the knuckles of her right hand, tears welling up in her eyes.

"How can you say such a thing about Sophia in front of her mother?" Lori asked Shane.

"Tell 'em, Rick," Shane demanded. "You know as damned well as I do the chances of finding a lost kid after 48 hours. It's about time we all had a reality check around here."

"What we all need is to calm down," Rick replied, trying to diffuse the tension.

Lori started to hug Carol, but the older woman pulled away and ran off. Everyone stood silently for a few minutes until Shane noticed Allison staring intently at him.

"And just what are you lookin' at, Doctor?" His sarcastic tone made Daryl bristle and take half a step forward, but Allison's calm, even tone as she replied made him pause.

"Oh, I was just thinking, Shane, that growing up on a farm in the rural South I've seen more than my share of manure. I've seen it loaded on wagons and spread across fields far and wide. But until today, I must say, I've never seen it piled high in such a tall stack." She made a point of eying him from head to toe before turning, collecting her pail and squirrels and continuing on to the picnic table. T-Dog failed to stifle a snicker which caused Shane to curse and stomp off.

Rick cleared his throat and drawled, "Why don't we all take a few minutes to collect our thoughts and our weapons and then meet by the Jeep. I'll get Jimmy to bring the map and we'll start a new
"You believe she's still alive, don't ya?" he asked her.

"Yes, I do," she replied, knowing he was referring to Sophia. "Until we find her body or her as a walker, that's the only logical assumption."

"Kids are smarter than folks give 'em credit for," Daryl commented. "She's probably hidin' somewhere…" He paused when he saw the expression on Allison's face change. "What? You don't think she's in a safe hidin' place?"

"In Sophia's case I think it's more likely that she found another group of survivors – or they found her – and she's traveling with them. Probably couldn't tell them how to get to the highway where she first got lost. I'm thinking maybe she's alive but no longer in this area."

"What did you mean 'in Sophia's case'?" T-Dog, who had appeared out of nowhere and joined their conversation, asked. "You sound like you know something we don't."

"Not necessarily 'know' but just suspect. It's not really important right now…"

"You brought it up, might as well finish it," Daryl said, his eyes narrowing.

Allison sighed and turned her attention back to the squirrel as she spoke. "I just think that Sophia isn't as mature as she should be for her age."

"How would you know? You don't have kids." Allison looked up to see Lori standing there. Where was everyone coming from? Was there a big ol' "Welcome" sign over the table or something, Allison thought.

"No, I don't have kids, but I've seen the signs before. I've treated thousands of kids in the ER."

"What signs?" Daryl pressed.

Allison sighed again. "Sophia is 12 years old. At that age most girls are wearing their first training bra, they're thinking about dating boys, they're experimenting with make-up."

"You have to train 'em?" T-Dog almost giggled.

"It's an expression, for heaven's sake. Anyway, Sophia is nothing like that. She's shy to the point of being invisible, afraid to speak. She still carries a doll when she's this close to being a teenager. It's like she's trying to stay a child, trying not to mature, and usually when a girl does that it's because…because she's being…well, molested."

"You don't know what you're talking about, you have no proof!" Lori was incensed. "How dare you make such sweeping accusations! You're not a mother!"

"Lady, you don't know what I know." Allison threw down her knife and stood up. "No, I don't have kids of my own but I've seen plenty of them. Every day, 12 hours a day for the past three years. I've seen sick kids, broken arm kids, broken leg kids, fractured skull kids, burned kids, undernourished kids, beaten kids… Let me tell you, it broke my heart every time I had to talk to a hysterical crying mother or father who'd taken their eye off their child for just one minute…That's all it takes sometimes, just that one minute and the kid falls in the swimming pool or pulls a pan of hot grease off the stove or falls down the stairs. The agony in that parent's eyes was almost unbearable.
sometimes. But worse was whenever I had to talk to the mother of some little girl who'd obviously been sexually assaulted, most likely by daddy, and I could tell that mom knew what was going on and didn't do a thing to stop it...well, that made my blood boil and my stomach turn. And I couldn't do a darned thing about it except report it to Child Protective Services, and they were always so overloaded with cases that chances were nothing would get done, nothing would change." She sat back down and picked up her knife and resumed squirrel preparation. "I never met Carol's husband, but from what I've heard about him, it wouldn't surprise me if he was the perp and Carol was too frightened of him to get help....but still..." she shook her head, thinking that had it been her own child, she would've walked barefoot through fire to protect her.

"I – I'm sorry, I just didn't think Carol...I don't know what to think..." Lori half-apologized and then sauntered off.

"Looks like Rick's ready to roll," T-Dog said, obviously anxious to change the subject. "You comin', Daryl?"

"Yeah, yeah, gimme a sec, I'll meet you there..." T-Dog nodded and left. Daryl was visibly upset by Allison's outburst. He stood beside the table for a few seconds as she quietly continued her task at hand. Finally he spoke.

"You gonna be OK?" he gently placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Yeah, I'm fine," she looked up at him and patted his hand. "You go on and find that girl."

"If this ain't a waste of time, that is. 'Less she's gone off somewhere like you said."

"That was just a theory. I have no proof one way or the other. Just me thinking out loud. If she's still in those woods you won't find her without looking."

"True enough," Daryl agreed. "You stay close to camp, y'hear, and don't wander around without a weapon."

"I've got my trusty knife," she assured him, saluting with it. "You stay safe yourself while you're out there."

"Always do," he gave her a quick smile, a knuckle rub to her scalp and then headed over to the Jeep to help plot out the newest search strategy.
Dinner that night was somber, what with Shane's earlier outburst. It was apparent from her controlled facial expression that Carol would have preferred to throw that evening’s helping of squirrel stew into Shane's face rather than scoop it politely onto his plate, but that was Carol. You couldn't undo years of silent compliance. Dale and Glenn seemed to exchange furtive glances as well, but Allison had no idea what that was all about. Other than Carol's grim behavior she mainly noticed that Daryl and T-Dog were unusually quiet during the meal. Well, T-Dog at least. Daryl was never a conversationalist, but as a rule he didn't usually eat with his eyes strictly focused on his plate as he did this evening. T-Dog, however, was always one to engage the others in idle chit-chat during a meal, with which Allison was always the first to join in, bringing up silly, irrelevant topics to keep the dinner atmosphere as light-hearted as possible. Happy, non-controversial conversation aided in digestion, she'd always been taught. Allison had a feeling that not only were the two men feeling guilty about not finding Sophia during their search mission that afternoon but that they were also remembering her stupid outburst about what Ed might have done to the girl, and her thoughtless remark about how Carol hadn't protected her…. Oh, when would she ever learn to control her tongue, she thought to herself.

Allison helped Carol and Lori collect the plates and utensils after the evening meal was finished. Andrea excused herself to take watch duty, and Dale retreated to the RV, hopefully to get some sleep for a change, Allison thought. That man never seemed to rest. Lori was very abrupt when Allison carried the used plates to the communal wash tub – "Thanks for your help, but Carol and I can handle it from here." She sighed and felt like a pariah. That was the last thing she wanted in such a small community; so far she'd strived to try and get along with everyone. She returned to her tent and plucked her toothbrush and toothpaste from her bag. She walked over to the communal pump and brushed her teeth and then returned to her tent, still feeling like an outcast.

"Knock knock," a familiar voice called quietly outside her tent while she was preparing for bed.

"Come on in," she said and Daryl entered, still looking unusually contemplative.

"Hey," he said.

"Hey," she replied. "Have a seat."

He sat down on the chaise in her tent and studied her for several minutes before speaking. "You OK?" she finally asked him.

"I feel kinda bad," he replied.

"Why?"

"Comin' over to see ya without…well, without a gift or somethin’ or without takin' you out somewhere. Sometimes it just doesn't feel right." He raised his eyes to meet hers.

"The world has changed in the last few months," Allison replied. "I'm thinking that the old rules of dating don't apply anymore simply because of circumstance." She shyly walked over to the chaise and sat beside him. "I know that had we met and started dating in 'the other world' you'd be taking me out for dinner or coffee or a drink and sometimes I'd make you dinner at my tiny little apartment…"

Daryl restlessly ran his hand across his face and through his hair. "I just don't want you to ever
think that I just come over because I want…you know…" He hung his head in embarrassment.

Allison gently picked up Daryl's hand and entwined her fingers in his. "I hope that you know that I wouldn't…you know…with you unless I felt a special, emotional connection…I've had several guys make passes at me at college and at the hospital and such, but what I feel when I'm with you is not just a casual, physical thing – I've never felt as comfortable with a man or gone as far as I have with you." She pulled his hand to her lips and kissed his palm. "I just sometimes worry that I'm pressuring you into a serious relationship when you're not ready for something like that…"

Daryl released his hand from her grasp and used it to push her hair back from her face and pull her closer to him. As he grasped the back of her head and pulled her forward he murmured, "You should know by now that I wouldn't be here if I didn't want to be…” He pressed his lips against hers and she responded eagerly. Their tongues danced together for several moments before Allison paused to take a breath.

"I guess I 'know' that, but sometimes I doubt myself…I'm sorry to be so wishy-washy but I just often worry about being worthy of someone like you…"

Daryl almost growled as he pressed his face into her neck just below her jaw. As he nibbled gently he mumbled "Angel, I'm the one who is not worthy…"

Allison grabbed the back of his head and pressed it into her neck. She shivered with pleasure at the ministrations of his tongue and teeth. Daryl sighed heavily when Allison gently stroked the top of his head, a gesture that always made him tingle. His hands found their way under her bedtime tank top and clasped her breasts. Her moans increased as his fingers expertly massaged her nipples. He tucked his head under her top and replaced one hand with his mouth, which caused Allison to involuntarily wrap one leg around his waist and pull him close as best she could on the chaise. Moments later she stripped her top off and tossed it aside. Daryl gently pushed her down onto the chaise and lay on top of her, still teasing her nipple with his tongue.

She used one hand to push Daryl's head further down on her breast, encouraging him to take all of it into his mouth. She used her other hand to bite her moans of pleasure into, lest the rest of the camp hear her. She'd never known that one could feel such ecstatic, ethereal pleasure just from…from what Daryl was doing to her breast. As she lay panting after reaching a peak, Daryl slowly raised up and kissed her lips, an unusual look of – what was it? Satisfaction? – in his eyes. Allison tried to catch her breath as she pushed him back slightly to unbutton his shirt. He kissed her quickly before sitting up and undoing the rest of the buttons himself. He set his shirt on the floor and pulled Allison up to a sitting position against him. He closed his eyes and kissed her deeply. When he opened his eyes she was smirking and gesturing with her eyes to the makeshift bed on the floor that she hadn't made up since they'd last enjoyed one another on it.

Daryl stood up and was about to undo his cargo pants when Allison pushed his hands away and gently unbuttoned and unzipped them. She slowly pushed his pants and boxer shorts to his ankles and then gently took his erect manhood into her hands. She leaned forward and kissed the tip and then hesitantly snaked her tongue out to tease it. Daryl moaned. She had only done this briefly, somewhat, once before with him but remembering how much it had pleased him she proceeded more boldly. She slowly, in measured strokes, took more and more of him into her mouth, stroking the underside with her tongue as she sucked with her mouth and massaged with her hand. Daryl groaned and wavered uncertainly on his feet, as if he was getting dizzy. He gently placed one hand on top of her head and grunted "Ohhhh yeeaah…" repeatedly. Allison increased her rhythm and Daryl's grunting utterances became more animal until he finally placed his hands on both sides of her face to stop her. "I can't – I'm gonna -," he rasped.
"I don't mind," Allison started to say, meaning that she was willing to accept his "money shot" in her mouth, but Daryl had other ideas.

"Sshh," he silenced her as he first squirmed out of the garments around his ankles and then pulled her up from the chaise and pulled her sweat pants and underpants down. As he kissed her gently she stepped out of her clothing and allowed Daryl to lay her down onto the bedding. He lay upon her at first, kissing her lips, then her neck, then her right breast, then he reared back onto his haunches. He gently grasped her lower legs and pushed them up toward her backside. She felt uncomfortably exposed with her most intimate area thus splayed, but he shushed her minor protests and bent down to gently kiss her inner thigh. His kisses moved progressively toward the place between her legs and when his tongue began teasing that area she was no longer embarrassed but instead encompassed with waves of pleasure. Her lower back arched involuntarily as she met his probing tongue. She no longer cared if the rest of the camp could hear her cries because she felt So Darned Good.

She'd lost track of how many times she'd spasmed in absolute ecstasy when Daryl came up for air and kissed her and then guided his manhood inside of her. She was dripping wet so he glided easily into her and it didn't take long for him to begin pumping and grinding like the beast she called him as he continued. Only a few moments later he started vocalizing a series of audible grunts which culminated in a major "Arghhohuggh" as he released inside of her. He collapsed on top of her and quickly kissed her several times as he struggled to catch his breath.

"Oh my God," he finally spoke, as he slowly rolled off of her. "That was…unbelievable."

Allison leaned over to kiss him as he lay exhausted, flat on his back. "Extremely. I've never felt anything like that in my life before." She lay on her side, snuggled against him until they both fell into a contented sleep.

She didn't know how many hours had passed when she sensed that Daryl was awake beside her. Her first thought was that they hadn't used a condom and that that was what was bothering him. Surprisingly though, when he spoke, it was something completely different on his mind.

"You awake?" he asked quietly.

"Yeah."

"I was just thinkin'…about what you said about Sophia…"

"Yeah?"

"You really think that her ol' man…well, that he…that she was abused?"

Allison wasn't all that experienced in the art of lovemaking, but it did occur to her that this wasn't typical post-coital conversation. On the other hand, Daryl Dixon wasn't your typical man.

"It was just an educated guess, but for the little time that I spent with her, she did show the textbook symptoms."

"And Carol never did anything about it…" He seemed to be thinking out loud.

"If, and that's a big 'if', I'm right, well, maybe Carol didn't know about it, or she was too afraid to do anything about it..." but Allison realized that she couldn't make a convincing argument speaking out loud. Whether she was right or wrong, her gut feeling still made its presence known.

"A mother is s'posed to protect her child," Daryl muttered.
Allison wondered if Daryl was thinking back to his own childhood, of which she knew little. She'd seen his scars, but had presumed just from the very few remarks he'd made to her that his mother had not been present when either his father or brother had inflicted them. He was very close-mouthed when it came to his upbringing, but Allison had gotten the feeling that maybe Daryl idealized the concept of motherhood and put Mom up on some sort of pedestal.

"I agree," she replied softly, reaching up a hand to stroke his hair which she knew soothed him. He reached an arm around her to pull her closer and a few minutes later his steady breathing told Allison that he'd fallen asleep.

Allison awoke when Daryl stirred at first morning's light. "You go back to sleep, Angel," he whispered.

"No, my name is already mud around here, I'd best get up and help start breakfast," she replied.

They got dressed and Allison headed toward the communal campfire to help prepare breakfast. She and Carol and Lori silently scrambled eggs and fried the last of the Spam and doled it out to the members of their group. Everyone ate in silence, and then Glenn stood up and sort of cleared his throat for attention.

"Um, guys?"

All eyes turned to him expectantly.

He looked uncomfortable being the center of attention, but Dale nodded to him so he continued: "The barn's full of walkers."
The way everyone froze in place reminded Allison of Statues, a game she used to play as a kid during recess. "What?" Shane was the first to speak. "What are you talkin' about?"

"The barn," Glenn repeated, this time looking toward it and gesturing with his head, "there's walkers in the barn. A bunch of 'em."

Everyone abandoned their breakfast and followed Glenn and Shane to the barn in question. Shane walked up to the door and jiggled the padlock and chain loudly. The air was immediately filled with sound of groans and growls coming from within.

"Hell no, this ain't happenin', this ain't right," Shane rubbed his shaved head repeatedly and paced wildly. He stopped and addressed the group. "That's it, we're gettin' out of here. Start packing your shit, we're movin' out today."

"Whoah, hold on," Rick held up his hands and tried to calm Shane down. "We're not going anywhere."

"I'm not leaving until we find Sophia," Carol stated defiantly.

"Then we're getting our guns and defending ourselves."

"No, no, everyone just stay put until I talk to Hershel."

"There is nothing to discuss with Hershel, Rick. You know as well as I do this ain't right, that this is crazy -to have a barnful of geeks so close to camp! ‘Talk to Hershel’…” He spat derisively. "Ain't nuthin' to talk about except are you goin' to defend your family or not?"

"Listen to Rick, let him deal with this," Dale interjected. "Hershel has relatives in the barn – he thinks they're sick and that they'll eventually get better."

"What?" Shane faced Dale with fury in his eyes. "You knew about this, old man? And you didn't say anything?"

"I just found out yesterday. I figured one more night wouldn't do any harm, and it didn't. We're still safe, the barn is still locked."

"Does he seriously think those…people…are going to recover?" Allison asked curiously. "I mean, he's a doctor, did you tell him about the MRI we saw at the CDC? The extent of the brain damage? He'd probably understand if you explain that to him – he obviously should know that the human brain can regenerate itself in appearance but not in function – "

"Maybe it would help if you go with Rick and explain it to him, from a medical standpoint," Dale suggested.

"Would you be willing to?" Rick asked her. "It probably couldn't hurt."

"We can't leave this place," Lori said quietly.

Allison felt overwhelmed with all that was happening suddenly, with the swirl of voices coming from every side. "I suppose I can try…” she said slowly.

"Yeah, right, more talk…always talk…” Shane shook his head. But he reluctantly agreed to not do
anything decisive until Rick had spoken to Hershel.

"In the meantime, we'll post a guard by the barn. We'll take turns like we do for watch duty."

"I'll take the first watch, just let me get my gun," Andrea volunteered and then trotted off to the RV.

"The rest of you stay clear of the barn, just to be on the safe side," Rick commanded.

The crowd slowly broke up and went their separate ways. Daryl approached Allison.

"You goin' now to talk to Hershel?"

"I guess so," she shrugged.

"OK, I'm going to saddle up a horse and try to follow that trail before it gets too cold."

"Horse?" Allison looked up at him with concern, knowing that he was still healing from his last exploration on horseback.

He bristled slightly; despite his feelings for this girl he still didn't like to be told what to do, and he resented any implication that he couldn't take care of himself.

"That was a fluke; snake scared the nag. I won't take the nervous one today."

Allison had noted how he'd tensed up so she didn't push the matter. "OK, it's just that I'm not a rider and horses make me nervous. You just please stay safe." She looked up at him through her lashes with those big blue eyes that never failed to threaten to turn his insides to oatmeal.

"Always do," he gave her his famous half-smile and quickly ruffled her hair with his knuckles. "Good luck talkin' to the old man." He hitched his crossbow over his shoulder and strode off.

Allison followed Rick to the farm house and waited while he knocked on the door.

"Come on in," Hershel's voice beckoned them. He was sitting at the table eating his lunch, a well-worn Bible opened next to his plate.

"Some light reading?" Rick tried to start the conversation off on a jocular note.

"Sometimes there's so much work to be done on the farm I have to get my studying in whenever I can," Hershel replied.

Rick and Allison approached the table. "We'd be glad to help out with whatever chores need doing," Rick offered.

"Thanks, but it's my land and my responsibility."

"We, um, found the barn. We can help you…take care of those walkers."

"Those people you call 'walkers' are my friends and family. My wife and stepson are in there."

"That's not them anymore," Rick grew more agitated, "they're not who they used to be. They're dangerous."

"Paranoid schizophrenics are dangerous. We don't kill them."
"But paranoid schizophrenics can be treated with anti-psychotic medications," Allison interjected. "I don't think there will ever be a drug developed to make your wife and stepson normal again."

"They said the same thing about AIDS at one time," Hershel said to her. "Now they have drugs to treat it."

"To manage the virus, not cure it. And there are no drugs to help the patients who are too far gone – the ones covered with Karposi lesions and who have wasted away to 80 pounds. It has to be diagnosed and caught in time. If a vaccine is ever found for whatever this plague is, it will most probably only be effective on those who haven't turned yet."

"You can't be sure of that," Hershel protested.

"What we can be sure of right now," Rick placed both his hands on the table and leaned toward the older man, "is that the walkers are dangerous. I didn't believe it myself until I first got out of the hospital and half a girl tried to bite me. That's right, her bottom half was completely missing but she was still crawling and trying to attack me."

"Mr. Hershel," Allison tried to reason with the vet, "we saw an MRI while we were at the CDC. It was a scan of a patient who was sick with the fever and had volunteered to be studied. The disease invaded and destroyed almost the entire brain before the patient died. All that was left was basically the brain stem when the patient reanimated. You and I both know that when there is that much brain damage it's hopeless. The walkers have some motor ability, they can see and hear and smell and have the instinct to find food and that's it. And there is no reasonable explanation for that, considering the complete destruction of the cerebrum and cerebellum. But it's pretty much guaranteed that they'll never speak or reason or read or write or in any way go back to being the people they were before."

"With all due respect, young lady," Hershel replied, "you yourself just admitted that that's all speculation. If the brain was that damaged, then the victims shouldn't be able to see or hear, much less walk. We don't know what the future holds, but I believe with all my heart that God holds the future."

Allison sighed, realizing that the man was steadfast and wouldn't be swayed. Rick, on the other hand, went into panic mode and played his trump card. "You don't know what it's like out there! You're isolated here on the farm. Dale says that all you know is what you heard on the radio broadcasts before they stopped. Well I'm here to tell you that I've been out there and I've seen what the world's like. And we have no chance if you make us leave. My wife is pregnant; now that's either a death sentence if we are forced to leave or a blessing if we're allowed to stay. I'm begging you to reconsider your position."

Hershel was silent for several minutes. Finally he spoke. "I'll need some time to think on it. I have to be honest, I consider you to be a man of conscience, but I'm not so sure about every member of your group. If I were to let you stay I'd need to feel comfortable and secure in the knowledge that my rules would be strictly followed."

"I can arrange that," Rick said evenly.

Suddenly Jimmy burst in through the front door. "Hershel! It's happening again!"

Hershel stood up from the table. "Rick, can I trust you to come help me with something?"

Rick was already heading to the door. "Of course, anything."
"Can I help?"

"Thank you, but I just need Rick right now." The three men rushed out of the house and Allison stood staring at the door in confusion, not quite understanding what had just happened.

"Is Hershel done eating?" a voice inquired from behind her. Allison turned to see Patricia standing on the far side of the table.

"I guess so," she replied, shrugging. "Jimmy just ran in here, said that something was 'happening' and then he took off with Hershel and Rick."

"He's done, then," Patricia said as she started to clear the dishes.

"Here, let me help," Allison picked up the silverware and the half-empty wine glass. "Is this red wine?" she asked as they walked to the sink. "I thought Mr. Hershel didn't allow liquor in the house."

"He doesn't," Patricia replied, turning on the tap and filling the dishpan. "It's fruit punch, made from a powder mix."

"Oh."

"I think he misses his wine, though, or maybe he just thinks it adds a touch of class, 'cause he always drinks it from a stemmed glass."

"My grandma used to do that all the time, whether she was drinking orange juice or milk. I used to tell her that that's why God created Dixie cups…I swear she only used all that fancy glassware just so I had to do more dishes…"

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

While Rick and Allison were having their discussion with Hershel, Daryl was in the stable getting ready to set off on his search. He was fitting the bridle and reins onto a chestnut mare when Carol entered the building.

"Did Hershel say it was OK for you to go out?" she asked him.

"Hershel ain't my doctor," he replied as he attempted to hoist the saddle over the mare's back. He winced in pain and set the saddle back on the ground.

"You're still hurt," Carol commiserated. "You shouldn't go." She paused and then said quietly "We don't know if she's still out there…I don't know."

Daryl's eyes narrowed and he took a few steps toward Carol. Despite the fury she saw in his face, she resisted the urge to step back, away from him.

"What?" he asked, as if he couldn't believe what he'd just heard.

"I can't lose you, too," Carol replied in a small voice, tears welling up in her eyes.

He stood in place for a moment, processing her words. Not only had she lost faith in Sophia ever returning, now she was pulling some sort of possessive shit? He wasn't hers to "lose." What the hell was she thinking?

His mind reeling, his anger boiling over, he picked up the saddle and violently threw it aside, aggravating the injury in his side even more in the process. As he crouched over in pain, Carol took
a few steps toward him. "Leave me be!" he commanded, waving her off with his hand. "Stupid bitch," he muttered as he exited the stable.

His first instinct was to find Allison…he was loathe to admit it to himself, but nothing brought him more comfort than when he sat slouched on the chaise in her tent with his back against her, his head tucked under her chin and her fingers gently stroking his hair. He'd talk about things he'd previously never said out loud before…but it was easy because he wasn't looking at anyone and she never judged or criticized, just mainly offered understanding "Mm-hmms" in between gently rubbing his scalp and occasionally massaging his tense shoulders. Once in a while she'd relate one of what he teasingly called her "boring" stories, but her anecdotes did usually have a point that related to whatever stream-of-consciousness thought he vocalized. Luckily Merle's voice calling him a "pussy" had popped up in his head less and less lately, and he was able to relax and enjoy Allison's tender ministrations. As a rule he'd never been able to abide someone touching him, much less hugging or cuddling him, but it was all so different with this woman. Her touch, her smell, the way she always smiled and looked pleased when he approached – unlike everyone else in the camp and in his whole goddamned life who automatically tensed up in his presence. He remembered how terrified he was, how he fretted, before presenting her with that necklace he'd chosen just for her at the pawn shop. But she didn't laugh at him or criticize it – no, she'd complimented him for remembering that her favorite color was purple. And he noted with pride that she'd worn that necklace every day and night since he'd given it to her, and that she unconsciously reached up and touched it every time he called her "Angel."

Yep, that's just what he needed right now…Allison to soothe him and listen to his jumbled feelings about Carol. How he now regretted calling her a "bitch" and how he was concerned about her talking about "losing" him. What the hell did that mean? Allison would come up with some explanation as to why his yelling at Carol didn't make him a complete asshole and that he would eventually have to apologize to her. He knew deep down what was "right" – and doing something because Allison advised him to didn't mean that he was taking orders from a woman – but sometimes it was good to bounce ideas and thoughts off of someone before taking action.

"Knock-knock," he called outside of Allison's tent. Receiving no response he poked his head inside. It was empty. He pulled his head out and walked toward the center of the camp, craning his neck to survey the area. She was nowhere to be found. He was about to ask Dale, who was diligently perched atop the Winnebago, if he'd seen her but then it occurred to him that probably the discussion with Hershel was still dragging on. She was most likely still inside the farmhouse with Rick. He sighed and decided to do some searching on foot, maybe take another look at that old house he'd found before with the pillow and blanket in the cupboard.

He was stealthily approaching the abandoned building when he heard a rustling in the nearby weeds and bushes. He pivoted and pointed his crossbow, but lowered it when Carol stepped out into the clearing.

"Hi," she said timidly.

"Hey," he responded, confused.

She stepped closer to him, arms crossed beneath her breasts hugging herself, as if she was fearful. Well, Daryl thought, he couldn't blame her for being nervous; he'd been vicious with her not an hour earlier.

"What are you doin' wanderin' out here all alone?" he finally asked her.

"I just wanted to tell you…." she hesitated and then reached out to a flowering plant nearby. She gently fingered a Cherokee Rose bloom. "I wanted to apologize for not believing in you before."
Daryl's stomach turned just slightly; how sad was this, he thought – the woman he'd cussed at so thoughtlessly now apologizing to him. He mentally pictured a beaten dog licking the hand of the man who held the whip. "'S nuthin'," he murmured. He studied her for a moment, cleared his throat and then spoke again. "I, uh, I'm sorry for what I said earlier."

Carol looked up at him as if he'd just handed her a silver angel necklace. "She's out there. I know she is. You'll find her."

Daryl suddenly felt vastly uncomfortable being alone with Carol and stated "Um, Rick must be waitin' for me to go over the new search grid. We best get back to camp."

As the pair approached the farmhouse they heard some commotion. Shane was carrying the gun bag and shouting. Allison, Patricia, Maggie and Glenn were on the porch, looking confused at the hubbub.

"I thought we weren't allowed to carry," T-Dog questioned as he accepted a gun from Shane.

"Where's Rick?" asked Andrea. "He was supposed to meet us by the Jeep about an hour ago."

"It's time we stopped screwing around - the time has come for action," Shane replied, tossing her a handgun. "You – you gonna protect your own?" he asked Glenn, handing him a rifle. Glenn reflexively accepted the weapon, then turned to Maggie questioningly. "Here," Shane said, handing Daryl another rifle.

"Can you please stop?" Maggie called to Shane. "My father will kick you off this property before nightfall if you don't put these guns away."

"Shane, you do not have the authority to do this!" Lori shouted.

"What the hell is that?" T-Dog's voice carried over all the others. The group looked in the direction he was pointing. The tableau seemed surreal: Hershel, Rick and Jimmy were leading two walkers to the camp with looped sticks that Allison's dad had always called "come-alongs". 
"Now see? This is what I'm talkin' about!" Shane shouted as he marched toward the struggling trio.

"Why do your people have guns?" Hershel called to Rick.

"Shane, just stay back, hold on," Rick kept trying to calm his friend down.

"No Rick, I'm not gonna hold on, you're the one who's holdin' on – to a fantasy." Shane walked up to one of the leashed walkers. "Lemme ask you, Hershel, could a real live person survive this?" He fired two gunshots into the being. "That's two shots to the heart and lungs and it's still up and moving. Real people cannot live through this," and he emptied three more rounds into the geek before finally finishing it off with a head shot. "These ain't people, old man, these are killers."

"Shane!" Lori's voice could be heard in the background.

"Hershel, take the snare pole!" Rick called, holding the lead out to old vet. "Hershel!" Rick yelled, trying to get the man's attention. Hershel stood as if in a coma, watching as Shane grabbed a pickaxe and ran to the barn door.

"Things ain't like they used to be, Rick!" he hollered as he bashed away at the padlock. "We can't exist next to a barnful of things that's tryin' to kill us! We've got to do what's necessary to live!" He pivoted and put a bullet through the head of the walker Rick was trying to control. Rick dropped the pole and kept calling out to Shane, trying to get him to stop. One final whack with the pick and one of chains fell off the door. It opened up about six inches and a walker clad in tattered overalls started shuffling out.

Andrea was the first to run up and stand next to Shane with her gun extended. Bang! The first walker went down, but two more were right behind him. Daryl and T-Dog stepped up to the firing line, followed by Glenn, who'd hesitated but went ahead when Maggie nodded her consent. The air was filled with the sound of gunshots, and the walkers kept tripping out, two and three at a time.

"How many are in there?" Allison wondered, standing back from the fray. "I thought it was just Hershel's wife and stepson…." She heard whimpering to her right and saw Beth crying in Jimmy's arms. Hershel had crumpled to the ground and was kneeling with a pained expression on his face as the massacre continued. A century later, a minute later – time had somehow simultaneously stood still and raced by – the shooting had ceased and the only sound was Beth and Carl weeping softly. The air was filled with the smell of gunpowder and putrid, decayed flesh. No one spoke and everyone slowly lowered their weapons.

Suddenly a soft noise coming from within the barn caught everyone's attention. They all stared at the door with looks of confusion and dread on their faces. A scrawny sneaker-clad ankle emerged into the daylight. There was an audible gasp among the group when a familiar rainbow T-shirt started staggering toward them. Allison heard someone murmur "Oh, no" and then Carol began calling out "Sophia!" hysterically as she ran toward her daughter. Daryl caught her around the waist and held her back. They slowly sunk to the ground, Carol's tear-stained face twisted in agony and Daryl's arm protectively wrapped around her.

The young girl growled and rasped and slowly approached the group. Rick finally took a few steps forward, raised his gun and fired. The tiny body collapsed in a heap. "Don't look, don't look," Allison heard Daryl repeating to Carol. The grieving woman stood up, broke away from his grasp and ran off toward the RV. Seconds later Beth ran sobbing to the pile of bodies and attempted to
embrace one that was covered by another. As she pulled the body of her mother loose the corpse growled and reached for her. Glenn and Rick snatched Beth out of the way while Andrea and T-Dog pummeled the walker's skull into submission.

Shane followed Hershel, his daughters and Rick toward the house, all the while loudly accusing Hershel of having known all along that Sophia was in the barn. Andrea disappeared into the barn for a few minutes then came out with several old saddle blankets. She covered Sophia with one, and handed another to Allison to use for Hershel's wife, Annette.

"Guess I'd better find some shovels," T-Dog sighed.

"You're gonna bury 'em all?" Jimmy asked. "That's a lot of graves."

"We bury the ones we love and burn the rest," Andrea told him.

"We're gonna need a truck for the bodies," T-Dog said as he came back carrying six shovels in his two massive hands.

"I'll get it," Shane, who had rejoined the fold after a vicious verbal fight with Hershel, volunteered.

"Um," Lori pondered the horizon and then said "Why don't we bury Sophia, Annette and Shawn over there, by those trees?" Allison noted that even though Lori had said "we", as soon as she'd uttered the words she trotted off to catch up with Rick, leaving the others to handle the grunt work.

"Typical," she thought to herself, picking up a shovel.

"We should have a service," Andrea suggested. "Carol would want that."

"We all want that," T-Dog agreed.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

Hours later, Allison handed her shovel up to Jimmy, who had climbed out first and then helped to lift her out of the hole they'd just dug. She was sweating, covered with filth and her arms and back ached. "I'm going to rinse off at the pump right quick, if y'all don't mind."

T-Dog threw a last blade full of dirt to the side and wiped his brow. "Go on ahead. We're about done here except for the….fillin' in."

"That always goes quicker than the digging," Andrea remarked grimly. Sadly, that was a lesson they'd learned back at the quarry. "If you don't mind," she glanced at Allison, "why don't you stop by the Winnebago after you're cleaned up and let Carol know that we'll be ready soon." Digging graves was hard enough, but no one really wanted to be the one to face Carol right now.

"Sure, I'll take care of it," Allison responded. When she got to the pump she filled a large bucket and then bathed her dusty face and arms. She looked around surreptitiously, saw no one nearby, so she lifted her shirt up to her neck and splashed the cool water on her chest and torso. It occurred to her, as she went to empty the pail, that she hadn't seen Daryl since the incident at the barn. She wondered where he'd gone off to and whether she should check his tent. She knew that he would be upset. Instead she decided to first go speak to Carol.

Allison paused at the bottom of the steps and took a deep breath. She climbed up and stepped inside the door without knocking or announcing herself. She saw Carol sitting in a chair by the table, gazing out the window. As she stepped further inside she noticed that Daryl was perched across from her, silently watching her. "So that's where he disappeared to," she thought to herself.
She cleared her throat and then said "Um, we're just about ready…for the service." She looked first at Carol, who kept staring out the window, and then at Daryl, who never removed his eyes from Carol.

"I'm not going," it was almost a whisper. "Why should I?"

Daryl's eyes narrowed. "'Cause that's your little girl."

"That's not my little girl. It's some other... thing. My Sophia was lost in the woods. All this time, I thought. But she didn't go hungry. She didn't cry herself to sleep. She didn't try to find her way back. Sophia died a long time ago." A single tear slowly rolled down Carol's cheek.

"Well..." Allison drawled, "Please think on it for a little bit. You don't want to regret...um, your decision... later." She looked at Daryl and he finally met her eyes. He gave a small nod and Allison departed.

When the group formed a semi-circle around the three graves, Daryl was there but Carol was not. Beth's sobs drowned out many of the words Rick was saying in a shaky voice. Carl seemed very grown up when he stepped forward and spoke of his friendship with Sophia. The camp was silent for a moment and then a soft voice began singing a familiar hymn:

Some glad morning when this life is o'er, I'll fly away.

It was Patricia. When she got to the next line, Hershel and Maggie joined in.

To a home on God's celestial shore, I'll fly away.

Most church-going Southerners knew the words, so T-Dog, Allison, Rick, Lori, Jimmy and Dale sang along - timidly at first, then their voices grew stronger:

Just a few more weary days and then,
I'll fly away;
To a land where joy shall never end,
I'll fly away.

I'll fly away, Oh Glory
I'll fly away; (in the morning)
When I die, Hallelujah, by and by,
I'll fly away (I'll fly away).

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

No one presumed that Carol would eat dinner that night, much less help to prepare it, so Lori and Dale built a fire and Allison scraped together what was left of the squirrel meat they had on hand and went to work making some sort of palatable meal. Everyone just picked at their food, anyway. Who could have much of an appetite after everything that had happened that day? Nevertheless, once Andrea and Lori started cleaning up Allison prepared a small plate to take to Daryl. She wasn't surprised that he'd skipped dinner, but he did need to keep his strength up. Besides, it gave her an excuse to go see him. She sighed as she walked to his tent; after everything that had gone on between them, suddenly she needed an "excuse" to visit Daryl? She hadn't thought he could intimidate her anymore, but seeing his face in the RV earlier as he stared at Carol, along with his stony expression at the funeral, had changed her mind.

She was so lost in thought that it took her several minutes to realize that Daryl's tent was not where it usually was. Neither was Merle's motorcycle. There was now just a wide space with some
trampled grass, the only indication that someone had lived here recently. She took a few steps around, pivoting her head, searching the area with her eyes. Where had he gone? And how had he packed up and left with no one noticing? That was stupid, she mentally chastised herself; years of hunting and stalking had of course made him stealthy, and, Allison suspected, much like Sophia Daryl had had a troubled childhood and had long ago learned to make himself almost invisible.

She was about to return to the cooking area when something far in the distance caught her eye. A tiny puff of smoke. She started walking toward it and as she eventually grew closer she saw it – Daryl's tent. She slowed her pace and observed the crumbling remains of a stone fireplace, a small campfire glowing in front of it. The Triumph was parked a few feet away. Well, at least he'd hadn't flown the coop entirely, Allison thought. Still, she was hurt that he'd pulled up stakes and moved so far away without saying a word to her. She considered just quietly going back to camp but then she remembered the plate of food in her hand. Oh, what the heck, she thought as she walked up to his tent flap. I've got nothing to lose but my dignity, and I pretty much lost that the first time I had to use milkweed leaves for toilet paper.

"Knock knock," she called out hesitantly.

"Come on in," was the immediate reply. He didn't seem surprised to see her. He was sitting on his cot, futzing with his crossbow.

"I brought you some – " Allison looked down at the unappetizing plate in her hands – "cold squirrel. You missed dinner, such as it was."

"Ain't hungry," he mumbled without looking up.

Her main reason for visiting shot down, Allison fumbled for something else to say. Finally she simply apologized, "OK, sorry to have bothered you," and turned as if to exit.

"Didn't say you should leave," Daryl said, setting the crossbow and rag down on the floor of the tent.

Allison set the congealing plate on a tiny makeshift table set up against the opposite wall of his tent. She turned to face him, but he had his face down in his hands, which were propped up on his knees.

"I know you're upset about Sophia…" she said softly. "You did everything you could to find her. I really thought that she'd found another group. You mustn't blame yourself – "

Daryl sat upright suddenly and slapped his hands on his thighs. "You don't get it!" he shouted. He stood up and began pacing the little distance there was within the tent walls. "You don't…I can't…I just…." He sat down again and ran his hand across his face and through his hair. When he finally spoke again it was in measured phrases, his eyes looking down at his boots. "It's not just about Sophia. Yeah, it breaks my heart that that little girl is gone, that her mama will never see her again…." He was almost hyperventilating. He paused, caught his breath, and continued. "It's…it's you."

"What?" Allison asked, her voice a mere whisper. "Did I do something? I didn't mean – "

"Yeah you did something," he stomped a foot and then looked upward at the ceiling. "You made me care! I ain't never…. Oh, God, when I saw Carol's face today all I could think about was what if that'd been you? What if I'd lost you? Carol has to go on every day now without her little girl…I don't know if I could bear it if it was me. It hurts to think about – I'm talking feelin' actual pain right here." He placed his hand over his upper abdomen.
Daryl stood up and cut Allison off. He began pacing again. "No!" he shouted. "That's why you should never feel….never get close to someone. All they do is leave you! They all do eventually."

"So what is your solution, then?" Allison asked quietly. She wondered if Daryl had been expecting some sort of female burst of emotion, because her question seemed to catch him short. He paused in his pacing and said "Huh?" She bit her tongue to restrain herself from retorting "Another witty comeback from Daryl Dixon."

"What is the solution to never again feeling any emotional pain, feeling that burning heaviness here" - she placed her palm on her chest - "like you've been gut shot? You live in a vacuum, never getting close to anyone or anything, ever again? What kind of life would that be? To never have felt the embrace of another human, or the joy of a dog climbing into your lap and licking your face? That's like living on broccoli and carrots and never, ever having a steak or slice of cheesecake just so you can live an extra couple of years. 'Oh, I lived to a ripe old age without any pain..'" she finished in a mocking voice. "But was it really living?"

Daryl sat down with a heavy sigh on his cot, but he sat close enough to one end that Allison recognized the invitation to come sit next to him. She gingerly scooted up against him and ever so gently placed her right hand on top of his head, intertwining her fingers in his hair.

"I've got news for you, Daryl," she said softly, "we're all terminal. No one lives forever. Some folks die before their time, like my parents, like Sophia, like the people in the World Trade Center…." She pulled his head closer and kissed his temple. He didn't pull away, so she continued speaking almost directly into his ear. "That's just the way it goes, life is what you make it. Sometimes there's pain – sometimes you fall off of a horse onto an arrow. Sometimes someone you care for dies. But you have to consider what came before – didn't the hope of finding Sophia give you a good feeling, a sense of purpose, a – a – reason for getting out of bed in the morning?" Daryl sighed and closed his eyes. "I'll tell you something else," Allison continued, this time turning his head so that he faced her. She waited until he opened his eyes and then she spoke. "If I had some sort of magic wand or time machine that could transport me back to a time before all this happened, back when I was safe in my little apartment in Durham with its indoor plumbing and pizza delivery and no worries about being attacked by some flesh-craving monster….I wouldn't use it. I am dead serious – given the choice, I would not go back to that world if it meant not being with you."

Daryl leaned forward so that his forehead touched Allison's. He closed his eyes and whispered so softly that she had to strain to hear it, "I love you."
Chapter 22

Allison's heart did a tiny somersault – she'd just about given up hope of ever hearing those words fall from Daryl's lips. But just as soon as it finished its flip-flop it was gripped by icy fingers of self-doubt – what if he'd only said that because he was of Sophia's death? Maybe he was just feeling vulnerable and guilty for not finding her, and….oh, darn it all, she silently scolded herself. Do you always have to over-think everything?

She lifted her chin and gently kissed his forehead. "I love you, too," she said. She sat back slightly and picked up his hand, entwining his fingers with hers. "I was worried when I saw that your tent was gone. I thought you'd left us."

"No," he sighed, "Just needed some space. Didn't feel like facing everyone. I let 'em down, 'specially Carol…"

"You didn't let anyone down," Allison squeezed his hand for emphasis. "You were out there every day searching for Sophia, even when you were hurt. You never gave up. It's not your fault that – well, that what happened happened."

"Still…" he was obviously still wrestling with this; he was not going to let go easily. "Carol was countin' on me. I shouldn't a told her that Sophia would be just fine…"

"Otis died, when? The day after Sophia got lost? That means that he probably found her and put her in the barn some time the same day she ran off. It probably means that, unfortunately, she'd already been bitten by the time we got organized and went out searching for her the first time."

Daryl ran his other hand through his hair in frustration. "At least if she hadn't been locked away in that barn we woulda found her and not risked the group searchin' every day." It was typical of Daryl not to mention what his own search efforts had cost him – almost puncturing a lung and then getting shot by Andrea. He rarely worried about his own safety.

"Carol knows that you did your best to find her daughter. She even told you so, that you'd done more for her than her own father…"

"How'd you know she said that?" His eyes narrowed. "You were out of the room when she was with me. You got bionic ears or somethin'?"

Oops. Geez, not only did nothing escape this man's notice, Allison thought to herself, he also had the memory of an elephant. "Um, I must've overheard her when I was out in the hallway." She could tell by his knowing look that she'd somehow been retroactively caught eavesdropping. "Anyway, Carol doesn't blame you for anything…"

"You don't know that for sure. You weren't there to 'overhear' when she was talkin' to me just this morning, out by that old abandoned house…she told me that she knew I'd find Sophia."

Now is not the time to feel jealous, Allison told herself….so Daryl was off in the woods somewhere with Carol. It was entirely innocent. Most likely. Right? Oh, All right, true confessions time; recently she'd had a pang of doubt or two where Carol was concerned. She seemed to always be looking at Daryl and wanting to do things for him…and now she's chatting privately with him in the woods. Oh, stop it! Allison chastised herself. You're worrying about a woman old enough to be his mother. What could he possibly see in her? Of course, by the same token, what did Prince Charles see in Camilla Parker-Bowles….?
"Um," she struggled to focus her mind on the conversation at hand. "She was clinging to hope, which was all she had at the time. And you gave that hope to her at a time when no one else did." She let go of his hand and gently patted his cheek. "I know I can't undo a lifetime of negative conditioning with one 20-minute pep talk, but I sincerely hope that someday soon you will start to see yourself as the rest of us do. Or as most of the rest of us do. Besides keeping us fed and protected, you've got a level head on your shoulders. I'm not saying you don't have a temper and go off half-cocked sometimes, but when it comes to important decisions that affect the group as a whole, you've got more common sense than Rick and Shane combined."

"'Negative conditioning'? I don't need my head shrunk. 'Sides, I didn't think psychology was your specialty." He was embarrassed by her praise and did his best to deflect it.

Allison smiled and stood up, picking up the untouched plate of squirrel. "I guess you must be feeling a little bit better, since you're starting to get ornery. I'll take this back while they're still doing dishes and give you a break from my Sigmund Freud routine."

"Would you – " Daryl began to speak then stopped suddenly. Allison paused at the tent door and turned to look at him. "Uh, would you stay with me tonight?" he asked her.

"I thought you wanted to get away, get some space, that's why you moved out here."

"Away from them, not from you," he said shyly, suddenly preoccupied with an imaginary hangnail.

"If I won't crowd you, then sure. Lemme take this plate back and stop by my tent to get my toothbrush…"

He stood up. "I'll come with and help you carry your stuff. Best you ain't walking around alone, anyway."

As they walked back toward camp Allison wondered why she'd need help carrying a toothbrush. Wait a minute…was the redneck hunter hinting that he'd like her to stay for more than the night? She tried to suppress a small shudder of excitement… Don't get carried away, she told herself…it's not like he'd actually came out and asked her to move in with him or anything…

There was an animated discussion going on around the campfire as they approached. Allison heard Maggie saying something to Glenn about "not going" and Rick telling her that he'd bring him back safely. "What's up?" she asked Andrea, who was standing nearby.

"Hershel's missing," she replied.

"Missing? What do you mean? The camp isn't that big…"

"No," T-Dog explained, "One of the cars is missing; they're thinkin' he went into town on a bender or something."

"Didn't know the old man was a drinker," Daryl commented.

"He used to be," Maggie interjected. "He quit the day I was born, though."

"So, what's the emergency?" Daryl asked. "Let him have a few belts. He's had a bad day. We all have."

"If he hasn't had a drink in 20 years or so, the stuff could hit him pretty hard," Allison mused.

"That's what I'm thinkin'," Rick agreed. "He could hurt himself. I think Glenn and I should drive
into town and bring him back."

"Why Glenn?" Maggie asked.

"He knows his way there, he's been there before."

"I don't want you to go, dad," Carl piped up.

"I'll be fine, you don't need to worry about me," Rick tried to assure him.

"But what about mom?" the boy asked. "She needs an operation and you should be here."

Everyone turned to look at Carl in confusion. Rick finally spoke. "What are you talking about? What makes you think your mother needs an operation?"

"I heard Allison say the other day that mom needs to have a big stick removed from her butt," the youngster said earnestly.

T-Dog, Daryl and Maggie burst out in laughter. Andrea and Glenn at least had the good grace to somewhat stifle their guffaws. Allison closed her eyes and willed the ground to open up and swallow her.

"Heh-heh," she tried to muster up a convincing chuckle, "The lad must have misunderstood something he overheard." She patted Carl's head.

"Yes, I'm sure that's the case," Rick replied, and Daryl could've sworn that the sheriff was trying not to smile as he said it.

He returned his attention to Glenn and continued to make plans for heading into town and Allison grabbed Daryl's wrist and quickly led him to her tent. He was still laughing as they stepped inside and he sat down on her chaise. Well, Allison thought as she threw a few things into her call bag, at least the kid lightened Daryl's mood a bit.

"Here, might as well bring your sleeping bag," he squatted down and started rolling it up. "Women are always cold at night, ain't they?" He looked around. "What else will you need? You got clothes and stuff?"

"Um," she hesitantly replied, unsure of how to approach the topic…was he asking her to move in with him after all? "I've got enough for tomorrow in this bag. We don't want to have to carry too much, you're already bogged down with that sleeping bag and pillow and…" She watched as he picked up her duffel, which was heavy with clothes and rifles.

"We can come back and get the rest tomorrow," he stated gruffly as he held the tent flap open for her. "You comin' or what? It's getting' late and I ain't got all night…"
Chapter 23

A little less than two hours after Daryl and Allison had arrived back at his tent with her belongings
the two were sitting outside by the ruins of that stone fireplace, looking for all the world like a
post-apocalyptic Norman Rockwell painting. He was carving ash tree branches into makeshift bolts
and she was darning the torn knee of one of his few pairs of pants.

When they'd first plopped down their armfuls of Allison's stuff just outside of his tent, Daryl had
stepped inside and removed the mattress from his cot. He tossed it to the tent floor, folded the
metal bed frame and brought it outside. "We'll put your camping pad next to that," he gestured with
his head, "and then throw your sleeping bag and my covers on top."

She could see that he was attempting to fashion a double bed for the two of them, but she still felt
guilty. A metal cot was not a pillow-top Beautyrest mattress, but it was still probably more
comfortable than a pad on the ground. "Are you sure you – " she began to ask before he cut her off.

"'S fine," he stated definitely.

After the bedding had been arranged, Allison began to pick up his discarded clothing from the tent
floor with the intent of both making more room and to also start a laundry pile. She noticed a rip
across the knee of one of his pair of cargo pants and set it aside so that she could repair it. Oddly
enough, she had a fairly elaborate sewing kit stashed away in one of her bags – one of those that
she'd packed for a trip years ago and had never unpacked, and had just continually added things to
(like hotel shampoos, shoeshine rags, notebooks, pens, Crazy Glue - whatever caught a closeted
hoarder's fancy) and always carried it when traveling because, well, by now it had pretty much
everything.

So, lacking a TV set and a living room, that's how they ended up like Ma and Pa Kettle, sitting
outside around the glowing embers of a small campfire and making idle conversation while he
whittled and she darned. She'd cut a clean piece out of that old bloodied T-shirt she'd used as a
makeshift bandage on T-Dog that day on the highway and used it as a backing to mend Daryl's
slacks with a darning stitch she'd learned at her grandmother's knee so many years ago.

"Maybe you can teach me what kind of branches to collect for you so you can make more bolts," she commented without looking up from her work.

"Gotta be hardwoods," he replied while carefully carving the tip of a limb into a sharp point. "Ash
is probably best, then beech or black walnut. No oak, though. Tends to split."

"I've got some Crazy Glue if you need it for the feathers."

"That's called 'fletching,'" he replied. "Could probably use some glue, thanks. Maybe that friend of
yours will part with some chicken feathers."

"Friend?"

"That quiet woman – Otis' widow."

"Oh, Patricia," Allison nodded. "I'm sure she would, she's very nice. She gave me a little chunk of
her homemade lard the other day and told me that Hershel wouldn't mind if I used some of the
vegetables from his garden. Said that as a rule they grew more than they use. I was thinking I could
use some of that lard to fry up some turnip and collard greens one night to go with our squirrel."
She paused and sighed wistfully. "I know it's not healthy, but I did used to love my Granny's greens
cooked up with a big ol' hunk of fatback…"

"Don't think we need to worry 'bout cholesterol much these days," Daryl commented. "I ain't had proper greens in I don't know how long…my Ma used to…"

His voice drifted off. Allison knew by now that if Daryl wanted to talk about his family or his youth, he would. She wouldn't press him. Instead, she remarked "I always loved eating fresh vegetables, but I truly hated the work involved. Especially potatoes…hilling the soil then going back and digging them up…of course it was always the hottest day of the year whenever Granny sent me out to work in the garden…"

"Pa used to send Merle 'n me out to pick corn when it was ready. 'Course Merle would just sit and smoke cigarettes where Pa couldn't see him and make me pick all the corn."

Allison picked up her scissors and snipped a thread. "Some of my friends in school when I was a kid had older sisters who were downright nasty to them. I remember in the third grade Arlene Boyd told me that whenever her mom left her older sister Linda to babysit her that Linda would just lock her in the closet until she heard their mom's car pull up in the driveway. Then there was this other kid…Andre something… Anyway, his parents were apparently recent immigrants from Germany or Austria. I just remember that a group of us had to stay after school for a few minutes this one day, not for anything bad, we weren't being punished…but anyway I still remember Andre's father storming into the classroom and yelling in broken English and actually smacking that poor kid in the face in front of everyone. He'd apparently thought Andre had misbehaved or something…" She shuddered and returned to her sewing. "Anyway, I think that it was that year – third grade – when I realized that every family was different and there were some that were downright weird. Well, weird at least compared to my limited experience. It wasn't until I was in high school and would watch Oprah while doing my homework that I learned that the technical term was dysfunctional." She snipped a last thread and held Daryl's pants up to inspect her handiwork. "Of course, once I really got out into the world and met different people at college and at the hospital, it seemed like no one's family was like the Huxtables or the Bradys, so who is to say what the heck really is dysfunctional?"

Daryl held up the branch he'd been carving at arm's length to inspect it. He then returned it to his lap and very delicately whittled away at some imperfections near the tip. "You wanna talk dysfunctional, there's plenty of it goin' on right here…between Lori and her husband and Shane, and the way they always push away and ignore the boy…"

"Speaking of Lori," Allison observed as she stood up and began folding Daryl's slacks. The sheriff's wife was striding toward them purposefully.

"Moving to the suburbs?" Lori asked as she approached.

Before either of them could reply she continued: "Listen, Beth's in some kind of catatonic shock... We need Hershel."

"Yeah?" Daryl replied warily, "So what?"

"So I need you to run into town real quick and bring him and Rick back."

Allison mentally noted that, as per usual, there was no "please" forthcoming; that Lori's dictate was not a request but an order.

"What's wrong with you? How can you be so selfish?" Lori had the gall to be offended.

"Selfish?" Daryl stood up and leaned angrily into Lori's face. "Listen to me, Olive Oyl. I was out there looking for that little girl every single day. I took an arrow and a bullet in the process. Don't you tell me about getting my hands dirty! You want those two idiots? Have a nice ride. I'm done looking for people."

Lori looked at Allison when she heard the blonde woman giggle at the "Olive Oyl" remark. Allison cleared her throat and tried to compose herself.

"Would you at least come take a look at Beth?" Lori asked her.

"Sure, just lemme grab my bag," Allison said as she stepped into the tent and deposited Daryl's slacks near his pile of clean laundry and then picking up her call bag.

"You shouldn't be walkin' alone like this," Daryl told her.

"I'm with Lori, and I've got my machete," Allison replied. "Be back directly."

Beth was lying on the bed, staring upward at the ceiling. "Her pulse is racing and she seems to have a fever," Andrea told Allison.

"The way she just stares and doesn't react when we talk to her," Lori commented, "I think she might be in a coma or something."

Allison didn't bother to give Lori a condescending look after she'd rendered her armchair diagnosis. Instead she spoke to the patient. "Beth? Can you hear me?" Beth didn't respond, but Allison noted that the girl blinked her eyes occasionally, which was unusual but not unheard of in a psychogenic coma. Allison gently picked up Beth's limp right arm by the wrist and held it up perpendicular from her body at shoulder level. She then let it go. As she suspected would happen, Beth manipulated her arm ever so slightly as it fell so that it wouldn't hit her face.

"She's not comatose," Allison announced to the concerned folks standing around the bed. "She may be suffering from post-traumatic shock, though." Beth didn't move or make a sound. "I could do a further test," Allison continued, speaking loudly so that Beth would hear, "just to make sure. It involves squirting cold water into the ear canal. If she's not truly comatose, it will induce immediate vomiting. It's a brain stem reaction."

The mention of vomit seemed to stir Beth somewhat out of her catatonic state. She squirmed slightly on the bed and moaned.

"Without access to psychotropic drugs…to be honest, the best remedy is probably to have her dad comfort her." She looked up at Maggie. "You can try in the meantime, but she'd probably benefit best from Hershel talking to her, comforting her…his voice and touch will probably trigger happy memories that will slowly bring her back."

Allison stood up and prepared to leave. "If she refuses food or drink after another hour or so, you might want to start an IV to keep her hydrated, since she's running a fever," she told Patricia. "Other than that, the only remedy is time."

"Dammit, woman, I thought I told you not to be walkin' around camp alone, 'specially when it's
"startin' to get dark," Daryl chastised Allison when she came back to what was now "their" tent.

"I'm carrying a weapon, and I made it back just fine," she reminded him.

"This is what I get for gettin' all caught up with some woman," he growled, "you're gonna drive me to distraction."

"Oh, you know you love frettin' over me and being my big ol' protector," Allison teased him in an exaggerated drawl as she collapsed into his arms and snuggled her head underneath his chin.

He kissed the top of her head and then asked, "How is the girl?"

"Beth? Physically she's OK. She is, however, suffering from some post-traumatic shock after seeing her mother….well, you know. Anyway, there's nothing much that can be done. I'm thinking that once Hershel gets back and talks to her she'll start feeling better. Y'know, if she sees that he's reconciled to Annette's death and he comforts her and gets her to accept that that wasn't really her mother that came out of the barn…"

Daryl sat back down and started slashing at another tree branch, though not as precisely as before.

"What's wrong?" Allison asked softly.

"The barn…it reminds me of Sophia…" he muttered.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to bring up a sore topic…"

"Nah, I'm not talkin' about that…I'm thinkin' more about…well, what you said before about Sophia. About her daddy and…what he did to her…"

"What he MIGHT have done to her," Allison amended. "I told you before, I had no concrete evidence, it was strictly a hunch, and hunches aren't always right…"

"No, but what you said about her, about how she behaved, made sense." He looked up from his whittling. "And Carol let it happen." He clenched the knife until his knuckles went white.

"We don't know that for sure, we don't know anything for sure," Allison sat down beside him and wrapped one arm around his head. "I shouldn't have said anything, I was just thinking out loud at the time and Lori had gotten me all riled up…"

"No, you were right in speakin' up. It's something that should have been noticed, long before Sophia went missin'.' His eyes looked back down at the branch in his hands. "A mother is s'posed to protect her youngin'" he said softly.

Allison sighed. "We don't know what went on in that household. I could be completely off base." She got up, went into the tent and came out with her toothbrush and tube of paste. "But I agree, a mom's main job is to protect her children." She made a point of showing him the machete hanging from her waist before heading off to the water pump to brush her teeth.

While she was gone Carol approached Daryl. "Lori's missing," she said succinctly.

"Yeah?" Daryl asked. "So what?"

"So we don't know where she is," Carol replied.

"Dumb bitch must've gone off lookin' for 'em," he scoffed. "She asked me to go fetch Rick but I told her I was done lookin' for folks."
"And you didn't tell anyone?" Carol asked incredulously.

"Ain't my business," Daryl shrugged.

She stood speechless for a moment, her eyes imploring. He returned to his whittling, indicating that their conversation was finished. Carol finally turned and started back toward the farm house but then she stopped abruptly and spun around. She stepped up to Daryl and blurted, "Don't do this. Please."

He looked at her in confusion.

"I've already lost my girl." It was almost a whimper.

"Yeah, that wasn't my problem, neither," he responded.

Carol's lip quivered and for a moment Daryl thought she might start crying. She heaved a great sigh and walked off into the night.

"Who were you talking to?" Allison asked as she returned to the tent. She'd heard faint voices as she'd approached.

"Carol," Daryl replied succinctly.

"What did she want? She shouldn't be wandering around by herself; she doesn't even carry a weapon, does she?"

"She was askin' after Lori," he said, looking out into the distance where Carol had disappeared. "Apparently she went off lookin' for Rick without telling anybody."

"You're kidding. Three of our people might be missing, and she decides to add to the mix." Allison shook her head. "Wasting gasoline, making people worry, leaving her kid alone again..."

"I ain't worried," Daryl snorted. "She deserves anything that happens to her, runnin' off half-cocked like that."

"Do you think Rick and Glenn are OK? I mean, wouldn't they be back by now otherwise?"

Daryl shrugged, hesitant to vocalize what he was really thinking. "No tellin' what coulda happened in town," he finally said. "Maybe Hershel wasn't at the bar and they're still searching for him."

"Should you go follow Carol and make sure she gets back to the house safely?"

"Nah, she knows better than to be walkin' around alone. I'm not gonna leave you alone because she's being stupid."

"I'll be fine, I can handle a knife and a gun."

"No," he repeated. "I ain't getting involved in all that. Besides, I gotta take watch in a little bit."

"Get involved in all what?"

"I'm not sure. Carol says stuff to me sometimes that I don't understand."

"Like what?" Allison decided that this was going to be interesting.

He paused and looked at his feet. He spoke without looking up. "I dunno, weird stuff about not
wanting to lose me like she lost Sophia…like she's my mama or something…” He glanced at Allison out the corner of his eye. "What's so funny? What're you smiling about?"

"Oh, nothing…except that I don't think Carol's feelings toward you are particularly maternal…”

"What is that s'posed to mean?"

"It means that I think she's got a little crush on you. Maybe more than a little."

"Oh, go on," he waved his arm impatiently in a dismissive gesture.

"I'm serious," Allison insisted.

"What, you got a stash of whiskey or somethin' over by the water pump? You're talkin' crazy. Carol's old enough to be….well, she's not….she can't possibly think of me like that."

"Why not?"

"Quit it, you're just bein' goofy now," he shifted uncomfortably on his feet.

"Oh, please, Daryl Dixon," Allison rolled her eyes, "like you don't know that you're irresistible."

"You don't know what you're talkin' about."

"Oh yes I do," Allison assured him, reaching up to ruffle his hair. "You've always got your rippling biceps on display, you've got the world's most gorgeous eyes and you've got that whole 'bad boy' thing going on. The type of guy mothers warn their daughters about. The kind of guy they put on the cover of those Harlequin romance novels."

"Get outta here," he replied, playfully swatting at her. But Allison noted that he'd squared up his shoulders and puffed out his chest a bit as he said it. "I've gotta go relieve Dale on watch," he changed the subject abruptly. "I'll walk you to the house first."

"Why? I'll be OK here in the tent."

"I don't want to leave you alone…"

"Well, how about if I keep you company on guard duty?"

He thought about it for a second and then gave her hand a quick squeeze. "Only if you promise to behave yourself and not distract me. Seein' as I'm so irresistible and stuff."

They were en route to the Winnebago when T-Dog trotted up to them.

"Allison! There you are!" he paused to catch his breath. "Shane sent me to fetch you."

"Shane? Whatever for?" Allison asked.

"Lori was in a car accident. He found her walking on the highway, I guess she flipped Maggie's car over. He wants you to make sure she's OK."

"It takes a special kind of stupid to crash a car when you're the only vehicle on the road," Daryl shook his head disbelievingly.

T-Dog chuckled. "I hear ya, bro. Anyway, Lori seems OK, but Shane's worried 'cause she's pregnant."
"I guess it's public knowledge now?" Allison asked as the trio walked to the house.

"Shane just sorta blurted it out," T-Dog said. "It's just one big ol' mess...Rick and the others ain't back yet, and Lori's pissed 'cause she says Shane lied to her..."

"Lied about what?" Daryl asked as they climbed the porch steps.

"He told her that they was waitin' for her here at the house."

"No one's on watch?" Daryl asked, seeing Dale and Andrea crowded around Lori in the living room. "I'll go keep an eye out, I guess." He had no desire to see the sheriff's wife get a complete physical.

"Please be careful," Allison told him.

"You be careful," Daryl replied over his shoulder. "Don't wander off alone. Either stay here in the house or have someone walk you back to the tent."

"I'll take care of her," T-Dog assured the hunter.

"Come sit in here where there's more light," Allison directed Lori into the parlor. She realized that she didn't have her bag or any equipment. "Patricia, can you please grab Hershel's call bag for me right quick?"

When the woman returned with the satchel Allison removed a penlight and shined it into each of Lori's eyes. "Your pupils are reacting fine; did you hit your head? Did you lose consciousness?"

"Just for a few minutes, I think," Lori replied.

"Do you have any discomfort in your neck or back? Any dizziness or nausea?"

"What about the baby?" Shane interrupted.

"First things first, please," Allison told him. Patricia wrapped a blood pressure cuff around Lori's arm and pumped it. "One-thirty over 80," she reported.

"More or less normal after what you've been through," Allison commented. She continued questioning the woman as she gingerly felt the back of her head and pressed on seemingly random places on her neck and shoulders. "How do you feel? Were you wearing a seatbelt? Any abdominal pain, any..." She looked around and hesitated to ask more personal questions in front of an audience. "...any unusual bleeding that you're aware of?"

"No, no, I think everything's fine," Lori tried to dismiss her. She seemed anxious be left alone in order to chat privately with Shane.

"Can I feel the baby?" Carl piped up.

"Not yet," Lori replied. "Not for a couple of months."

"If it's a girl, can we name her 'Sophia'?" he asked.

"There's plenty of time to decide that," Lori told him. She sighed and patted his head. "I guess you've got a lot of questions." She looked around at the assemblage and explained "We haven't had The Talk yet."

"Don't look at me," Dale held up his hands, "That's his father's job."
Allison packed Hershel's equipment back into his bag and handed it to Patricia. The kid is, what?, 10 years old, she thought to herself. He's certainly already heard the rudimentary details about sex from his little friends on the playground. Heck, she still remembered sitting with a group of friends underneath the monkey bars at age eight, totally enthralled while Shirley Wolf – whose mother was a nurse – explained the baby-making process. Of course at the time she'd doubted the whole story…surely her parents had never done that.

"Carl, why don't you go with Dale for a little bit while I talk to Shane?" Lori's voice interrupted her thoughts.

The boy seemed hesitant to leave until Shane punched him gently in the shoulder. "Go ahead, little man. I know you're gonna be a big brother, but that don't mean you still don't gotta listen to your mom."

Dale, Carl and Allison walked out to the living room where Maggie was pacing furiously.

"Something's happened, they should've been back long before now," she said to no one in particular.

"I can drive into town and look for them. I know where Hatlin's is," Jimmy offered.

"No, you need to stay here with Beth," Andrea told him. "I'll go – "

"I don't think anyone should go anywhere in the middle of the night," Dale interrupted. "Too easy to get lost, and the headlights will just attract walkers."

"Last thing we need is another wrecked car," T-Dog commented.

"We should all try to get some sleep and then if they're not back by first light we'll organize a proper search," Dale suggested.

"I can't sleep while Glenn and my dad are missing," Maggie stated.

"I won't tell you not to worry," Allison told Maggie, "because I know you will anyway. We're all concerned. But maybe in the meantime you can keep your mind off things by sitting with Beth. Talk to her, try to keep her spirits up as best you can."

Maggie breathed a heavy sigh and then said "At least it's something to do." She took a step toward Beth's bedroom and then turned back to Dale. "But first thing in the morning someone is going out to look."

"I promise you," Dale said softly.

‡‡‡‡ ‡‡‡‡ ‡‡‡‡

Daryl sat on top of the RV looking out into the blackness. He was listening more than watching, since it was really too dark to see anything. Years of rural living had attuned his ears to the sounds that were typical at night – the chirping of crickets and cicadas, the croaking of bullfrogs, the occasional explosive slap of a beaver's tail on the surface of the river. He could immediately recognize the telltale shuffling gait of a walker or the snap of a twig that indicated a careless human who didn't know how to trample quietly in the woods. He idly chewed on the cuticle of his thumbnail while his thoughts meandered back to his earlier conversation with Allison. He felt a warm flush cross his cheeks as he recalled her words. No one had ever in his life told him that he was good-looking, much less any female. And he didn't think she was just blowin' smoke, either; he'd already went and told her that he'd loved her – another memory that made him blush, thank
God it was dark and no one could see him – so she had no reason to flatter him unless she meant it. Besides, he could read her face like a newspaper. Those had been what he called her sincere eyes that had held his gaze so earnestly when called him “irresistible.” It wasn’t like when she tried to defend Carol those few times they’d talked about what might have gone on with Sophia in the Peletier household when Ed was still alive. Allison’s eyes had flitted all over the place when she tried to tell him that maybe she was wrong, that they shouldn’t assume anything without evidence.

Those eyes. So big, so blue they were almost violet. He smiled to himself. Never in his life would he have imagined a woman so beautiful gently touching him, taking care of him, being with him. Damn, sometimes he wished they were back in his hometown, that the world hadn’t gone to hell, just so he could show Allison off. To walk past all those assholes who’d always thought he wasn’t worth a shit with this smart and gentle and gorgeous woman – a fuckin’ doctor, for Christ’s sake – on his arm. Oh well, he thought, what mattered was right now. Somehow or other they’d found each other and she was with him and made getting up in the morning worthwhile. Together they would get through whatever curveballs were thrown their way day by day.

He heard voices approaching. Andrea and Dale. He stood up and looked down at them as they came nearer the RV.

"They back yet?" he asked.

"Not yet," Dale replied. "If they're not back by morning we're going to organize a search of some sort."

"OK, I'll be there," Daryl started to sit back down.

"I'll take over watch," Andrea told him. "I'm not sleepy, anyway."

Daryl descended the ladder and shrugged. "Have it your way." He started to leave but then asked, almost as an afterthought, "How's Lori?"

"Seems to be OK," Dale said. "Allison gave her a good looking-over."

"Allison still at the house?" Daryl asked.

"No, I saw T-Dog walk off with her," Andrea answered.

"Goin' back to my tent for a bit, then," Daryl said, hoisting his crossbow over his shoulder. "I'll be back in a few hours to see what's goin' on."

In the dim glow of the remains of his campfire, Daryl saw a shadowy figure hovering near his motorcycle. He could tell it wasn’t a walker but he readied his crossbow nevertheless. As he silently stepped closer the intruder gasped in surprise. It was Carol.
Chapter 24

Daryl slid up behind Carol noiselessly.

"What're you doin'? " he asked suspiciously. The sudden sound of his voice caused her to jump. She turned around to face him.

"Keepin' an eye on you," she replied.

He walked around her, eyeing her steadily, and she spun in place slowly with him.

"Ain't you a peach," he finally remarked sarcastically. Why did this woman constantly seem to be hovering near him? He didn't know what she wanted from him or why she hung around him, he only knew that it made him vaguely uncomfortable.

"I'm not going to let you pull away," she continued, "you've earned your place."

What the hell did that mean? He didn't need Carol to tell him he was worthy. He didn't need her approval or anyone else's. Hell, the only person that he'd maybe let talk to him that way was Allison, but as a matter of fact she'd never ever treated him like he was an outcast that needed to prove himself. Since that day she rode with him in the truck when they left the quarry, the first time he'd been alone with her, she'd never acted fearful of him or talked down to him like he was a stupid hick. She'd always spoken as easily and casually to him as she did to Rick or anyone else in the group, and she'd been asking his opinion on things long before anyone else bothered to. She'd never praised him for "earning his place" like he was some fuckin' service dog.

"If you spent half your time mindin' your daughter's business instead of sticking your nose in everyone else's she'd still be alive! " he snapped at Carol. His anger was building as he stood and looked at the woman. Yes, he used to feel bad for Carol…gettin' beat on all the time by that turd of a husband of hers… But when he thought about her not protecting Sophia for who knows how long Ed was doing God knows what to her… Allison can keep sayin' that we don't know for sure, but he could tell that she believed it, and he'd overheard Carol talking to the crucifix in that church that day; he hadn't thought about it much at the time, but now it was another puzzle piece that made him sick to his stomach.

Carol stood up straighter and tried to sound stoic. "Go ahead," she told him.

"Go ahead and what?" Daryl asked.

She was trying to look imperturbable, like she was prepared to stand her ground, but her eyes were filled with fear, as if she expected to be slapped at any moment. That just upset Daryl further. What did she take him for? Had he ever given any indication that he'd strike a woman? The terror in her eyes was downright insulting.

"Just go, I don't want you here!" he growled, waving her off. He was in no mood to be silently accused or psychoanalyzed. He started to leave but when she stood frozen in place he felt like he could no longer hold his tongue.

"You're a real piece of work, lady," he said, jabbing a finger in her face. Her expression suddenly changed, her eyes filled with sympathy for him, as if she "understood" him. "What, you gonna make this be about my daddy or some crap like that?" He sneered derisively. His dear ol' daddy. Alcoholic womanizing pile of steaming horseshit whose belt was responsible for most of Daryl's scars. But when Pa's liver finally gave out, Daryl still went to the old man's funeral. That's
something that you just do. It's family, it's Death, you still pay your respects no matter what your feelings for the person in Life. And Carol hadn't bothered to come when her little girl was put in the ground. "You don't know jack," he spat at her. He probably shouldn't have verbalized what was on his mind, but her willingness to stand there and be a human punching bag just caused his thoughts to tumble off his tongue. "You're afraid! You're afraid 'cause you're all alone. You got no husband, no daughter...you don't know what to do with yourself. And you ain't my problem!" He was working himself into a true lather. "Sophia wasn't mine!"

Carol's lips trembled ever so slightly, as if she was struggling to hold back tears. Daryl was unable stop the tirade he'd unleashed and with narrowed eyes he stepped closer to her to deliver the finishing stroke, the icing on the cake, the knife in the heart: "All you had to do was keep an eye on her!" This time Carol did audibly sob once, then visibly collected herself. The two stared at each other for several moments and then with a sigh of defeat she turned and scuttled off.

Daryl had been all ready to climb into his tent and get some much-needed sleep when he'd first left the RV twenty minutes ago, and now thanks to Carol his blood pressure was off the chart and he felt all riled up. He debated whether he should just take a walk through the woods to calm himself down when a voice called out quietly from within the tent.

"I'm still awake if you feel like talking."

He stepped inside. "You heard, I s'pose."

"I heard," Allison replied.

He set his crossbow down then sunk down onto the makeshift bed next to Allison, who'd sat up and scooted over to make room for him. He ran a hand through his hair impatiently.

"Probably shouldn't have said what I did," he finally commented.

"There's no crime in saying what's on your mind," Allison replied. "Sometimes it's best to get things out. I mean, Carol was the one who came over and started the conversation with you, she can't fault you for being honest with her."

Daryl looked at her steadily, considering her response. He'd half-expected her to chastise him for yelling at Carol and tell him that he needed to apologize. He was quiet for a few minutes and then unlaced his boots and took them off. He settled down on his side, bracing himself on his elbow, and faced Allison. "There's just so much crap goin' on right now...Rick 'n Hershel missing, Stick Lady runnin' off like a mad woman...I'm probably gonna have to go out early tomorrow to help search - "

Allison put an arm around his neck and pulled his head close to her. She kissed his forehead. "I know that Carol is desperately looking for someone to reach out to, but what she doesn't understand is that it's not fair to burden you like that when you've already got so much responsibility on your plate." Daryl snuggled closer into Allison's chest, tucking his head under her chin. She gently stroked the back of his head and the nape of his neck as she spoke. "I can't blame her," she said softly, "you're the most likely candidate for comforting...you're strong, you're compassionate, you supply the camp with food and protection..." Daryl gave a tiny puppy-like murmur as he curled closer to Allison. It was rare for him to let himself be so vulnerable, so tactile, but this woman just somehow automatically brought that out in him. It was a natural response to her touch, her voice. "She's frightened and you make her feel safe. But she needs to understand that right now you just can't be there in that way for her. You can only stretch yourself so far."

Allison felt a slight twinge of guilt for saying all this; she knew deep down that some of her
reasons were purely selfish. She couldn't help it, but she sometimes felt jealous of Carol. That probably made her an evil person, but she'd deal with her conscience later. Right now it felt good just to pull Daryl close to her and have him all to herself.

"They're not fair to you, either," he mumbled.

"Excuse me?" she asked, confused.

"You having to drop everything all the time, no matter what time or what you're doin', just to check on Lori 'cause she's pregnant."

"Well, duh, that's the main reason I'm allowed to stay with this group and eat their food and use their supplies. It ain't because of my superior laundry skills. You were there that day in Atlanta… when Rick found out I was a doctor and invited me to come with y'all."

He lifted up his head and looked at her in surprise. "What are you talkin' about? 'Allowed' to stay? You're a member of the group!"

"I'm an extra mouth to feed and I rub some people the wrong way….without mentioning names, but some of those people feel forced to tolerate me only so that their unborn child is properly cared for. And I don't mean Rick, he's pretty egalitarian. But y'all had a little community already established before I intruded."

"You're just talkin' goofy again," Daryl reached up and playfully gave her a quick noogie. He then leaned pulled her face close to his and kissed her tenderly. "I hope you don't really believe all that," he whispered.

"You should get some sleep," Allison replied, returning his kiss. "We both should. Morning will be here before we know it."
Daryl stretched out next to Allison. He was tired, but not sleepy. She curled up close to him and he pulled her head against his. After a few minutes she sensed that he wasn't dozing off. She glanced over and saw that his eyes were wide open, staring at the ceiling.

"What's wrong?" she asked quietly.

There was a long pause before he replied. "I dunno...it's just...well, sometimes I just feel scared."

She lifted up onto one elbow and looked down into his face. "You? Scared?! Of what?"

"Well, I guess mainly you scare me sometimes..."

"How?" She was genuinely confused. "I mean, I know I don't look my best first thing in the morning, and I haven't bothered to put on any makeup since we met..."

"No," his voice was soft but emphatic. "What I mean is...I'm still not used to these... feelings..." He reached up and caressed her cheek with his calloused hand. "It's just suddenly so weird for me; all during the day, whatever I do, whatever I think, in the back of my mind I'm wondering 'what would Allison say or think about this?'. Like with Carol before...when I said what I said to her...I dunno, part of me was thinking "Allison's gonna be mad at me for being mean to Carol." He chuckled slightly. "And then I immediately could hear you correcting me and tellin' me that 'dogs get mad, people get angry.'" He picked up a lock of her hair and twirled it idly in his fingers. "See what I mean? It's like you're always in my head. No one has ever affected me like that."

She pulled hand to her mouth and gently kissed his knuckles. "For what it's worth, you're always in my head, too. And also here," she placed his hand between her breasts, "in my heart." She entwined her fingers in his. "I've never felt this way about anyone before, either. Never thought I could actually care for someone like this, at least not someone who hadn't given birth to me." She traced small circles on the back of his hand with her thumb and laid back, staring at the roof of the tent as she continued quietly. "I remember hearing other women at the hospital talking about some guy they'd just met over the weekend and had this instant chemistry with him and blah blah...and I just thought it was some New Age term they used to rationalize a one night stand. I didn't know it was possible to feel such a... an actual emotional bond with someone. Someone who occupied your every waking thought, who made you suddenly always think of 'we' instead of 'me'." It suddenly occurred to her that, once again, she was babbling. "Someone who made you talk too much trying to describe your feelings," she added shyly.

Daryl leaned over her, brushed her hair back and kissed her forehead. "I'm used to ya goin' on all the time," he gently teased.

"Well, you're sweet to put up with it," she smiled in return. He studied her seriously for a moment then reached down to kiss her lips. She closed her eyes and returned his kiss, reaching one hand around the back of his head.

When they stopped he opened his eyes but didn't move away. "See what I mean about the power you have over me?"

"Hmm?" she asked, the blood having rushed from her brain to other parts of her body.

"I'm s'posed to be getting' some shut-eye so I can go out and hunt for those dumbasses in a few hours, but right now all I can think about is --" He didn't finish his sentence and instead mashed his
mouth against hers once again. She didn't reply but instead indicated that she was of a like mind by parting her lips and teasing his tongue with hers.

He slowly trailed his kisses from her lips to her right cheek and then down to the side of her neck. As he nibbled and sucked gently she moaned in pleasure. The fleeting thought ran through her brain that now that their tent was so far removed from the others she no longer had to stifle her cries. She arched her back slightly, thrusting her chest upward. Daryl unbuttoned the first two buttons of the oversized men's shirt she was using as a nightgown and teased her right nipple with his tongue. It excited him when she moaned again – it made him feel proud to be able to bring her such pleasure - and she could feel his hardness against her leg. She grasped the back of his head and pushed his face further into her breast, forcing him to take more of it into his mouth, while gently tantalizing his left ear with her fingers. When he briefly paused and raised his head up to kiss her lips again, she reached down and fumbled with his zipper while simultaneously caressing his bulge. "Oh, Angel, you're making me crazy," he mumbled. He sat up quickly and doffed his clothing in record time while Allison slid her underpants off and tossed them aside. Feeling emboldened, she then sat up and gently pushed Daryl down into a prone position. She grinned at him saucily then kissed his abdomen while running her left hand across his sparse chest hair. He sighed and closed his eyes. She moved downward and kissed his inner thigh before gently clasping his now engorged organ. Stroking it slowly, she teased the tip with her tongue. Daryl groaned loudly. She took more and more of him into her mouth, going by instinct since she'd only done this once before. When she caressed the underside of his manhood with her tongue he uttered a guttural "Ohhh, God!" A few more strokes and suddenly Daryl's hands were on either side of her face, lifting it up slowly. "Can't…take that much more…," he whispered in halting gasps as he pulled her up to his face for a long, sensual kiss. His mouth remained engaged with hers as he flipped her onto her back and hovered above her.

She entwined her fingers around his neck while he used one hand to guide himself inside of her. She sighed contentedly as he first penetrated her, then when he increased his rhythm she began to mewl and then moan. "Oh, oh, Daryl, yeah! You feel sooo gooood! Daryl! Oh, yeah, do it like that!' she cried out loudly, uninhibited for the first time. Hearing her say his name like that just excited him more and he plunged deeper into her. He reared back onto his knees, grasped her ankles and pushed her into an almost folded position and grunted in time with his thrusts. He felt her quiver and shudder against him just seconds before he exploded. "Unh, ugh, oh, shit, ohhhh!" was all he could manage to vocalize before collapsing on top of her. They both struggled to catch their breath and then he kissed her forehead and then her lips. She gently caressed his cheek and smiled into his face before he rolled off of her and crumpled into a heap beside her.

"That was….wow," she sighed, haphazardly reaching an arm across his chest. She felt as limp as a Raggedy Ann doll. It took a concerted effort to speak. "But I gotta say, you pretty much knocked me out. I think I'll be able to sleep now."

He just as clumsily grasped her hand, pulled it to his lips and kissed it. "I dunno if I'll ever wake up again." A few minutes later, as she was dozing off, the last words Allison heard were a soft "I love you, Angel."

"I love you, too," she murmured.

‡‡‡‡ ‡‡‡‡ ‡‡‡‡

Sunrise came all too soon. Allison struggled to keep her eyes open as the group convened around Carol's Jeep. After a prolonged discussion, Daryl and Shane were preparing to drive into town to search for Rick and the others. Andrea and Jimmy were delaying their departure by arguing that one of them should go, and Dale was also there throwing in his two cents (from what Allison's
foggy brain could comprehend, he was trying to say that he didn't trust Shane to be part of the rescue party). Suddenly the sound of a car engine could be heard and all eyes turned to the road leading to the Greene farm.

When the car pulled up, Maggie dashed off of the porch to embrace Glenn. Rick exited the driver's seat and spoke to Lori. T-Dog stood aside and then asked no one in particular, "Who the hell is that?"

"That's Randall," Glenn said of the blindfolded young man in the back seat.

Hershel emerged from the car and called out "Patricia, prepare the shed for surgery. Allison, would you please assist?"

Twenty minutes later Allison was scrubbed and gloved and wearing the coverall apron Patricia had provided. The patient – Randall – had a huge tear to his calf muscle. As she helped Hershel stitch what they could as best they could (there wasn't much they could do about the nerve damage) he tersely told her what had gone on at the bar in town. That Randall had been with three or four other men, that they'd all shot at them and Rick had killed two of them. That Randall had played the role of sniper and had impaled his leg on a wrought iron fence when he’d jumped from a roof. Once they'd done all they could, they left Patricia to monitor him and started walking back toward the house. To Allison's surprise, Daryl was standing just outside of the shed, apparently waiting for her. He fell into step with them and asked, "You OK?"

"Yeah, I'm fine, the kid is knocked out for now." They arrived at the house to find that the rest of the group was gathered in the dining room, apparently having some sort of meeting.

"He'll be out for a few hours," Hershel told them. "We repaired his leg as best we could. It'll probably be a week before he can walk on it."

Allison stripped off her gloves and was about to go use some of the Greene's hot water to wash up when she caught some snippets of conversation. They were debating the fate of Randall. Rick was talking about driving the guy out a ways somewhere and leaving him to his own devices, while Shane was afraid that the remainder of Randall's group might come looking for him. She was exhausted and didn't feel like getting involved in the discussion at the moment, although she'd been forming her own opinions during surgery. When Hershel had mentioned that this person had actually shot at him and Rick and Glenn, she frankly wondered why they were wasting anesthesia and surgical supplies on him. But that was just too much to digest at the moment; what she needed right now was a quick shower and some rest. As she disrobed in the bathroom she couldn't help but feel a bit like Scarlett O'Hara in regards to the Randall situation – she'd think about it tomorrow.
Dale trudged back to the RV, rifle slung over his shoulder, his mind occupied by so many of the latest developments. He hadn't trusted Shane for some time, and he had truly feared for Rick's safety had Shane been the one to fetch him from town. Rick and Hershel both had probably literally dodged a couple of bullets there, he thought to himself. Now there was this young man in the shed, Randall. Shane was already making noises about getting rid of him, and Dale knew that he didn't mean depositing him on the side of the road with a box lunch. He hoped that somehow cooler heads would prevail. Climbing the steps into the Winnebago, he saw Carol sitting dejectedly at the table, matching socks from a laundry basket.

"Hi there," he greeted her, pulling up a chair on the other side of the table. He tried to tread very carefully around Carol, treating her with sympathy but not condescension. He remembered how it was after Irma had passed, how some well-meaning folks had said hurtful things like "She's in a better place now" or "You just have to get over it".

"How are you feeling?"

Her answer couldn't have surprised him more. "I'm worried about Daryl."

"Daryl?" he asked, eyebrows knit in confusion.

"I think that that girl is a bad influence on him," she continued without looking up from her work.

"Girl? Oh, you mean Allison?"

"Yes. He said some very hurtful things to me earlier. He never used to talk to me that way. I think that he's hanging around her too much and is picking up her sarcastic attitude."

Dale considered her words before replying. As far as he knew, Daryl hadn't really conversed with Carol or any of the group that much, and that now when he did speak he was far less racist and impatient than he used to be. He'd credited the change to a combination of Daryl getting out from under his older brother's thumb and also keeping company with Allison. He didn't know exactly how serious their relationship was, but he'd noticed that the girl seemed to have a calming effect on him.

"I'm sorry to hear that he was rude to you," Dale finally said. "I'm sure part of it is that he feels that he let you down when he didn't find Sophia. Sometimes people manage to say entirely the wrong thing when a loved one dies. I'm sure he didn't mean anything by it."

Carol looked up at him. "I know he didn't really mean it. Like I said, he's changed. He's moved his tent so far away…he never used to be distant like that before she latched onto him." She looked back down to the laundry basket. "I think we just need to give him some time…"

"I think we all need some time to sort our thoughts and feelings out," Dale replied gently. "I'd better go upstairs and relieve T-Dog now. Just sing out if you need anything."

He mentally shook his head as he climbed to the roof. He couldn't quite put his finger on it, but something bothered him about what Carol had said. Whether she was trying to mother Daryl – use him as a Sophia substitute – or had misguided romantic feelings for him…neither situation could have a happy ending, as far as he could see. Hopefully once she worked her way through all the traditional stages of grief she'd snap out of it and not fixate on the hunter.
Back at the house, Allison had just poked her head in Beth's room to check on the girl. Hershel was by her side, talking softly to her.

"She seems to be doing a little better now that you're here," she told the man.

"Well, she's still dehydrated and not eating; I gave her a sedative to slow down her bodily functions in the meantime. I do appreciate you looking after her when I was gone."

"I just wish I could've done more," Allison told him. "But other than keeping her sedated, the best medicine is probably having her family around her."

After finishing her chat with Hershel, Allison exited to the kitchen, intent on going back to her tent for some rest. Andrea and Maggie were standing around the table, talking quietly, and both gave her a look that made her stop.

"What's going on?" she asked. "You look like you're plotting something."

"No," Andrea sighed, "we're just having a mutual bitch session."

"About whom?"

"One guess," Maggie said with half a smile.

"What did the Queen Bee do now?" Allison asked, knowing that they were talking about Lori.

"She gave Andrea shit for keeping watch."

"What?"

"She says that I'm not pulling my weight, that I'm just slacking off and working on my tan,"
Andrea explained.

"Oh, for heaven's sake…first of all, you don't need to explain yourself or defend yourself to her. In fact, I got a similar lecture a couple weeks ago – "

"So that's why I've seen you doing laundry detail? You let that bitch intimidate you?" Andrea was incensed.

Allison shrugged. "I dunno…it's just the way I've always been. I can give a man the dickens, but I shy away from confronting mean girls."

"Speaking of a man's dick…" Andrea began.

"That's not what I said!" Allison protested, embarrassed, as Maggie guffawed.

"I know, but it reminded me of Shane and Her Majesty. Like she thinks no one knows he's been nailing her."

"What're you talking about?" Maggie was curious. "I mean, I've seen him hovering around her, but I thought it was just because he's Rick's friend and he's known Lori for so long…"

"He's 'known' her alright, in the Biblical sense," Andrea remarked. "This was back before we came to the farm, before Rick came back from the dead. Shane and Lori were going at it like a couple of bunnies on Viagra."
Maggie's eyes widened in surprise and delight at some new and delicious gossip. "Does Rick know?"

Andrea shrugged. "Who knows? Who cares, for that matter. Quite frankly, I don't exactly what the attraction is. I mean, it's not like Shane is Mr. Amazing in the sack…"

"WHAT?!" Maggie squealed and leaned in closer for details.

"Oh, it was just one time," Andrea said with a dismissive wave of her hand. "Frankly, I've been vaccinated slower."

Maggie burst out laughing and Allison felt her cheeks redden. Overt sex talk still tended to embarrass her, but nevertheless she couldn't help but be intrigued by such chit-chat. And then the "doctor" part of her brain was activated – Lori had previously assured her that she'd talked to Shane and he hadn't been with anyone but her, and that he had a clean bill of health. But if he was fooling around with Andrea now, who was to say that he was telling Lori the truth? And how in the world could she delicately ask Lori to please double-check with Shane about the women he might have boinked in the six months or so before he hooked up with her… For Heaven's sake, she mentally despaired, couldn't that man just keep it zipped?!

"Sure, you laugh," Andrea jokingly pointed an index finger at Maggie, "But what about you and Glenn?"

"What about us?"

"You two have obviously been going at it, what about some details? Is it serious? C'mon, I'm starving for some good old-fashioned girl talk."

Maggie's face grew somber before she replied. "Could be serious. I told him I loved him," she said in a quiet voice.

Now Andrea was the one to move in closer for information. "Really?"

"Yes…I mean, I know we haven't had that much 'alone' time, but I can't deny that I feel something for him… Now I wonder if I spoke too soon and spooked him."

"He's a very intelligent, sensitive guy," Allison conceded. "I can see you finding him loveable."

"Funny you should say nice things about him," Maggie smiled, "'cause Glenn's kinda afraid of you."

"Afraid? Of me?!" Allison was completely taken aback. "What did I ever do to him?"

"I'm not sure, it's just some comments he's made about you, something about sarcastic remarks you've made to him a few times or something…"

"I'm sarcastic with everyone," Allison protested half-jokingly, "that's part of my charm."

Maggie chuckled. "I know that, and you know that, and probably several other people in camp know that, but Glenn's … different. More sensitive. He tends to take everything more seriously."

"Oh," Allison was temporarily lost in thought. "I hadn't realized…maybe I should say something to him, apologize, tell him that I didn't mean anything – "

Maggie shook her head. "No, he's got enough on his mind right now, no need to burden him more."
"What do you mean?" Andrea asked.

"I mean that Glenn told me that before, when he was in the bar with Rick and my dad…during that shoot-out…that he froze up because of me. Because I'd told him I loved him."

Allison was totally confused so she was grateful when Andrea asked "What is that supposed to mean?"

"He said," Maggie sighed, "that because I'd told him that I loved him that suddenly, at that moment, he was afraid to do anything – that if he made the wrong move and got killed then what would happen to me? I guess he thought that he'd hurt me by dying."

"That's so sweet," Allison murmured almost involuntarily.

"It is?" Andrea asked. Her first reaction was that the man was being weak.

"Well, yeah, it just, um, to me, sounds like his way of saying 'I love you too'. That he was picturing a future life with Maggie, and thinking about how upset she'd be if something happened to him." She shrugged her shoulders. "To my mind it's an impressive statement when a man admits to thinking about a woman before he thinks of himself."

Maggie seemed pensive. "I hadn't thought of that. To be honest, I thought he was blaming me for something that I had no part in. I was this close to tellin' him to not use me as an excuse and to just go off and grow a pair. But what you said does make some sense."

"You yourself just said that Glenn was sensitive and took things seriously," Allison reminded her. "I don't know him that well, but in the few conversations I've had with him I know he used to love those role-playing video games that involved strategy and planning and what-all that I've never understood… heck, I had trouble with Pac-Man… Anyway he seems like he's very analytical. He could be the type that is so used to thinking and not feeling that that was why his reaction when you told him you loved him was to begin mentally plotting out a future for the two of you." She paused and smiled wryly. "I've found out that it's not like in the Lifetime movies – not all men immediately collapse into your arms when you declare your love for them."

Andrea gave Allison her famous snide half-smile. "You sound as if you speak from experience. Have you, as you say, 'declared' your love for a certain redneck?"

Allison gave what she hoped was an enigmatic smile. "I didn't say that."

"What are you saying, then?"

"I'm saying don't let Lori get you down, keeping watch is a very important job that not everyone is able or willing to handle." She started to leave the kitchen.

"Changing the subject, classic sign of guilt!" Andrea called to her departing back.
Chapter 27

Patricia was just approaching the front porch steps as Allison descended.

"I just checked on the…patient," the older woman told her. "He's still sleepin' it off."

"OK, thanks," Allison replied. "I'll look in a little later, make sure everything's OK when the anesthesia wears off."

"Best check with Daryl before you do," Patricia warned her.

"Daryl?"

"Yeah, he caught me comin' out of the shack and pretty much gave me what for about goin' in there alone. Said next time I should find him or T-Dog or Rick, that none of the women should be in there alone with Randall."

"I hope he didn't yell at you," Allison apologized. "He means well – "

"Oh, I know that," Patricia smiled and assured her. "He was only thinkin' of my safety. Fact is, he's the only one so far who even thought to warn me."

"Well, Hershel would've said something, I'm sure, but he's busy with Beth right now," Allison said. "And Rick is worried about his wife and keeping the peace in camp…"

"Well, that's just my point," Patricia responded knowingly. "Daryl doesn't get involved with silly politics or in-fights. He's concerned about the basics – taking care of everyone." There was a quiet emphasis on the word "everyone."

"You're right," Allison admitted, "for all his faults – and he does have a few – I have to admit that I don't think he'd ever not help a person in need, no matter what his personal feelings for them."

"He's a good man," Patricia told her, not for the first time.

"I agree," Allison said softly. "Anyway, later on we're going to have to rig something up in the shed if we're going to keep Randall there – fresh water, a bedpan or some device, that sort of stuff."

"I'll talk to Hershel and see how he wants to handle it."

"OK, I'm going back to my tent to see if I can't catch a quick nap…let me know later if I can help with anything Randall-wise."

"I'll do that," Patricia acknowledged with a smile. "I see that I'll have to hike a little bit to find 'your' tent these days…"

"So you noticed that I'm now, um…well, 'shacking up' with Daryl?" Allison asked, slightly embarrassed.

Patricia chuckled and gave her a quick hug. "I think everyone's noticed, Sweetie, but they don't dare say anything for fear of upsetting you."

"Why would anyone bother to tip-toe around me? I mean, I try to mind my own business, but I've heard others around here outright questioning members of the group about what might or might not be going on behind tent walls without hesitation."
"Hershel's a great doctor, but he is technically an animal doctor, and that doesn't sit well with some folks 'round here who require medical care. Or some who may eventually need it. They want to stay in your good graces."

"Oh…" Allison slowly processed this information. "Well, aren't I just the protected little hot house orchid, then?" She shook her head, feeling conflicted about what Patricia had just told her. "Now don't you fret about it," Patricia seemed to read her expression. First of all, you're not doing anything wrong. Secondly, I don't think anyone here really thinks anything about it beyond basic curiosity. And third, I used to work in a hospital, too. Think about how the gossip would've raged through the doctor's lounge if the world hadn't changed and you were still working there and dating…well, not necessarily Daryl but just anybody. All the questions you'd constantly be badgered with. 'Who is he? What does he do? Have you done blah blah blah yet?' At least now folks have the decency to just talk behind your back." Patricia grinned at her and went into the house.

Allison returned to her tent, still slightly uneasy with the knowledge that some people were just being nice to her because they might need her services one day. She was used to being genuinely liked because…well, doggone it, she was a nice person! Or at least that insecure, little girl part of her liked to think that she was. Of course, she'd pretty much told Daryl just this thing the other night – that she'd only been allowed to join the camp in the first place because she could wield a scalpel with some accuracy. She kicked her shoes off and snuggled under the sleeping bag, hoping to catch a quick nap. As she hunkered down it occurred to her that her situation wasn't all that unique, really; that some of the others were accepted in the group strictly because of their usefulness – T-Dog's brute strength, Glenn's ability to wriggle in and out of buildings to scavenge supplies, Dale's ownership of an RV that he was willing to share, Daryl's hunting and tracking skills, Carol's not minding cooking and cleaning, Lori's…um, Lori…surely there was some skill she had but Allison was too drowsy to ponder it further….

"You gonna sleep all day or what? Thought you had chores to do," Daryl's gruff voice awakened her some time later. She sat up, stretched and looked at him. "That laundry ain't gonna wash itself, y'know," he said with his famous half-smile, purposely egging her on.

She crawled out from under the covers and ran her fingers through her hair, trying to comb it without digging for her hairbrush in her bag.

"Maybe I'd get started on your laundry sooner if you'd bother to pile your clothes in one place," she teasingly retorted. "I know it's a lot to ask not to have to hunt and dig like a terrier just to find all of your discarded socks and underwear…"

"Nag, nag, complain, complain, that's the thanks I get for bringing you a present."

"Present?" she asked curiously, looking at both of his hands, which were empty.

"It's outside. Put your shoes on first, don't be runnin' around barefoot out there…" he instructed her as he walked back out through the tent flap.

She quickly donned her socks and shoes and then stepped outside to find him holding a large raccoon.

"Caught it in one of my snare lines," he said proudly. "You'd mentioned the other day that you had a taste for some roasted 'coon…"

"Oh my goodness!" she exclaimed, hardly believing her eyes. She reached out and took the furry critter from him. "Thank you so much!" She hugged him with her free hand. "This will be such a
wonderful treat! I know Patricia will lend me some pickling salt, and I've got those other spices you and Glenn brought back the other day...I can get to brining this guy just as soon as I skin him..." She paused and looked up into Daryl's beaming face. "It's going to taste just like Christmas Eve. You are so sweet to remember me talking about that. Thank you again." She stretched up onto her tiptoes and kissed him.

As always, even though she could tell he was pleased, he was also still slightly embarrassed by her praise. "Truth is," he mumbled, with a slight reddening to his cheeks, "I was gettin' pretty sick of squirrel myself."

Allison was sitting on the log outside their tent ever so carefully severing the last of the fleshy threads that bound the raccoon's fur to its flesh. She was hoping to cure the hide and eventually fashion something for Daryl out of it – a sheath for his Buck knife, perhaps. And maybe he could add the tail to his ear necklace. Or hang it from the handlebars of his motorcycle. She was so lost in her work that she didn't hear Rick's footsteps as he approached.

"Whatcha got there, a raccoon?"

She looked up from her work and mentally chastised herself. You'd better pay better attention, girl; thank goodness he wasn't a walker. "Yeah, Daryl trapped it. Thought I'd roast it. Make something different for dinner for a change. Ever had 'coon?"

"I haven't, but my daddy often talked about eating it when he was growing up."

"It was a holiday tradition at my house when I was a kid," Allison commented. "The smell of roasting 'coon reminds me of Christmas as much as the aroma of cookies baking." She smiled at the memory and then held up the carcass. "You know, in some big cities they still sell raccoons for food...I have – well, *had* - relatives in Michigan, and I remember my uncle telling us that he could even buy 'coon in Detroit, but that the seller always left one of the feet on the carcass so that the buyer knew it wasn't a cat." She chuckled. "I guess there were some unscrupulous types who tried to pass off skinned stray cats as raccoons. Their skeletons are very similar, you know. But the paws are very different. Anyway, I'm sure you didn't walk all the way up here to talk about what's on the dinner menu."

Rick settled himself on the log that was perpendicular to hers. "You're right. I wanted to discuss Randall. Get your input on the situation."

"What do you want to know?"

"His leg. Once it heals, how well will he be able to walk on it?"

"There was some nerve damage, but overall I think we did a good job stitching the muscle tissue back together under the circumstances. In a perfect world, Randall would undergo months of physical therapy...he'd gradually use the injured leg more and more in hopes that other nerves would eventually take over some of the work of the damaged ones. Again I emphasize that this is a perfect world, pre-walker scenario, but after enough therapy he would probably be able to walk with only a very slight limp."

"Well, you and I both know that this is no longer a perfect world. So what are his chances without all this therapy? How mobile would he be, say, a week from now?"

Allison pondered for a moment. "He'll be in a lot of pain any time he puts weight on that leg. It
will buckle underneath him the first several times he tries to walk. But in a desperate situation, endorphins kick in and trigger the survival instinct… He'll learn to walk and run in a big hurry, just like a baby giraffe does."

"So you think he'd be OK if we take him out a ways and cut him loose?"

Allison shrugged. "I suppose. If you mean 'OK' mobility-wise, he'll be ambulatory. But otherwise…he'll have the same chance as anyone else that's out there all alone."

"Shane thinks it's a mistake to keep him alive." He remarked casually, as if testing for her reaction.

"Oh."

"What?" Rick asked her.

"What do you mean, 'what'?" she was confused.

"You got a funny look when I mentioned Shane's name."

"I did? I didn't mean to. Maybe the sun was in my eyes…"

"If you've got something to say about Shane, I'd like to hear it."

Allison weighed her words before speaking. "It's really none of my business. I know he's your friend and I don't want to talk out of turn, OK?"

"Speak your mind." Rick looked at her intently.

"Well…I've overheard Shane talking a couple of times, and he's always asking folks 'what do you do to keep this camp safe' and then he goes on to enumerate all his magnificent acts of bravery. Like he's keeping some kind of big ol' scorecard someplace. And he always seems more intent on getting praise or applause than actually accomplishing anything. If it isn't big and showy and he doesn't have an audience, he's not interested. I have the feeling that when he was on the police force he was the type who hated writing traffic tickets and helping find stolen bicycles – he wanted get out and find the hard-core perps and bust some heads open."

The sheriff smiled wryly. "Did you know him back then? You've pretty much called it."

"You work in the ER for a while, you have to learn to read people,” she shrugged. “It's a necessity; you have to figure out if they're lying about symptoms just to get drugs or if they're hiding something, things like that. Anyway, what sometimes worries me about Shane is that he seems to go out of his way to undermine you, to question every one of your decisions. If you said the sky was blue he'd immediately insist that it was purple just to prove you wrong."

Rick didn't say anything out loud, but he was somewhat reassured by what she was saying. He'd thought maybe it was just him, that he'd become suspicious of Shane ever since he'd found out about him and Lori, but if someone else noticed his combative behavior maybe he wasn't being paranoid after all. Instead he simply told her, "Shane's always had a habit of speaking before thinking. Usually once he calms down and thinks rationally he comes around, though."

Allison shrugged noncommittally. "You know him better than I do. If you're comfortable with the situation, that's all that matters. You're the one that's carrying the burden of taking care of all of us, and you certainly don't need a heckler in the peanut gallery making you second-guess yourself."

"I appreciate your confidence in me," Rick said to her. "To be honest, I was kinda worried that you
were dissatisfied with something I'd done, that you were thinking of leaving us."

"Why?" She asked, then she caught him glancing at the tent. "Oh, because I moved up here, away from the camp? No, that was just because..." her mind raced, trying to think of an excuse. With Rick seeming so uncertain at the moment she certainly didn't want to bring up Sophia and Daryl's need to get away because he felt guilty about her. If anything, she knew Rick felt even worse than Daryl did about her death, that he blamed himself for leaving her in the woods that day. There was no need to pour salt in that wound right now. She looked downward at the ground, trying to play the role of the bashful maiden. "Daryl and I have been sort of...keeping company." She looked up through her eyelashes at the lawman, wishing she could blush on cue. "He's kinda funny about everyone knowing, and wanted some privacy for us."

Rick smiled and placed a hand gently on her shoulder. "I'd sort of noticed that you two had paired up. Nice to see you getting along so well. Daryl's a good guy, I'm glad he found a good woman."

"You are very kind, sir," she smiled back at him. "And, for the record, I think that most of us realize that your decisions have always been based on the good of the entire camp, and not just a select few. And sometimes you've put yourself at risk in that pursuit. There are not a lot of people in these times who would be so selfless. We're lucky to have you. I've always felt that way but now even more so after hearing from Hershel about those other shady characters you met in town. For that matter, we're all lucky to have the group that we do, with everyone respecting one another and working together and the men not....well, not taking advantage of the women. I'm sure a lot of that comes from having a decent, moral man in charge of the group."

"OK, knock it off before I start crying," Rick tried to joke to cover up his quavering voice. He quickly swiped at one eye with the back of his hand. "Shoot, Lori's s'posed to be the one with the hormones." He collected himself and said "Thanks again...for everything. I look forward to having my first taste of raccoon whenever that critter is cooked." He walked off toward camp and Allison watched him go for several minutes before returning to her work.
Sometime later, Allison was trimming the last of the fat from the raccoon and making sure the scent glands had been removed. She remembered that Granny had usually brined 'coon meat for at least 12 hours, so this little guy was going to have to soak overnight. He wouldn't be ready for tonight's dinner. She heard a noise and looked up from her work to see Carl hesitantly approaching.

"Hey, Squirt," she called out to him. "Whatcha doin' out here all by your lonesome?"

He seemed glad to have been noticed and trotted over to the log where Allison was seated.

"Wasn't doin' nothin', just walkin' around," he told her.

"Well, have a seat, take a load off...that's quite a walk from camp. Those little legs of yours must be tired." She was teasing him and looked out the corner of her eye to see if he'd take the bait.

"I ain't so little," he protested.

"I know, I was just kidding you," she assured him. "You're sprouting up like a summer cornstalk."

"My mom doesn't think so," he grumbled, looking down at his feet and idly kicking the dirt. "She still calls me 'baby' all the time."

Allison chuckled. "I've got news for you...some day when you're over six feet tall and have children of your own, your mama will still call you her 'baby'. You're her first-born child, so even when your hair is grey and your teeth aren't your own, she will still look at you and see a tiny little baby in a hospital bassinette. That's just how mothers are."

"Eew," Carl commented with a slight shudder.

"Get used to it, kid, women are like that. All mushy and stuff," a gruff voice stated. Allison and Carl looked up to see Daryl, who'd silently materialized out of nowhere.

"Are you mushy, Miss Allie?" Carl asked. Then, as an afterthought, "Can I call you 'Allie'?"

"Not if you want me to answer," Allison replied. She noticed that Daryl was looking at her with one eyebrow cocked, as if this was something he had wondered about. She decided to explain. "When I was about your age," she said to Carl, "Kids in school started shortening my name to 'Allie' but almost as soon as they did some other mean kids started calling me 'Alley Cat', which made everyone else laugh." She paused and sighed. "It's stupid, I know, but for some reason it always bothered me."

Daryl shifted his crossbow around back to his shoulder and sat down on the log perpendicular to where Allison and Carl were sitting. "Kids can be mean sometimes," he commented.

Carl looked at Daryl with wide eyes. "Was anyone ever mean to you, Mr. Daryl?"

"Sure," Daryl replied. "Even the toughest, baddest kid in school had someone who thought he was tougher and badder that bullied him."

"Wow," Carl remarked. The look on his face revealed that this was important information indeed. If someone as tough as Daryl Dixon had been bullied in school, Carl reckoned, then maybe he wasn't such a geek or nerd after all. Maybe everyone got picked on at one time or another in school.
He'd never had the courage to ask his dad about it, because of course his dad was the sheriff and he
bet no one had ever dared messed with him. He'd always thought that he would disappoint his dad
if he ever told him that sometimes he felt scared. And he certainly would never have told Uncle
Shane that he sometimes got picked on; Shane was the toughest guy he'd ever met – well, before
Daryl had come along, anyway – and was always telling Carl about how he should be a man.

"Why are you out here on your own? Does your mama know where you are?" Daryl asked Carl,
interrupting the youngster's thoughts.

"I dunno," Carl shrugged. Then, with the facile irrelevance of youth, he stated, "My dad yelled at
me."

"Why?" Allison asked.

"Cause I told Carol that it was bullshit to believe in Heaven."

"Um, hold on a sec. If it's OK with your parents for you to swear like that, that's fine and dandy. It's
their call. But since I never use those kinds of words when I talk to you, I'll have to ask you to
please not use them when you talk to me."

Carl looked confused; he wasn't sure what he had done wrong.

"What she means, kid," Daryl clarified, "Is that even if you use cuss words when you talk to your
friends, it's only polite not to use them when you talk to a lady."

"Oh, OK."

"But I'm sure that's not why your dad yelled at you," Allison continued. "It wasn't because you
used a curse word, it was because you told Carol that it was…nonsense to believe in Heaven."

"Well, she told me that Sophia was in Heaven, in a better place, and I told her – "

"Yes, we know what you told her. And it is fine to not believe in Heaven or the afterlife. You can
believe whatever you want to. What is NOT fine is to tell someone else that they are wrong for
what they believe."

"But she's just being an idiot for thinking that – "

Allison held up her hand. "Like I said, if you think she's an idiot, that's your right. You can think
whatever you want. But you or me or Daryl or your dad or anyone else does not have the right to
tell Carol that what she believes is wrong."

"But she's just being stupid," Carl protested with the absolute conviction of a pre-teen.

"Maybe she is, by your way of thinking. But if it gives her comfort to think of Sophia as being in a
better place, she should be allowed to believe that without anyone criticizing her." Allison paused
and thought for a moment. "Do you know that so many wars that have taken place on this planet
throughout history were because of religion? Simply because one side was upset that the other side
didn't share the same beliefs?" She smiled at Carl. "What I'm saying is, religion is a very touchy
subject for a lot of people, and sometimes it's best just to avoid talking about it at all if you want to
keep the peace."

Carl seemed to consider her point. He was quiet for a few minutes and then announced, "Dad and
Shane won't let me look at Randall."
"What do you mean, 'look' at him?" Daryl asked.

"I just wanna see him. Is he really a kid, like Dale says?"

"OK, time for another lecture," Allison told him. "And might I suggest that you roll your eyes back down into the forward position before they freeze like that," she added when the boy looked skyward in exasperation. Daryl snickered but she ignored him and continued. "OK, first of all, Randall is not a kid like you – he's over 18. Secondly, any prisoner, whether he's 10 years old or 50, is not a zoo animal on display for people to browse at. Even murderers on Death Row are entitled to certain rights, and one of those rights is not being gawked at like he's a sideshow freak."

"What's Death Row?" Carl asked, intrigued by the term.

"It's a place where little kids who ask too many questions end up," Daryl mumbled as he produced a knife and began whittling a stick.

"Oh, hush. Way to terrorize a child," Allison told him. To Carl she said, "Death Row is the special area of a prison where the most dangerous criminals are kept. The murderers who are awaiting execution."

"Execution means killed, right?" the boy asked, his eyes wide with interest. His parents had never told him about cool stuff like this.

"Well, yes…"

"Sure, you jump on me for terrorizing the kid and then you go and tell him all about the gas chamber," Daryl pointed his knife at Allison accusingly.

"What's the gas chamber?" Carl piped up.

"We've gotten way off topic here," Allison replied, shaking her head. "Just remember – don't criticize anyone else's religious beliefs, and Randall is not tied up in the shed for your amusement."

"…and don't do drugs and make sure to brush your teeth after every meal," Daryl continued, standing up. "Come on, kid, I best take you back. Your parents are gonna be worried 'bout you."

"I can walk back on my own, I'm not a baby," Carl protested.

"Didn't say you were," Daryl told him. "It ain't safe for anyone to be wanderin' around alone, though. I don't let Miss Death Row Prison Stories here walk around camp alone, either."

"Maybe I can come back tomorrow and you can tell me more?" Carl asked Allison hopefully. "You're a good teacher."

"We'd probably better check with your mama first before Allison gives you any more history lessons," Daryl told him, looking over his shoulder at Allison as the two headed back to the Greene house.

‡‡‡‡ ‡‡‡‡ ‡‡‡‡

Later that evening Daryl and Allison were enjoying a solitary dinner around their small campfire.

"Kid was right, y'know," he commented to her. "You do make a good teacher. Did you ever wanna be one when you were little?"

"No, not really. Thought about being a writer once, though."
"Oh?"

"Yeah, I remember one night at supper Granny got all exasperated with something I was saying and announced 'Girl, the only thing in this whole darned world you're good for is talk.' And in my naïveté I thought that she meant 'dialog' so I went I tried my hand at writing a short story."

"What happened?"

"It stunk."

"Maybe it wasn't all that bad," Daryl mused. "Sometimes you're your own worst critic."

"Trust me...as I recall it was entitled 'The Pursuit of Happiness' and Happiness was the main character's name."

Daryl snorted and took a sip of his campfire coffee. "Guess you made the right career choice, then."

Allison paused before quietly asking, "What about you? Did you ever want to be a teacher or a fireman or airline pilot when you were a kid?" She knew he didn't like to reveal very much of his past, so she was taking a chance in even asking.

He looked at his plate absent-mindedly while he seemed lost in thought. Finally he spoke. "At one time I thought it would be cool to be a marine biologist. I used to love watching those Jacques Cousteau specials on TV."

"I still remember that theme song," Allison commented. "Granddaddy used to watch those shows whenever they were on PBS."

"You mean he actually wrenched the remote control out of your hands long enough to watch something he liked?" Daryl teased, knowing how addicted to television she'd been growing up.

"For your information, we didn't get a TV with a remote until I was much older, when Granddaddy got sick. Before that I was always the remote control – as in 'Allison, go turn it to channel 4, it's time for the news.' I remember making the mistake one night after Granny couldn't decide what to watch and had me up and down, up and down, changing the channel and then adjusting the antenna for the millionth time – we didn't have cable at the time – of saying 'I bet this is why there was a Baby Boom after World War II; you old people didn't want to have to get up and change the channel yourselves!' Earned myself a big ol' smack upside my head that night, I tell you what. Dunno how she happened to always have that wooden spoon so handy..."

"It was a different time back then, I guess," Daryl remarked. "I coulda never gotten away with smartin' off the way Carl does. Funniest thing was my ol' man would holler 'Watch your goddamned f-ing language at me while whippin' me with his belt if I ever dared to cuss in front of him, apparently not realizing or caring that he was using those same swear words while supposedly teaching me a lesson.' He grinned slightly at the memory. "I woulda laughed at the time if it hadn't hurt so much."

"Oh, you learn at an early age to never laugh while they're beating you, don't you?" Allison replied, touched that he was opening up so much. "Nothing made Granny angrier than when she was whuppin' on me and I didn't cry... I remember once when I asked her 'What're you tryin' to do, tickle me?'. Whoah, buddy, that was the wrong thing to say. She tossed her wooden spoon aside and picked up a darned electric extension cord." Allison shuddered involuntarily at the memory. "That was the last time I talked back during a whupping." She knew that her Granny's occasional
outbursts were probably nothing compared to what Daryl had had to endure growing up – after all, her torso wasn't covered with scars. But she knew that it pained him to open up about his past and she was hoping to make him feel less self-conscious by sharing a sort of childhood solidarity, as tenuous as it was.

"So your grandma was the strict one?" Daryl asked.

"Pretty much. Granddaddy was much more easy-going, and sometimes I got the feeling that even he was afraid of Granny. What about you – your dad was usually the disciplinarian?"

He chewed on the omnipresent imaginary hangnail on his thumb. "Yeah. He was strict even before Ma got sick…" His eyes clouded over, as if his mind was a million miles away. He was silent for several moments and then he looked up at Allison and asked, "Why does chemotherapy make a person's hair fall out?"

Allison suppressed a smile at his sudden change of topic. Sometimes he was just like a little boy. But since he had mentioned his mother being sick – and this wasn't the first time – she presumed that Mrs. Dixon had had cancer.

"The drugs in chemo are designed to kill cancer cells. Cancer cells reproduce very rapidly, which is how the drugs find them and kill them. Unfortunately, the cells in our body that grow hair also reproduce very quickly, and the chemo drugs mistake them for cancer cells and kill them, too."

He seemed to consider this information. "Do you think Carol had chemotherapy and that's why her hair is so short?"

Allison was momentarily taken aback. She thought he'd been asking about his dear departed mother and now he brings up Carol?! She took a moment to control the unreasonable anger that was rising up her throat.

"It's possible, but I doubt it. Chemo kills all the hair cells, including eyebrows, eyelashes, arm hair, et cetera. She doesn't have the 'look' of other cancer patients I've encountered. Honestly, I think her hair is that short because of her late husband…she mentioned to me a while ago when we were scavenging clothes that Ed didn't let her wear nice things. Odds are he didn't allow her to have long, luxurious hair, either."

Allison stood up abruptly. "If you're done eating, I'll clean up," she stated, reaching for his plate and flatware.

Daryl handed her his plate and utensils wordlessly, somewhat confused by her sudden change of attitude. "Don't wander off, just go to the pump and back. You got your machete?" Allison wordlessly lifted it from her hip to show him it was handy and walked off.

He didn't know that much about women and relationships, but it seemed like he'd pissed her off somehow and he didn't know why. He mentally reviewed their conversation…her sudden change of passion seemed to have popped up when he'd asked about Carol. Why would Allison be upset because he'd mentioned Carol….? For Christ's sake, he was just curious as to why Carol was so clingy…maybe she was recovering from cancer or something. He was just trying to make sense of a nonsensical situation, and he thought maybe Allison could help to shed some light. He'd seen movies about people with cancer and the drugs always made them go bald. He was just looking for a logical explanation. He sighed, shook his head and extinguished the fire. If he lived to be a million, he would never understand women…
Chapter 29

Allison scrubbed the two plates and few utensils she'd brought with her under the water pump with more aggression than was necessary for basic cleanliness. She was taking out her anger at Daryl's mention of Carol on their dishes.

"Why is he so obsessed with Carol?" her mind was a tumble of questions. "OK, maybe his question was completely innocent and borne of just basic curiosity…Carol's cropped hair is unusual, after all…but why does he care enough to inquire about it?" She washed and rewashed the same plate with a vengeance as she rolled the matter over and over in her mind. "OK, he's told you more than once that he loves you, why isn't that enough? Why do you get your hackles all raised when he mentions this woman who is old enough to be his mother?"

"I just don't know," Allison muttered out loud, throwing a plate onto the ground in frustration. She picked it up to re-wash it and thought to herself "I really don't know…it doesn't make sense to be jealous of Carol; after all, I was the one he asked to move into his tent. I was the one he gave this beautiful necklace to…" She unconsciously fingered the angel pendant around her neck as her thoughts meandered. "Why can't I just trust him and feel secure that he doesn't have feelings for Carol… Oh, for Heaven's sake, it's probably because he mentions her all the time, and she has a habit of hanging around him. He never brings up Andrea or Maggie in casual conversation…it's always Carol…"

She gathered up the dinnerware, stood up and turned and almost crashed right into Daryl.

"You startled me!" she gasped.

"I was worried 'bout you walking in the dark, what with your hands full and everything," he told her. "Here, give me that heavy stuff, you carry the flashlight."

Two plates, two forks and two knives were hardly heavy…he was really making it difficult to stay angry with him when he turned around and did something considerate like this.

As they walked back to the tent Daryl commented cautiously, not wanting to upset her again, "Your mind must've been somewhere else, the way I was able to walk right up without you hearing. You have to stay alert, especially at night."

"You're right. I shouldn't have been daydreaming…or nightdreaming, whatever," she agreed. After a moment she slipped her arm through the crook of his elbow and said softly, "thanks for looking after me."

"Somebody's gotta do it if you're not going to take care of yourself," he grumbled, shrugging off praise as always.

When they arrived at the tent Daryl started to attempt to hold the flap open for Allison with his foot. "Here, I've got it," she told him, stepping inside, feeling her anger evaporating even further.

He followed her inside and then handed her the dishes. "You got everything under control for a minute? I've gotta….I'll be right back," he said, avoiding her glance. She smiled, knowing what he had to do. She remembered the time she'd involuntarily uttered "Eeew" when he'd first said "I gotta piss" in front of her. She couldn't help it; at that time, they were in the first blush of romance; they'd only kissed maybe one time, and it embarrassed her to think of him and bodily functions in the same breath. On top of that, she never used the word "piss" herself, so pile one neurosis on top of
the other and now poor Daryl had to stop and consciously consider his phrasing before going off to relieve himself.

She quickly kicked off her shoes changed into her "nightgown" and was arranging the covers on their sleeping area when Daryl returned. He sat down on a chair and unlaced his boots. "That's a nice, um, shirt…is it new?"

Allison couldn't help but smile now. Oh, this man…how could anyone be upset with him when he was obviously making an effort to be on his best behavior. And complimenting a raggedy old man's shirt was such a transparent attempt at making nice…the anger she'd felt just half an hour earlier was replaced with a warm glow that wrapped around her heart. "Well, it's 'new' to me, but it's just an old shirt of Otis's. Patricia gave it to me the other day when I mentioned that we were both running out of clothes. His pants and shirts are too big for you, but I figured I could use a couple of his shirts to sleep in. They're not Victoria's Secret, but they're comfy."

"Well, you look pretty in it," he said very sincerely. Allison could not resist a minute more; she walked over to where he sat and wrapped her arms around his shoulders and hugged him tightly. She kissed the top of his head.

"You're very sweet," she murmured into his hair. She sighed and then gently stroked his scalp as she still held him close. She had probably over-reacted before, she thought to herself. Daryl was just showing concern for Carol, that was all. Right? She was pretty certain that he never did things like compliment her appearance or monitor his language for her. She felt his warm breath against her bosom as he sighed heavily and pulled closer into her embrace.

She seems to not be mad anymore, Daryl thought to himself as her relaxing fingertips sent tingles across his scalp and down his spine. Maybe he'd ask her later what he'd said to make her mad. Or maybe it was best to just let it go and not stir up a hornet's nest. He'd have to consider it later, when she wasn't hypnotizing him with her magic touch. After a few minutes he sat back in the chair and looked up at Allison.

"Speaking of Patricia, I talked to her about not going into that shed alone with Randall in there. I'm gonna tell you the same thing. It ain't safe, and I do not want you to be alone with him. I'd prefer it if you let Hershel take care of him. But if you have to do whatever, I'm telling you, not asking you, to not go in there alone. If you can't find me, then find T-Dog or Rick. Or even Shane. I don't know much more about the guy than what I've heard from Rick and Glenn, but I think that Randall is bad news and could be dangerous."

"I trust your judgment," Allison said simply.

Daryl's voice grew softer. "I don't think I'm very demandin' when it comes to you, or to us, but this is one time when I am going to insist."

Allison knelt down so that she was eye level with him. "I know you only tell me what to do or what not to do when it's for my own safety. I promise you I won't go in there alone. Like I said, I trust your gut. And from what Hershel told me about what went on in that bar, I don't much trust Randall, either. Or the people he was with." She kissed him and then stood up to give him room to finish undressing. She lay down under the covers and he extinguished the light and joined her a few minutes later.

She snuggled against him in the dark, inhaling his wonderful scent that was uniquely male, uniquely Daryl. He wrapped an arm around her neck and pulled her head underneath his chin. "When I hear about the behavior of people like the crowd Randall was with," she told him quietly, "I learn to truly appreciate the group we have here." She kissed his neck. "I think that sometimes
we women take the safety we enjoy in this camp for granted. We can walk around without being leered at or groped or worse."

"Real men don't treat women that way," Daryl replied. "Even Merle…" he paused for a moment before continuing. "…Merle had a mouth on him, and could say some nasty things to women… women he didn't even know…but he was really all talk; he would never force himself on a girl. Heck, I've even seen him coldcock a guy at the bar a time or two when that guy got too grabby with a woman."

"It's always been my experience that most rural Southern men have that same vague code of honor…" Allison said. "I mean, I grew up seeing men who scratched themselves in public and spat tobacco in whatever container was handy and cursed like longshoremen but who always still retained a certain level of respect for women. They might talk trash sometimes, but if a woman said 'no' to a physical advance, then they were strictly hands-off."

"That's 'cause they know that that's someone's mother or sister or daughter. Decent men wouldn't want their own women folk to be treated that way. 'Do unto others'…"

"It's a shame that there aren't more men like you in the world," Allison said softly into his neck. Daryl didn't reply immediately lest his unsteady voice gave him away. He was suddenly overcome with emotion. Never in his life would he have imagined someone wishing out loud that there were more Dixons in the world, much less a beautiful woman curled up in his arms the one doing the wishing. Hell, he'd never ever pictured himself cuddling with a woman like this – a soft, smart, kind, sweet-smelling woman who genuinely enjoyed his company. One who'd actually told him more than once that she loved him. It occurred to him that this zombie apocalypse was a nightmare to pretty much everyone else, but daily life hadn't changed all that much for him since the dead began to walk. He still hunted for his food, spent much of his time outdoors, and instead of dealing with Merle's unpredictable temper he had to fend off flesh-eating monsters. OK, maybe that last part was an obstacle he'd never had to deal with before. But in the midst of this nightmare he'd found a dream – a woman who'd seen him at his worst and still wanted to spend all her time with him. She didn't "accept" him, she genuinely loved him…as far as he could tell with his limited love track record, that is, which up 'til now had been a big zero.

He finally spoke. "I hope your friend…" he paused.

"Patricia," Allison supplied.

"Patricia," he repeated, "didn't think I was out of order tellin' her what to do."

"Not at all," Allison assured him. "In fact, she mentioned that you were the first to think of warning her, to consider that Randall was a danger." She pulled her face from the crook of his neck and looked up at him. "She could be your friend, too, you know. I think you'd like her, she's very nice."

"Mmm," he grunted without enthusiasm.

"She was showing me an old photo album when I was in her room the other day, when she offered me Otis's clothes…they looked like such a happy, down-to-earth couple. I was actually imagining…" her voice trailed off.

"Imagining what?"

"Never mind, it'll sound stupid."

"You started it, might as well finish it."
"Well, a couple of the photos showed them sitting at the kitchen table playing a board game with another couple, and I kinda imagined meeting them and knowing them in a different world…like you and I getting together with them now and then to rent a movie or play Uno or something. Doing couple things together. Like I said, it sounds corny and stupid…"

"Would you be happy, livin' like that? If there weren't walkers and such and we had managed to get together anyway?" he asked her quietly.

"What do you mean, 'living like that'?" Allison wasn't sure what he meant.

"I mean not going out to fancy restaurants or to nightclubs and living in the big city. Would you get restless living in the country and just going to barbecues or church potlucks? Or visiting with just a few friends for entertainment instead of going to parties?"

"Gee, I don't know," Allison said with a touch of sarcasm to her voice. "That lifestyle would be sooo different from my previous routine of working 12 hours a day and then eating some carry-out food in front of the TV all alone before I fell asleep in my chair, not to mention using my days off to do laundry and run errands and attempt to maybe dust where it showed or do enough dishes so mold didn't start growing in my sink. You know, come to think of it, it would really be hard to give all that up in exchange for watching a movie at home after dinner with someone who'd argue with you whether tonight should be comedy or a horror night and who would snuggle with you under an afghan on the couch no matter what you ended up choosing. Or for going out with that someone once in a while to spend the evening with another couple who has the same basic values and interests as you and are happy playing Trivial Pursuit or Password or Outburst or some board game while downing a beer or two or three and chit-chatting in between turns. And around midnight or so after such an outing we would drive back to our quiet rural home on a lonely country road without worrying about running into some drunk-driving checkpoint. In fact, if we got pulled over for any reason the local deputy would know us because I'm the doctor who made a house call when his kid was running a high fever and you're the guy who fixed his leaky roof for just the cost of materials. He wouldn't whip out his breathalyzer gadget which might send you to jail for having two beers in your system; he'd just smile and say 'take it easy, drive safely' and send us on our way. Hmm…that lifestyle would take some getting used to…"

Daryl gave her a playful noogie with one hand and commented, "I can see that you didn't overthink that scenario."

"Seriously," Allison amended, "I was never much of a party person. Some of the most fun I've ever had on my nights off since I started working was 'game night' at one of my neighbors' apartments in our building. They were a married couple, around my age. Sometimes it was just the three of us – and yes, occasionally I felt awkward because I didn't have a date or a husband – but they never made me feel weird. We'd have some cocktails and some snacks and just laugh our heads off playing all sorts of different board games. Once in a while Kathleen – my friend from the hospital, the one who was driving me home from Durham when we parted company in Atlanta – would join me with them for game night. We'd always be laughing at how seriously she took every game; geez, she couldn't play a friendly game of Scrabble without a dictionary at her elbow." She chuckled at the memory. "And I don't mind a fancy dinner out at a nice restaurant now and then, but so far those have always been some sort of special occasion or treat for me, never a regular thing."

Daryl kissed her forehead. "If you could be happy livin' that kind of life, then I guess I can go ahead and have my own daydreams without you laughin' at 'em…"

"You've had daydreams? Of us? Like what?" she prompted him.
"Well, sometimes...sometimes I think of a time in the future once all the walkers are gone. When life is getting back to normal...and we're still together."

"Go on," she encouraged him.

"Now I'll sound stupid," he grumbled.

"As you always say, you started it, you best finish it."

He sighed. "OK, I sometimes kinda picture us setting up house somewhere and bein' together, but it's all Little House on the Prairie because there's still no stores and you have to cook what I kill and sew clothes from scratch...." He turned sideways and propped himself up on his elbow. "And then I feel real silly for thinkin' such thoughts, as if a professional woman, a big city doctor, could ever be content stayin' at home and just cooking and sewing and, well, being a housewife."

Allison was silent for a moment. Hearing Daryl talk of thinking of a future that included her made her feel warm all over and temporarily banished all thoughts of Carol from her mind. She turned to face him and propped herself up as well. Looking into his eyes she replied, "Truth be told, a few years ago I couldn't picture myself staying home all day and taking care of household chores. But part of that was probably because at that time it took two incomes pay the bills no matter where you lived. And even though deep down I resent Lori telling me that I have to do laundry, I really don't mind doing yours and mine. In fact -- and I never thought it was possible to feel this way -- but I actually enjoy doing things for you. Cooking what you kill, cleaning and mending your clothes. Maybe it's because you, unlike a lot of men I've observed over the years, truly appreciate it when someone takes care of you. You don't just sit back and expect it." Daryl gently pushed her onto her back and kissed her lips tenderly. "Whatever the reason for this feeling," Allison said after he lifted his face from hers, "I truly hope that it never goes away."

He leaned down and kissed her cheek then her neck. "You mentioned that you need clothes?" He buried his face in her cleavage.

"We both do," she murmured with her eyes closed, trying to concentrate on what he was saying. "I only packed enough for a week when I left North Carolina for Georgia, and other than that I've got a few things we've scavenged since then. And I took some of Otis's socks for you, since you are in desperate need of some. But..." she paused to moan as he unbuttoned her shirt and began to tease her left nipple ever so delicately with his tongue. "...the rest of his clothes are too big for you. Cold weather's coming, you'll need some shirts with sleeves.....Mmmmmnhh.....a few more pairs of pants.....Oh, God....."

He paused long enough to reply. "I can go back to that town where the pawn shop was and fetch some stuff. There were a couple of other stores there, probably have some clothes...." He returned his attention to her breast and she arched her back in response.

"Unnhhhhh," she grunted, "I don't want you to take any chances...don't know if it's safe...there....oooh, that feels so goood," she pushed his head further down, forcing him to take almost the entire breast into his mouth. He variously suckled and tickled it for many minutes before he paused for breath.

"It'll be OK, I can take care of myself," he exhaled breathlessly.

She pulled his face up to hers and looked into his eyes. "Um, maybe we can talk about this later?" She asked before mashing her lips to his. His response was unintelligible as their tongues dueled with one another and eventually their bodies entwined more and more frantically until neither could tell where one began and the other ended...
Chapter 30

Allison had to make two trips to the river before she could start washing clothes the next morning. The reason for the second trip was summed up in one word: Carol. When Allison first arrived at the usual laundry spot, she found Carol sitting there with her washboard, scrubbing away. Allison knew that Daryl was very sensitive about anyone else seeing his underwear and socks (that's why he'd previously always done his own laundry), so she hiked back to the tent to leave his unmentionables for another time when she had privacy. And why he was shy about something so innocuous as his socks was a mystery, but Allison knew she had no room to complain, since she had her own quirks about things like swear words and talking about her period even though she was a doctor.

She scooped up a bucket of water, grabbed a bar of Fels Naptha and a scrub brush and settled down beside Carol.

"How's it going?" she asked the older woman as a greeting.

"Oh, fine," Carol replied without looking at her. "I have to admit, though, every time I get to scrubbin' clothes I miss my Maytag more and more."

"What kind of washing machine did you have?" Allison asked, not that she cared, but at least it seemed like a topic of conversation. She always seemed at a loss for words when it came to talking to Carol. "Was it one of those front loaders, low suds things?"

"No, it was a top-loader…a heavy duty old school Maytag from back when appliances were built to last." The woman sounded almost nostalgic talking about a washing machine.

Allison worked up as much lather as she could with bar soap and began scrubbing her own underwear. "The apartment building where I lived before…before all this…had coin operated machines in the basement. I don't remember the brand name, but they were all top-loaders." She wrung out a pair of her underpants. "I don't know what I was doing wrong, but so many times my clothes had white smears on them – sort of like what you get when you put on a shirt before your deodorant's dry."

"That comes from over-stuffing the load," Carol said with authority. "When you put more clothes in than the washer's equipped to handle at one time, you'll get those blotches. The agitator has to have room to rinse the clothes, you know."

"Well, that was probably my problem, then…I'll admit I crammed in as many clothes as I could to get my 50 cents worth out of every load. I always figured that if the machine didn't go off balance or shut down or something then I hadn't put too much in it."

The two worked quietly for a few minutes before Carol asked, "So you used to live in an apartment building? You didn't have a house?"

"It was a nice apartment," Allison suddenly felt defensive. "Why do you ask?"

"I just thought that rich doctors lived in fancy houses, that's all," Carol replied, squeezing the water out a shirt. "I mean, Ed and I weren't wealthy by any means, but we lived in a house…"

"I wasn't rich," Allison told her. "I made a living. I thought about maybe buying a house someday…not that I know anything about that… It's funny, I can look at an MRI or CT scan and immediately understand and interpret it, but house-buying terms like 'short sale' and 'mortgage
"Really…” Carol mused. Then she remarked "Is it because you're young and just starting out that you didn't make a lot of money…? Because it seems to me that doctors usually drive Cadillacs or Mercedes –"

Allison interrupted her. "Let me ask you this – when Sophia was a baby, did her pediatrician drive a Cadillac? Or a Lincoln or a BMW?"

Carol seemed to ponder the question before stating, "Best I can recall, the one time I saw him in the parking lot he was getting out of a Toyota. But maybe - "

"There's a saying in medical school," Allison interjected, "'Little people, little dollars.' Pediatrics is among the lowest-paying medical specialties, mainly because so many mothers these days are low-income and Medicaid pays the bills. As a rule, any doctor you see driving a luxury car is either an older person – someone who's been practicing for 20-plus years – or someone in one of the elite specialties, like plastic surgery. In other words, those doctors who cater to the wealthy who pay out of pocket."

Carol seemed genuinely surprised. "I never knew that. I always thought that because it cost so much to see a doctor that, well, they were all fairly well-off."

"Doctors don't get to keep most of that money that is billed to patients," Allison explained. "So much of that fee goes to pay for things like medical malpractice insurance…that's part of why I chose to sign on with a specific hospital as an ER doctor – they pay your insurance premiums, which are massive, I assure you. And in the end it still comes out of my salary…I earn a lot less per hour than a private practice doctor, but because my malpractice insurance is a huge group plan covered by the hospital I won't go bankrupt if I ever get sued…" Allison paused, surprised that she was talking in the present tense. Well, school and work had been so all-consuming for so many years; sometimes it was hard to realize that that chapter of her life was firmly closed forever.

"Well, anyway, insurance stuff makes my head spin almost as much as house buying stuff."

"Is that so…” Carol murmured. She'd obviously stopped listening or caring a few sentences ago, Allison decided. But before she could apologize for having gone on like a lecturer her attention was diverted by approaching footsteps. She turned and looked to see Daryl walking their way with a small bundle in his arms and his ever-present crossbow on his shoulder.

"Um, hey there," he awkwardly greeted the duo. Allison knew him well enough by now to see both the small pile of underwear and socks in his hands and his embarrassment at finding Carol sitting beside her.

"You been out hunting?" Carol asked him with a smile and an interest that she hadn't even shown Allison when discussing her precious Maytag.

"Yeah, got some squirrels for later, but I think we're havin' raccoon tonight…?"

"It's a good-sized one I've got brining," Allison explained to Carol. "Gonna roast it later this afternoon for dinner tonight. Patricia said we could help ourselves to the vegetables in Hershel's garden, so I'm hopin' to whip up some sweet potato stuffing to go with it, along with some sautéed greens…"

"That sounds nice," Carol replied absently, never taking her eyes off of Daryl. "Can I wash those things for you?" she asked, nodding toward the small bundle in his hands.
"Um, no thanks, this isn't really laundry...I was just, um, bringin' it to ask Allison about my missing sock. I've only got so many pairs and one is missing." Allison suppressed a smile at his lame explanation.

"It's in my hair," Allison told him as she rinsed out the last of her lingerie.

"It's where?" Daryl asked in genuine confusion.

"I was going to try to darn it for you," Allison explained, "but there wasn't enough thread in the entire sewing kit to fix those holes. It was time to face up to the fact that it was time to retire it to the sock graveyard. So I cut it up and used it to make this sock bun." She placed her right hand on the large donut-shaped bun that she had gathered her long blonde hair into on the back of her head.

"You cut up his sock without asking?" Carol asked in a tone that made Allison feel as if she'd committed genocide.

"Oh, for Heaven's sake, it was one stinkin' sock," Allison protested.

"I've still got Ed's clothes packed away," Carol told Daryl. Allison used every last fiber of her restraint to not interject, 'I'll bet you've got some wife beaters in your suitcase, then.' "I'm sure there are some clean socks that you can have," Carol continued.

"He has some clean, fairly new socks that Patricia gave me," Allison stated, rolling her eyes. "He just hasn't found them because I didn't place them in his outstretched hands."

"Well, I'd best go back and hide them before you cut them up to make a skirt or somethin'," Daryl said with a wry smile.

"I think Carol's almost done here, but I'll be a little while longer," Allison told him, knowing that he'd catch her meaning. Carol would be gone in a short while and he could bring his delicates back for Allison to launder in private.

"Oh, you don't need to help me carry this basket back to the clothesline," Carol told Daryl with exaggerated graciousness, totally misunderstanding Allison's statement. "I've got everything under control, but thank you very much for offering."

"Um, OK, then," Daryl replied, exchanging a glance with Allison that told her he knew to bring his dirty clothes back in half an hour or so. "Dale's on watch, so you should be safe walking back to camp by yourself," he told Carol.

"Thank you," Carol smiled at him. "You're very kind to be so concerned."

Daryl left and Allison returned to her scrubbing, lost in thought. When exactly did Daryl offer to carry Carol's laundry basket? She was trying to figure out Carol's train of thought when the older woman spoke.

"You really shouldn't be so gruff with him like that," Carol said while packing up her washboard onto her basket of wet clothes. "Men don't take kindly to that kind of attitude."

"Huh?" Allison asked with her usual flair for witty conversation. Well, when she was caught unaware, anyway.

"You made fun of him in front of me. About him not finding his new socks. Men don't like that," she warned.
"He knows I was kidding," Allison assured her. "We joke like that. I wasn't impugning his manhood or anything…"

Carol stood up and turned to leave. "You can use whatever big words you want, but trust me, Daryl doesn't like it." She paused and then said earnestly "I know men and how they think." She walked off toward camp, leaving Allison gaping open-mouthed liked a beached salmon.
"Carol knows men?" Allison thought to herself in a mentally sarcastic tone, still hurting somewhat from the older woman's dressing-down, as she returned to her scrubbing and rinsing. "Maybe she knows how men slapped her around when she wasn't being obedient...." Oh, what's wrong with you, she automatically mentally reprimanded herself...you're just buying a front-row ticket in that handbasket to Hell when you criticize that poor woman. Maybe that's her only experience with men, to be complacent. And for Heaven's sake, she just recently saw her daughter get shot. Have more patience, have more empathy, she told herself.

She heard the familiar hesitant footsteps approaching and announced without turning around, "The coast is clear."

"I can see that," Daryl replied sardonically. He handed Allison his small pile of laundry. She accepted it without comment.

"Somethin' wrong?" he asked.

Allison paused before replying. There was so much going on in their world right now – the threat of walkers, Randall chained in the shed, cold weather approaching – she felt downright silly for being concerned about Carol and her comments. But when Daryl squatted down to look at her eye-level, she felt the floodgates open despite herself.

"It's just...Carol kinda gave me heck for cutting up your sock without permission. And then she implied that I'd embarrassed you in front of her with that remark about you not finding Otis's socks...."

Daryl shook his head and gave her a rare full-mouthed smile. "Fer Christ's sake, you're worried about that? I was just surprised that you had my sock stashed somewhere in your hair, that's all. I'd never heard of such a thing. But I could give a f-- , um, fig what you do with my clothes. Heck, you can wear my pants as a hat as for all I care." He paused. "My slacks, that is. Don't be displayin' my underwear."

"OK, I guess I just wanted to make sure I hadn't upset you...I never said I was the most self-confident person in the world...Heck, I used to always wash my hair right before I went to the salon just so that the person I paid to wash my hair didn't think I was a slob."

Daryl leaned over and kissed her forehead. "Angel, I knew from the get-go that you weren't perfect, so don't let it bother you. Lord knows I've got a fault or two of my own." He paused and then gave her an impish half-smile. "Although maybe it's good that Carol reminds you now and then how best to take care of a man before you get too uppity..." As he finished his statement he rose back up to a standing position and then playfully danced several steps backwards as Allison swiped at him with a wet T-shirt.

"You got your machete? You'll be OK on your own for a bit?" he asked, suddenly serious. When Allison assured him that she'd be fine making her way back to the laundry line stretched out alongside their tent after she'd finished washing his clothes, he excused himself to go off and take watch duty.

Allison was seated at the camp picnic table chopping up the onions and carrots and sweet potatoes
she'd pulled earlier from the garden. She was intent on concocting a stuffing for the roasted raccoon similar to what she'd had as a child. She heard footsteps approaching and looked up from her work to see Beth and Carl.

Beth shyly said "Patricia said you might need some of this," as she held forth a box of Reynold's Wrap aluminum foil.

"Oh, this will definitely come in handy, please thank her for me," Allison told the young girl. Carl seated himself on the opposite side of the picnic table wordlessly and Beth stood by hesitantly, as if awaiting an invitation to stay. "You're welcome to keep me company if you've got nowhere else to be," Allison added. "Of course, I just might put you to work. You didn't happen to bring a kitchen knife with you, did you?"

Beth sat down and shook her head.

"Figures," Allison said with a slight smile. "Well, I could still use the company even if you two are going to be lazy and shiftless."

"Cooking is girls' work," Carl commented.

"So how did your dad survive before he got married, eat at the Waffle House for every meal?"

The boy shrugged. "My grandma probably cooked for him back then."

"Somehow I doubt that. Your dad seems pretty resourceful. Who filled your head with all this girls' work nonsense, anyway?"

"Shane told me."

Allison rolled her eyes. "Now there's a huge surprise."

"He said that that's why he always kept an old lady around, so she could do his cooking and cleaning. But it's funny, I never saw any old cleaning woman at his house. Just his girlfriends."

Beth chuckled for the time in a long time. She'd been so depressed since the barn incident, and her one wrist still had a small bandage on it where she'd make a half-hearted attempt at ending it all.

"He was talking about his girlfriend when he said 'old lady', silly," she told Carl.

"None of his girlfriends were old, either. They were young and really pretty."

"It's just an expression some men use," Allison explained. "They call their girlfriends or wives their 'old ladies.' I don't know why, I guess 'old lady' sounds more macho than saying 'wife'."

Carl looked at Beth. "Are you Jimmy's old lady?"

The young girl looked horrified. "I'm nobody's old lady!" She tugged the sheriff's hat down over Carl's eyes. "Besides, Jimmy and I only dated for three months. It's not like we're married or anything."

"You mean Jimmy didn't sit around with his buddies and say 'I really laid down the law with my ol' lady, told her I wasn't taking her to no chick flick'," Allison said the last part in an exaggerated drawl.

Beth giggled and teased "I bet Daryl goes around telling everyone 'I never let my ol' lady sass me, boy, I'll tell you what'." She lowered her voice to imitate Daryl's growl and swaggered slightly in
"Sure he does, while he's scratching himself and crushing beer cans against his head," Allison agreed. Both girls simultaneously burst out in laughter and Carl joined in, though he wasn't exactly sure what the joke was. But it felt good to laugh, something he did all too infrequently these days.

"How's your mom been feeling?" Allison asked Carl after their laughter died down. She was routinely checking Lori's blood pressure and other vital signs, but since Lori was always insistent on playing the stoic Earth Mother, she would never admit to Allison if she was having any difficulties.

"OK, I guess," Carl shrugged. "She throws up sometimes."

"Eew," Beth murmured.

"Morning sickness," Allison commented. "Perfectly normal during the first trimester."

"They always talk about pregnant women throwing up in movies and stuff, I wasn't sure that that was a real thing," Beth said.

"It's very real. And even though it's called 'morning' sickness it can occur at any time of the day."

"Why does it happen?" Beth asked.

"Oddly enough, scientists aren't exactly sure. The theory is that it's an evolved defense mechanism -"

"A what?" Beth and Carl asked in unison. Allison sighed. Didn't they teach kids anything in science class anymore? No, they were too busy handing out blue ribbons to everyone who just showed up for roll call.

"An evolved defense mechanism is something that develops over many hundreds of years in people and animals and even plants to protect them. For example, a turtle can't run very fast, so it would be easy for a predator to catch it and eat it. So over time it evolved and developed a hard shell for protection. Instead of running away to safety, it hides inside its shell. Scientists believe that expectant mothers developed morning sickness as a way to protect the unborn baby. Hundreds of years ago, we didn't have refrigerators or other things to keep meat and milk and other foods fresh, so a lot of the food people ate back then was filled with germs. Sometimes it wasn't enough to harm an adult, but it could harm the unborn baby. So Nature made mom feel sick to her stomach when she smelled certain foods to keep her from eating them."

"Is that why my mom keeps barfing?" Carl asked, not quite clear on the concept. "Because we don't have refrigerators?"

"Sort of. Even if our food is safe, there is a part of her brain that is being overly cautious and saying 'don't eat this, just in case.'"

"I hate throwing up," Beth commented. "It's like my worst thing in the world."

"Well, then, keeping that in mind would be an excellent form of birth control," Allison smiled.

"What's birth control?" Carl asked.

Beth looked at Allison and giggled. "You're in trouble now," she said in a low voice.
"You should probably ask your mom or dad about that," Allison told him.

"I hate that!" Carl declared.

"Hate what?" Beth asked.

"When I ask a question and someone says 'ask your mom.' What's the big secret? I'm not a little kid!"

"Well, why don't you just ask your mom, then?" Beth asked.

Carl looked down at the table top. "'Cause I always seem to bother her when I ask her stuff."

Allison felt a pang of sadness for the boy. Certainly she wasn't the only one in camp who'd noticed how Lori constantly seemed to pawn Carl off onto the nearest adult, as if she couldn't be bothered to take care of her own son. Allison couldn't really fault Rick, as he was busy taking care of everyone in the camp as well as his child, but Lori wasn't exactly spending her waking hours occupied with manual labor.

"Well, Squirt" she sighed, "It's a little complicated to explain in detail right now, since I'm about done here and have to get this raccoon on the grill… But here's an example. You've heard of China, the country, right?"

Carl nodded his head.

"Over one billion people live in China. And the people there realized that if they kept having lots of babies, there wouldn't be enough food for everyone, because there wasn't enough land to grow rice or raise cattle. So married people learned how to have only one or two babies per family so that the population wouldn't get too big and people would starve. That's what birth control is, planning how many children to have or deciding to not have them at all."

Carl digested this information. "Oh, OK, I get it. So like if they're poor and don't have enough food a mom and dad can say we'll wait to have a baby until we get more money, right?"

"Something like that," Allison said, standing up. "Right now I need a strong pair of arms to carry this pan to camp for me. Think you can help me out?"

"Sure," Carl grinned and picked up the roasting pan that was filled with chopped vegetables. He trotted off and Allison called "Don't get too far ahead of us, y'hear?" To Beth she said "Why don't you come with me; I can give you the foil to take back to Patricia after I take what I need. And then one of the men can walk you back to the house."

"OK," Beth said, falling in step beside her. "You do know that after he thinks about it Carl is going to have more questions about birth control and where babies come from. Especially after that weird explanation you gave."

"Well, I deflected him the best I could. Do you think he'll buy the stork story?"

Beth giggled. "I dunno…I'm just glad I won't have to deal with Mrs. Grimes when Carl starts asking more questions."

"What about you? How are you doing?"

Beth shrugged as they walked. "Better, I guess. Sometimes, anyway. Other times I still wonder why we all bother to try to carry on. What's the point?"
"What was the point before all this happened?" Allison asked her.

"We didn't have flesh-eating freaks chasing us before," Beth protested.

"No, but we had disease, crime, natural disasters, whatever. Before this happened your mom could've just as easily died in a car accident or you might have died a long, painful, lingering death from cancer. Life has always been a crap shoot, there have never been any guarantees. We carry on because we have to." Allison stopped walking and gently grasped Beth's elbow. "Suicide is an easy out for the victim, but it is so, so painful for the people left behind. I saw it too many times in the ER. One person's suffering is over forever, but family and friends have to deal with it every day for the rest of their lives. Maybe it's just my personal point of view, but I think it would have been very selfish of you to 'opt out', as they say. Your dad and Maggie seem determined to survive as long as possible in this new world, but losing you would've been such a crushing blow. It would have affected their ability to carry on. Your choice could have harmed their attempt at survival."

Beth didn't seem completely convinced. She was quiet for a few minutes and then shrugged and said simply, "Maybe."

The raccoon was not yet fully cooked but had been roasting long enough for several people to stop by and ask "What smells so good?" It amused Allison to see the look on their face when she revealed what was for supper. Like Allison, T-Dog had grown up eating 'coon during the holidays, so he recognized the aroma immediately.

"Mmm," he stood near the fire and inhaled. "Smells just like grandma's house on Christmas Eve. Don't tell me you made sweet potato stuffing?!"

"I did, thanks to Mr. Hershel's garden," Allison confirmed.

"Damn, girl!" he exploded then corrected himself. "I mean, darn! Will you marry me?"

She smiled and said, "Why don't you wait until after you actually taste it before you propose?"

"Hey, Allison, can I talk to you for a minute?" Shane strolled up and asked.

"Sure, what's up?"

"Rick wants to know if Randall is fit to be cut loose yet, and I can't find Hershel anywhere. Can you give him a quick look-see and tell me if his leg is healed up?"

"Rick sent you?" She asked somewhat warily.

"Yeah, he's busy right now otherwise he woulda asked you himself."

"Well," she hesitated slightly, "Let me get my bag and find Daryl."

"He don't need a complete physical, I just want you to look at his leg."

"OK, but Daryl told me not to go in there alone – "

"You won't be alone, I'm going with you. Won't take but a few minutes, just need you to officially say yes or no the kid can walk on it."

"All right," she reluctantly agreed, without much of a choice. Shane had already started steering her in the direction of the shed.
"Can we slow down, please?" Allison asked as she tried to keep up with Shane's stride. "What's the rush?"

Shane stopped abruptly and waited for her to catch up. He looked around in every direction, turning his head like a lighthouse, scoping out the immediate area.

"All right, while you catch your breath, I want to discuss something with you," Shane told her. "Randall is dangerous, he shot at Rick and Glenn and Hershel. I am not comfortable with him being so close to our camp."

"But I thought the plan was to drive him out somewhere far away and just leave him to fend for himself. If we all keep a close eye on him until he's taken away and set free, then what's the harm – "

Shane gripped both of Allison's shoulders somewhat roughly and pivoted her so that she faced him. "I'll tell you what the harm is… If he's able enough, he might just manage to make his way back to wherever his group is holed up. He could lead them back here, they could take this farm away from us."

Allison shrugged Shane's hands off of her shoulders. "That's a big 'if'," she replied. "He was blindfolded when he was brought here, and I presume he'll be blindfolded when he's taken away. That could possibly confuse his sense of direction, don't you think?"

"Do you really want to take that chance?" Shane asked.

"I really haven't thought about it that much, to be honest…"

"Well, think about it now," Shane told her, his eyes boring holes into hers. "You know that Lori's pregnant, and I think you know how I feel about her - "

"I saw your feelings for her at the CDC," Allison said quietly.

"No, you didn't!" He managed to shout in a whisper. "What you saw was just a misunderstanding!" He leaned forward so that his face was mere millimeters away from hers. "I love Lori. I would never hurt her. I want you to know that!"

Allison was feeling more and more uneasy. "Lori told me the same thing the next morning, that you didn't mean to hurt her. In fact, she begged me to not tell anyone about what happened, and I never have." Shane seemed to relax ever so slightly at her words, so she lied in order to continue placating him, to keep him calm. "Women don't usually defend their attackers if they don't have feelings for them." She felt nauseated deep down for basically turning traitor on her own gender and saying such a disgusting thing about rapists, but her statement had the desired effect. The expression on his face indicated that he'd found a kindred spirit, someone who understood that he and Lori were destined to be together.

"Don't get me wrong, Rick's my best friend, I love him like a brother…but I love Lori, too, and I
"think you know now that she loves me, seein' what she said to you," he told her.

"Uh-huh," was all she could think to reply, not knowing where he was going with this conversation.

"Like I said, I love Rick, but he's gotten kinda soft-hearted lately and sometimes his decisions are based on….well, let's just say he's not facing reality."

"I'm not sure I know what you mean," she replied hesitantly.

"I mean that Rick gets caught up in bein' the camp hero, tryin' to save everyone and he loses focus on the basics. He forgets everything we learned 'way back at the Academy. He's not concentrating on keepin' Lori and Carl safe."

"Isn't he trying to keep all of us safe?"

"Yes he is," Shane began to talk to her as if she was a child, "But he is also gettin' overly democratic when it comes to making the hard decisions. There's a famous sayin' by some philosopher...'sometimes the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few'. Rick is taking care of the needs of Randall, a prisoner who shot at him, above those of his wife and son. And unborn child."

"I still don't know why you brought me out here. Where do I fit in in all this existential rumination?" If he was going to pass off Mr. Spock as a 'philosopher' as if she hadn't gone beyond the seventh grade, then she was going to match him psychological term for term.

"Randall is a danger to all of us," Shane repeated. "More so than those walkers in the barn. You are contributing to the problem by treating him, taking care of his injuries."

"What choice do I have?" Allison asked him. "For Heaven's sake, even Susan Atkins, after she was sentenced to the gas chamber, was afforded extensive medical and dental care while she lived in the California Institution for Women. Whatever your personal feelings, prisoners do have rights."

"Susan who?" Shane asked, confused.

"Speaking of the Academy, wasn't crime history a required course?" She couldn't help it; maybe it was some sort of intellectual snobbery, but she always lost patience with people who hadn't learned what she considered to be the basics. "Susan Atkins, also known as Sadie Mae Glutz, member of the Manson Family – that's Charles Manson, by the way – who by her own admission held Sharon Tate's arms while Tex Watson stabbed her to death."

"Oh, yeah, of course I've heard of the Manson Family," Shane sputtered, caught by surprise by this sudden change of topic. He hated when someone derailed his train of thought and took over the conversation. He preferred to always be in charge.

"Well, I read her autobiography…actually I've read many similar books, true crime has always been a hobby of mine…and she mentioned that after the trial was over and she'd been sentenced to death then the State of California took care of all the medical concerns that she'd neglected for so many years while living on Spahn Ranch. As every prison does whether the patient be Richard Speck, John Wayne Gacy, Gary Gilmore - - "

"OK, OK, I get it, why don't you save the history lesson for Carl," Shane held up his hands. "What I'm sayin' is that turning Randall loose is a mistake. And keeping him here indefinitely is a bigger mistake."
"So what's the alternative?" Allison asked, already certain of his answer.

"Look, you know Rick...he's bein' all humanitarian these days and would never agree to...well, to 'dispatching' of Randall right here and now."

"Again, I'm not understanding how I fit in - "

"You're a doctor," Shane once again took on the tone of voice he would use when talking to a small child. "You can take care of what needs to be done....medically."

"I'm a doctor, but I'm not Dr. Kevorkian, if that's what you're proposing," Allison told him. "I did take an oath, you know."

"I don't think those rules apply anymore, do you?" Shane asked her.

"Hershel's a doctor, too," Allison ventured. "Why don't you ask him to take care of 'what needs to be done'?"

"Hershel's an old, by-the-book, ethical kind of guy."

"And I'm not ethical?!!" Now she was doubly offended.

"I didn't say that," Shane tried to sound soothing, grasping her right forearm, "I'm just sayin' that you're younger, you haven't had as much on-the-job experience as Hershel...you can very easily go in and give Randall an 'accidental' overdose of his painkiller and when he doesn't wake up just tell everyone that you must have made a mistake."

"Are you serious?!" She jerked her arm away from him. "You actually want me to undermine everyone's confidence in my medical expertise just to euthanize Randall and put your mind at ease? Not to mention any ethical conundrums I personally have at the mere suggestion -"

"Why don't you save those ten dollar words to impress your jerk of a redneck boyfriend," Shane said dismissively. "All I'm asking is - "

Allison visibly rose up into a stick-straight posture, almost towering over the stubble-headed lawman. "What you are asking is for me to murder a man in cold blood, without the benefit of a trial, and then to play stupid afterward. And, speaking of stupid, I must respectfully request that you NEVER refer to Daryl as a 'jerk' again. Ever. He may be petulant and brusque sometimes, but he has never been a jerk, unlike some others in this camp I can name." Her eyes bored lasers into his. "And, let the record show, that Daryl has never mocked my vocabulary nor accused me of using words just to be impressive. He is well aware that that is my normal manner of speaking and has not only always understood most of what I say but has also never criticized me for expressing myself in those words. And he most certainly would have immediately recognized that that 'needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few' quote which you attributed to a famous philosopher in your desperate attempt to sound educated was originally said by Mr. Spock in a Star Trek film. Oh, and by the way he would also know what 'petulant' and 'brusque' meant without looking them up or asking someone, unlike you."

Shane's facial expression went from surprised to angry to downright hateful to panicky while she spoke. He needed this woman to stay in camp and to take care of Lori and what he knew was his unborn child, but he also didn't need her to blab to anyone else about the proposal he'd just suggested regarding Randall. In a rush of emotion he grabbed both of her wrists tightly and pleaded forcefully, "Allison, listen to me. I mean you no harm, and no (he paused for a moment, as if this next statement physically pained him) disrespect towards Daryl. I just want what's best for..."
I'm askin' you right now to not say anything to Rick about our conversation until you've had time to think about it, OK?"

"Please let go," Allison replied, "You're hurting me."

Shane instead gripped tighter and hissed, "I'm sayin' again – not a word to anyone, until - "

"Hey, Doc?" A voice called out from the distance. T-Dog approached the pair hesitantly. "I think that raccoon might be gettin' overdone, and I know it don't taste half as good when it's all dried out."

"OK," Allison said over her shoulder without taking her eyes off of Shane. He let go of her wrists and took a few steps backward. "I'm on my way," she said.

"Everything OK?" T-Dog asked the two of them, although he was looking at Allison as he spoke.

"We're good," Shane spoke for her. "We've decided to delay making a decision on Randall for the moment." He glanced at T-Dog, lowered his eyes and walked away in the opposite direction from camp.

"Thank you," Allison whispered to Dog as they headed back to camp.

"No problem," the dark-skinned man replied. "I'm not sure what all was goin' on, but I had an uneasy feeling about it. And Daryl has saved my ass – er, butt, more than once so I figured the least I could do is keep an eye on his woman."

"I appreciate it very much," Allison replied, her normal voice now restored. "I don't guess that I was in any immediate danger, but Shane does scare me sometimes."

"Me, too, to tell the truth. I remember back at the quarry when he was getting in Rick's face for taking us back to that building to get Daryl's brother…” He seemed reflective for a few minutes as they continued walking. "I was no fan of Merle Dixon, believe you me, that guy was one racist, sexist, you name it ‘-ist' piece of work. But it was my fault that he was left handcuffed on that roof, and I aimed to make it good despite Shane and Dale."

"Dale?"

"Yeah," T-Dog recalled, "We needed his bolt cutters since I'd lost the handcuff key. But he didn't want to part with them at first…actually lectured me on leaving his tool bag behind and talked like he wasn't going to let us use his cutters. He finally gave 'em up when Jim negotiated a deal, so to speak."

"Well, for what it's worth, Daryl has never said anything to me about you being responsible for Merle being left behind. Nor Rick, for that matter. He's just not like that. He's never laid any blame."

"I know. I knew that back when he saved me on the highway when that herd of walkers was comin' and I'd slashed my arm all to heck. He coulda just as easily left me as walker bait, distracted that herd with my sorry ass long enough to let everyone else escape, but he didn't."

"Like I said, he's not that way. And neither are you, apparently. I've never met Merle, but from what I've heard he was never very selective in his speech and used all sorts of the very worst racial slurs when talking to you. But yet you went back for him. You have that similar sort of basic human decency hardwired into your character."
"I'd like to think so," T-Dog said contemplatively. "And I do thank you for saying so. Been a long time since I've heard a compliment out loud."

"I'm sorry we all tend to take one another for granted," Allison confessed. "I know that you get saddled with a lot of the grunt work, the hard physical labor, simply because you're…well, very muscular. You're physically strong, unlike Glenn or Dale. And I feel bad sometimes that you're the de facto go-to when it comes to hauling and toting and such, and that none of us give you props for it…"

"Hey," T-Dog seemed simultaneously pleased and embarrassed by her praise. "It's the same for everyone. I don't think we go out of our way to thank Daryl for hunting, or Carol for washing our clothes… I think that we all appreciate one another, and what we all do for the group." He impulsively put an arm around her neck as they walked and used the knuckles of his other hand to rub her scalp and give her a noogie, as he'd seen Daryl do occasionally. "And don't tell your man that I did that," he grinned, "He seems like he might be the jealous type."
Chapter 33

Allison chuckled and impulsively gave T-Dog a quick squeeze around the waist – as much as she could squeeze, anyway. My goodness, that man is a pile of rock solid muscle, she thought to herself.

"I don't know if he's jealous, but maybe just a bit insecure. I can't fault him, I'm not much different… I have to admit that I'm kinda sorta always watching out the corner of my eye when I see him talking to one of the other women."

"Let me give you a piece of advice, comin' from a man who's dealt with more than one crazy-jealous female – and for no reason, mind you," he added parenthetically. "Give the man some breathin' room and also some credit. Every time a man talks to a woman doesn't mean he's lookin' to get a little something on the side. A man can carry a heavy bag for a woman just because he's being a gentleman, it doesn't have to mean that he's gonna buy her a drink and ask for her phone number later."

"You're right, of course," Allison agreed with a sigh. "And I appreciate the advice – it carries some weight coming from someone speaking from experience. And that example was pretty specific, so I'm guessing it did come from experience…?"

"Darn, I dunno what it is with you women…" T-Dog caught himself and backtracked. "With some of you women; they want you to be polite and considerate, in fact, they'll tell you that that's what attracted them to you in the first place. But go and be polite to some other woman, even some old lady trying to carry her groceries in the rain at the bus stop, and they'll whomp you over the head with their purse and call you …" He stopped abruptly and said, "Well, that's not important. Anyway, what I'm sayin' is a woman has got to have some trust. Nothing will make a man run away screaming faster than if she starts to smother him and accuse him at every turn."

"Duly noted," Allison acknowledged, smiling to herself. Poor T…she could almost picture the gentle giant fending off blows from some hysterical woman, being attacked for nothing more than being a nice guy. "Um, one more favor," Allison asked the man as they grew closer to the campfire.

"Name it," T-Dog replied.

"I think it best if you don't say anything to Daryl about me going off with Shane, or you seeing Shane arguing with me…. I can't say much more at the moment about what Shane told me - I need to think about it all some more. Believe me, Shane is the last person I care to protect, but right now I know that both Daryl and Shane have hair-trigger tempers and I want to consider the best way to handle things for the good of the entire camp before the two of them get into a knock-down, drag-out, if you know what I mean."

"I understand," T-Dog said quietly. "I don't know exactly what's going on, but I trust you a heckuva lot more than I trust Shane. And my main concern is maintaining a safe place to live. So don't worry, I won't say a word."

"Say a word about what?" Andrea asked as she arrived at the campfire from the opposite direction at the same time Allison and T-Dog stepped into view. Allison surveyed the scene; Carol and Lori were also hovering nearby and had apparently hear that last part of Dog's statement, based on the sudden fear in their eyes.
"About me beggin' this girl to marry me," T-Dog replied seamlessly. Darn, this man could think quickly on his feet, Allison thought. Maybe he'd learned the fine art of fashioning a quick white lie after being smacked on the head too many times by a jealous girlfriend. "It's been years since I smelled raccoon with sweet potato stuffing slowly roasting," he continued, his face growing dreamy. "Made me lose my head for a second and propose to Allison so she could cook for me exclusively. But I thought it was best that Daryl didn't hear about it...." Everyone smiled and chuckled in relief.

‡‡‡‡ ‡‡‡‡ ‡‡‡‡

Allison unwrapped the top layer of foil and gently poked at the roasting 'coon with the barbecue fork she'd borrowed from Dale's RV kitchen. "Won't be much longer," she announced to no one in particular.

"Never thought I'd say it about a varmint, but that does smell delicious," Dale commented.

They both heard footsteps approach and looked up to see Patricia hesitantly hovering nearby.

"Everything OK, Miz Patricia?" Allison stood up and asked anxiously. She wondered if there was a problem with Hershel, or maybe Randall.

"Yes, everything's fine," the woman quickly assured her. "I just, um.." she seemed to struggle with her words. Finally she blurted in a rush, "I've got some fresh biscuits baking and peas and sweet corn on the stove, and Hershel and I wanted to invite y'all to come up to the house and share your raccoon." She paused and lowered her eyes. "I know it sounds presumptuous as to outright ask you to bring your food up for the rest of us...but it smells so delicious, and Hershel thought it would be good for everyone to sit down to supper together and we've got these side dishes to share..."

"That's very kind of you," Allison responded, "You're more than welcome to take this up to the house when it's ready."

"Y'all come up and eat with us when it's ready?" Patricia addressed the small crowd. She received an enthusiastic affirmative reply. From most of them.

"You'll come, too, Allison?" she asked.

"Um, I might." She fidgeted uncomfortably. "I'll have to let you know." She was used to eating dinner alone with Daryl each evening around their private campfire, and she didn't know how he'd feel about having a big ol' sit-down supper with the entire camp.

"You did all this work preparing it, you have to come eat with us," Carol said, stepping forward and grasping Allison's hand. "I don't mind taking Daryl a plate if he doesn't want to join us," she added.

Allison's chest involuntarily tightened up. She took a deep breath and then smiled sweetly before responding. "Thanks very much. I'll extend the invitation to him and let you know if he declines." Then to the assemblage she announced, "The roast should be ready in about 20 minutes, if anyone cares to help Miz Patricia help set the table and such."

There was a smattering of overlapping voices as everyone dispersed. Allison headed toward her tent, her mind variously recalling T-Dog's advice and then replying that she had only thus far talked to Carol, and that she would present the invitation to Daryl in the most neutral manner possible. And, by the way, she admonished her brain – please shut up.

When she arrived at their shared tent, she found Daryl sitting on "his" log (they'd already silently
claimed their own sitting places around the campfire, as if the two perpendicular logs formed an L-shaped sofa) gutting some squirrels and tossing the usable meat into a Tupperware container that Patricia had loaned her.

"Hey," he greeted her, "Where ya been?"

"Checking on dinner, should be ready directly," she replied. She kissed the top of his head as she passed by him to sit on "her" log.

"Seen your 'coon hide tacked up by the barn," he commented as he continued his work. "You want to save any these skins?" he nodded to the squirrel carcasses by his feet.

"Sure," she assented. "And by the way, I tacked that hide up all the way over by the barn so it could be a surprise for you." She looked at him accusingly out the corner of her eyes. "I brain-tanned the hide and tail…was gonna sew you a pouch for your Buck knife and give you the tail to hang from your handlebars or saddle bag or wherever…" her voice drifted off.

He gave her his traditional half-grin. "Thought you knew by now you can't slip anything past me."

"Well, I guess I suspected as much, but somehow I thought hiding something on the far side of the barn would be safe. Lord knows how I'll hide your birthday present, whenever the heck your birthday is, for that matter."

"It's the heck in November. November 12, to be exact. Now what?" he asked when he saw her surprised facial expression.

"Really? Holy cow, mine is November 14!"

"Guess we'll be bumpin' into each other hiding presents then," he semi-grunted. But once again Allison's heart did a tiny jump when he said that…not only was he seeing them together in the future, he was also discussing something so mundane, something so un-Daryl as a getting birthday present for her! She sighed happily to herself.

"…and I saved the brains so I can tan these squirrel hides to make some rawhide strings for you to sew with…So anyway exactly how soon is that raccoon I got for you gonna be ready?" his voice interrupted her warm, happy thoughts.

"Um, about 20 minutes or so…"

"What's wrong?" he asked suspiciously, realizing she hadn't been paying strict attention to what he'd been saying.

"Nothing – why do you ask?" she said in such a rush that it confirmed she was hiding something.

He didn't reply and simply looked her in the eyes. He knew her well enough by now that she could not hold up under his glare if she was concealing something. He was right; after a moment of silence Allison stood up and started pacing.

"OK, it's just that Patricia invited all of us to eat the roast in the house – she's made biscuits and vegetables and said that Hershel thought it would be nice for everyone to eat together….and I know that you prefer for us to dine alone, and I didn't want you to feel uncomfortable…and…I want you to know that I'm good either way. I can eat here with you or at the house…"

Daryl stood up wordlessly and put the lid on the squirrel meat container. He told Allison "I'll be back in a bit…."
"Where are you going?" she asked, confused.

"Gonna wash up at the pump. Can't go to a fancy dinner all filthy like this," he replied tersely.

"Hold on, I'll come with you," Allison replied, barely able to contain her excitement at his acceptance of the dinner invitation. "I could stand to be hosed down a bit, too." As they walked to the pump, Allison silently chastised herself. Why couldn't she find the perfect words to tell this man how much it meant to her that he was going to this dinner just because he knew it would please her? How he never had to get her a birthday present because doing thoughtful things like this was "present" enough? The words formed in her brain but somehow got caught in her throat. She didn't want to sound smothering, or possessive, or frighten him away. Instead she simply accompanied Daryl silently to the pump and splashed cold water on her face, neck, arms and hands and then handed the hotel-sized bar of soap she'd grabbed from one of her bags to him. As she dried herself with the ragged towel she'd brought, she finally found the presence of mind to tell him quietly, "Thanks going with me to this. I know large crowds aren't your favorite thing."

He took the towel from her and rubbed it vigorously over his head and hair. "I mainly don't want to embarrass you, Angel," he said without opening his eyes.

"Huh? What? How?" She was completely confused.

He finished with his head and began drying his torso. He opened his eyes and looked at her. The pain she saw there almost broke her heart.

"I never had anyone smack me on the knuckles or upside the head like you did to teach me proper table manners," he confessed. "I do my best to not eat like I was raised in a barn, but I've watched you while we eat and I know that I ain't exactly elegant and I...." his voice drifted off as he looked down at the ground, "I don't want you to be ashamed of me."

"Oh, Sweetie," she exclaimed, calling him by a nickname out loud for the first time as she wrapped her arm around his neck and pulled his head under her chin, "I could never, ever be ashamed of you." She kissed the top of his sweet puppy-smelling head. "I just wish I could tell you how proud I am of you, every waking minute..." She pulled his head out from under her chin and apologized, "And I'm sorry for calling you 'Sweetie'..."

He sat up in order to be eye-level with her. "S'OK," he mumbled, giving her a quick kiss on the lips. "I know how women like to be mushy..." She smiled at his reference to the conversation they'd had with Carl a few days ago. "Just so long as you don't do it in front of everybody," he admonished her.

"I'll try to restrain myself," she told him, returning his kiss.

‡‡‡‡ ‡‡‡‡ ‡‡‡‡

"Where's Shane?" Carl asked as the basket of biscuits was passed around the table.

"He said he'd keep watch," Andrea replied. "I told him I'd bring him out a doggy-bag later."

"These peas are so sweet, are they out of your garden?" Dale asked Hershel.

"Yep, just like the corn," the old man replied.

"And the carrots, onions, and sweet potatoes in the stuffing, too" Allison added. "We all owe Mr. Hershel a big 'thank you' for sharing his garden with us."
"Hear, hear!" Rick said, raising his glass of punch. Everyone else joined in the toast; some were drinking powdered punch, some water, some sweet tea – Lori's glass was filled with milk at Allison's directive.

"So, Lori, do you and Rick have any names picked out yet?" Maggie asked. "My name was going to be Matthew if I'd been a boy," she added.

"Carl would have been Caroline if he'd been a girl," Rick commented.

"So far I've been thinking of boy names…I don't know why," Lori said. "I'm remembering some of them from a book I had when I was expecting Carl…"

"What boy names are you considering?" Dale asked. "Maybe we can give you a group consensus."

"Well, I was thinking of Cooper, or Tanner. Or maybe Fletcher."

"Fletcher Grimes?" Rick asked with a bemused smile. "That's the first I've heard of that possibility."

"What book did you get these suggestions from, the Big Baby Book of Medieval Profession Names?" Allison asked before she could stop herself.

Even though Daryl chuckled along with most of the others at the table, he gave Allison a quick glance that humorously said "…and here I was afraid of embarrassing you?!"

"Um, sorry," Allison added, realizing she'd spoken out of turn. Especially to a hormonally-fused expectant mother. "That just sorta slipped out."

"Like I said, they were just some names I had penciled in," Lori said in an even voice. "Perhaps I'll think more clearly after my … surgery." She looked pointedly at Allison. "You know, my Stick-Removal."

The entire table save for Carl, Hershel and Allison burst into laughter at Lori's remark. Two of the sober-faced folks in the crowd remained so because they didn't understand the remark; the third person who hadn't joined in the hilarity just prayed for instant invisibility. "I'm sorry," she finally managed to whisper to Lori.

Lori didn't respond, but Rick, sensing the tension and needing to keep on the good sides of both his wife and the doctor that would see her through her pregnancy, quickly changed the subject.

"Hey, Glenn, have you made any progress in learning how to play that guitar?"
"Not a lot," Glenn replied, somewhat surprised at the sudden change in topic. "I practice whenever I have time…or try to practice, anyway. It's hard when you don't know what you're doing."

"Learning any musical instrument takes practice," Allison told him. "Too many people get frustrated and quit because they're not playing solos like Eddie Van Halen after a week." All eyes turned to her so she hastened to explain, "My mom was a music teacher and she gave private lessons, too. Seemed like a lot of the kids were there against their will, just kept coming because their parents paid for a guitar or piano and they didn't want to waste their money."

"Do you play?" Glenn asked.

"A little," Allison shrugged. "Mom kinda forced me at first, said it was 'good' for me, which of course was the instant kibosh as far as I was concerned. But when she brought down some of her old music books from the attic with Beatles songs and stuff like that, instead of classical pieces, I started to enjoy it. I spent more time on the piano, but I learned enough guitar tofake my way through a few songs."

"There have been several studies done over the years," Dale piped up, "that have shown that people who learn to read music and who play a musical instrument tend to do better in school. They pick up foreign languages quicker and mathematical concepts and such."

"I wanted to learn guitar," Carl piped up.

"You wanted that Guitar Hero game for your PlayStation," his father corrected him. "That's not exactly the same thing."

"Could you maybe show me some basics?" Glenn asked Allison.

"Like I said, it takes a long time and a lot of practice…I guess after dinner – and washing dishes – I can show you a few chords or something."

"We used to enjoy Otis playing for us in the evenings," Hershel commented. "It was quite a pleasant way to relax after supper and listen and sometimes even sing along…"

"Didn't your TV work?" Daryl asked with a sidelong glance at Allison which made everyone laugh.

"Well, they say that music hath charms to soothe the savage breast," Dale quoted Shakespeare after the laughter died down. "Maybe Allison can play for all of us later on. We can enjoy some music while Glenn gets a guitar lesson."

"Um, I dunno," Allison felt uncomfortable at the suggestion. She was certain that Daryl wasn't the type to want to stay behind for some sort of hootenanny, and if there was anything she should do after dinner it was probably help with the dishes. She didn't want to be accused of not pitching in and doing her part. She looked at Daryl questioningly, seeking his silent opinion. He merely shrugged and said quietly,"If everyone wants you to, and you want to…" leaving his statement open-ended.

"I don't know if I'm comfortable with us having a happy song-fest when there's a man in chains out in the shed," Andrea interjected. "Have we given any further thought on what we're going to do with Randall?"
"I think that that's not an appropriate subject for the dinner table," Hershel replied. "Besides, we should not feel guilty for going on with our lives and seeking solace whenever we can just because he is a prisoner. He made his choice when he shot at us. He is being treated humanely under the circumstances at the moment, and any decision on his fate can wait until tomorrow. Now, a minute ago I was starting to anticipate a nice evening of music, and I don't care to have my digestion upset any further by unpleasant topics." He wiped his mouth, folded his napkin and stood up.

Dale followed suit. "I'm with Hershel on this; it's important to our mental health as a group to find whatever occasional respite we can. Music can be incredibly therapeutic. As I recall Plato said 'music gives a soul to the universe, wings to the mind, flight to the imagination and life to everything.'"

Hershel started walking toward the living room. He paused and asked Allison "Are you coming?"

"Er, yes, sir," she barely resisted saluting him. Glenn scurried off to fetch his guitar and Patricia, Lori, Carol and Beth began collecting the empty plates from the table. "I'll be there just as soon as I help clear the table…"

"That's OK, honey, we've got it under control," Patricia told her kindly. "You go on ahead." Allison wondered if the thought of a community sing-along was paining Patricia, reminding her of Otis.

"Well then, as they say, you can lead a horse to water but a pencil has to be lead," Allison stated, folding her own napkin and setting it down. She heard groans and looked up to see grimacing faces glaring at her. "Oh fine, if Dale had said that you'd all look at him like he was Mahatma Gandhi…" she muttered.

"Anyone who cares to join us is welcome," Hershel stated, although it sounded more like a command than an invitation.

Glenn returned with the guitar and handed it to Allison. Everyone took seats around the living room and looked at her as if they expected her to produce a rabbit from a hat. "Nothing like a little public pressure," she thought to herself.

"First of all," she spoke to Glenn, "This guitar had been in an enclosed car in the hot sun when Dale found it. Guitars are made of wood and they warp and change shape with weather fluctuations. Even professional musicians playing outdoor concerts in hot or humid weather have to constantly re-tune their guitars."

"So how do you tune a guitar?" Glenn asked.

"You need a 'reference' – a piano, another guitar, a tuning fork. I don't know how long ago that piano there," she nodded toward the spinet against the wall, "was tuned, but it will do for now." She walked over to the keyboard and alternately punched a key and then fiddled with a knob on the neck of the guitar. She didn't bother explaining the intricacies of what she was doing because she had an antsy audience waiting for a song. Right now she just wanted to adjust the strings as quickly as possible, hoping that a semi-tuned guitar would cover up her rusty playing.

A few minutes later she walked back to her seat near the middle of the room, the center of attention, with a sea of waiting eyes pointed at her. She hoped no one would notice her nervous, trembling fingers. "OK, mind you, I'm going to have to go by memory here, since I don't have any sheet music… I'm trying to think of a song that I know that y'all might know the words to…" She sighed as if the rush of words had exhausted her. "All right, here's an easy one to pick up if you don't already know it…"
"In the town where I was born
Lived a man who sailed the seas
And he told us of his life
In the land of submarines…"

As it turned out most of the group recognized the song and enthusiastically joined in the chorus: "We all live in a yellow submarine, yellow submarine, yellow submarine…"

When the song was finished there were smiles everywhere and young Carl was the most excited of all. "Yellow submarine, yellow submarine" he was still singing after the music had stopped. "That was cool, do you know any other songs like that one?" he asked.

Somewhat reassured by the reception to her first song, Allison wracked her brain for another sing-along-type number. Most of the songs she knew by heart came from those old music books of the 1960s and 70s her mother had resurrected from the attic. Another simple Beatles song came to mind.

"Hey Carl, how'd you like to hear a song about an evil little boy who used to clobber people over the head with a hammer whenever he was displeased?"

"Awesome!" the boy smiled with anticipation.

"Bet I know what's comin' up," Daryl commented with a slight smile. Allison was surprised to see him participating in the festivities. He wasn't necessarily singing along loudly, but he wasn't retreating to a corner of the room to be by himself, either.

"Well, if this was 'Name That Tune' you'd probably win the prize," Allison smiled at him. Then she began the song: "Joan was quizzical, studied pataphysical science in the home…"

Again, it seemed like most of the crowd recognized the song – apparently the Beatles catalog had been a staple on classic rock radio stations over the years – and sang along not only with the chorus but the verses as well. Allison noted that Rick was enthusiastically singing with his son, making hammering gestures each time they sang "Bang, bang Maxwell's Silver Hammer came down upon her head…"

"That was fun! More, please!" Carl clapped his hands in delight.

"Yeah," Rick smiled and ran his hand across his face. Allison noticed as he made the gesture that his face seemed to contain more worry lines than it had back when she'd first met him. "I remember thinkin' that all those rap and hip-hop songs Carl liked so much were too violent…I never stopped to think that they hid violent songs behind cute melodies back in the 1960s. I mean, think about it – they used to play songs like this on the Muzak speakers in supermarkets and stuff, and we thought it was innocent background music."

"Popular music was full of veiled violence, back before you were born," Dale told Rick. "And the adults used to fret about it just as much back then." He smiled and chuckled softly. "I remember when I was 10 years old and my parents would immediately switch the station when 'Wake Up Little Susie' by the Everly Brothers came on. Just the mention of a boy and girl falling asleep together in a car at a drive-in movie was just too scandalous for them to comprehend."

"My mama," Hershel commented, "God rest her soul, couldn't understand why a good ol' God-fearing boy like Elvis could sing such gospel classics like "How Great Thou Art" so beautifully
and then go and shake his hips shamelessly on national television.” He smiled at the memory. "I'll admit that it was partly because Elvis upset her so much on The Ed Sullivan Show that I bought his records and grew my sideburns long."

"Who's Elvis? And The Ever Brothers…?" Carl inquired, his brow furrowed in confusion.

"Who is Elvis?!" Daryl asked indignantly. He looked over at Allison. "You're right, they don't teach kids anything in school these days."

"To be fair," Andrea spoke up, "Elvis Presley and the Everly Brothers and the Ed Sullivan Show were all before Carl's time."

"World War II was before my time," Allison responded, "But I still know who was involved, the countries, the people…." She was building up steam; knowledge for knowledge's sake was a favorite hobby horse of hers. "Pearl Harbor happened long before I was born, but I still know the details – the dates, the people involved, the reasons why….""What's Pearl Harbor?" Carl asked.

"Long story, kid," Allison hastily replied. "Has to do with World War II, which they probably hadn't started teaching in detail in your grade at school yet."

"Can you tell me about it sometime?" he asked her, since she'd so far been his go-to source for questions his parents never answered.

"Sure," Allison said, strumming random chords on the guitar, "Any time, as long as you mom says it's OK." She paused and then looked at him seriously. "Above all, you should never stop being curious and asking questions. That's the only way you'll learn new things is by asking questions, whether it's your parents who answer them, or me or Mr. Daryl or whomever."

"Hey, Doc," T-Dog called out, "Do you know this one? I remember when I was a little kid my grandma dancing me around the room to it…" He began to sing hesitantly: "'Everybody's doin' a brand new dance now, c'mon baby, do the loco-motion…"

Allison thought back…it was a pretty basic song, only a few chords…she strummed a few tentatively while singing the verse quietly, "My little baby says it's so easy to do…C, A minor, C, F, D minor…" She looked up then and said "I think I've got it, but I'll need y'all to help me out, since this is not really an acoustic song.” She suddenly felt like some rock star on stage in front of a crowd. "I need y'all to clap your hands in time to keep the beat." She thumped on the front of the guitar with her knuckles to suggest the rhythm. Once everyone began clapping along Allison added, "And you'll need to sing the words, too, to cover up for when I don't know the right chords…" After a few beats she began singing and playing and everyone joined in almost immediately. Even Carl learned the basic melody quickly and sang "c'mon baby, do the loco-motion" every time the phrase came up.

Rick, T-Dog, Carl and even Dale got up and did some makeshift dance movements in time to the music. Everyone collapsed in laughter once the song was done, and then Patricia hesitantly entered the room.

"I got some of Otis' sheet music out of the trunk upstairs," she told Allison, handing her a handful of sheafs. "Maybe this will help you teach Glenn."

"Thank you," Allison replied. Then to Glenn she said "Study these and pick out a song you'd like to learn and tomorrow I'll show you how to match those chords on the printed music to your fingers
"It's getting late," Andrea said, indicating that it was time for the party to break up. "I'll take Shane's dinner to him." She headed to the kitchen to assemble some leftovers.

"That was most enjoyable," Hershel told Allison as everyone began getting up and scooching the furniture back the way it was. "I thank you very much."

"It was my pleasure, Mr. Hershel," Allison replied. "I'm just pleased that my attempts at singing and playing didn't send everyone running and screaming."

‡‡‡‡ ‡‡‡‡ ‡‡‡‡

As they got ready for bed in their tent, Allison apologized to Daryl.

"I'm sorry 'bout all that," she said, stripping off her shirt and bra and donning Otis' old shirt in their place.

"'Bout what?" Daryl asked, somewhat pointedly as he unlaced his boots.

"About staying after supper and that whole singing thing with the whole group. I know that that's not really your favorite way to spend an evening..."

"Is that what those looks you were givin' me were all about?" he asked her.

"What do you mean?"

"When Hershel asked you to stay and play for everyone."

She had to think back, but it occurred to her that yes, she had sort of silently sought his approval before she'd started the sing-along.

"I guess," she admitted. "I just didn't want to upset you. If you didn't want to linger after dinner, then I didn't want to either."

He removed a sock and tossed it aside. "And since when did you need my approval to do anything?"

"What?" Allison was confused.

Daryl turned and looked her in the eye. "Did you like playing music and singing?"

"Well, after I got going and got used to it, I guess I did."

"So why would you need me to tell you it was OK?"

"I don't understand – I just didn't want to –"

"'Upset me', I know, you already said that. And you're right, you don't understand." He ran a hand impatiently through his hair. He sighed and then continued. "I ain't Ed Peletier, OK?! I don't want you to feel afraid of me, or like you need to check with me before you make a move or f - - freakin' breathe." He paused and caught his breath, and his tone was softer when he spoke next. "You make me feel like some kind of monster when you do that."

Allison quietly thought about what he'd said and it struck her that he was right; in a way, she was starting to act like a skittish mouse around him. And why? Maybe part of it was because she still...
felt some sort of silent, psychological competition for his attention, thanks to Carol. And surely a bigger part was a habit she'd had all her life…overcompensating, trying too hard to please so that people liked her.

She slowly walked over to where Daryl sat and knelt beside him, facing him. "You're right, and I apologize," she began. She very gently entwined her fingers with his that were resting on his knee and continued. "I'm on a learning curve, and I'm afraid I'm not doing very well. I've never had a boyfriend, or however you want to describe yourself…I've never before had a man who loved me and cared for me like you do, and sometimes I'm not sure how to act, what to do. I get over-anxious to please you, because, frankly, what makes me happiest these days is making you happy."

Daryl released his hand from her grip and wrapped that hand around the back of Allison's head. He pulled her close, closed his eyes and kissed her lips for a long, lingering moment. When he pulled back ever so slightly and opened his eyes he told her "Just don't try so hard, OK? I'm just learning, too, about, um, relationships and stuff, but all I want from you is to be yourself. That's what makes me happy, 'K?"

Allison closed her eyes and wrapped her hand around the top of his head and gently tousled his hair as she pulled him back to her lips for another kiss. "OK," she whispered.
Daryl sighed and relaxed as she stroked his scalp; he did feel better after clearing the air with Allison about not walking on eggshells around him, but he also couldn't help but submit to the awesome tingles that ran from his head down his spine thanks to her gentle fingers. He became so entranced by the feeling that his lips couldn't even form a proper pucker to kiss her with; he simply moaned very softly and leaned his forehead against hers as she caressed his head from forehead to crown. He was so relaxed as to feel like a rag doll, and the tiny part of his brain that was still actively thinking and not feeling worried that Allison would be offended, would find him a wimp or a pussy. Moments later, though, that part of his brain relaxed as well, as she silently wrapped her other arm around his shoulders and rubbed his back.

"Mmm," she murmured as she pulled him closer. His head flopped, as if he had no neck muscles, down to the crook between her neck and shoulder. She leaned her head to the right to embrace his head with hers and he finally found some neurons that were still firing enough to softly kiss her neck. She mmmmm'd again and pressed his face against her neck. He reached his arms around her shoulders and held on as if for dear life. He involuntarily emitted a tiny mewling sound, like a tiny kitten nosing its mother's belly. Even though having his warm breath on her neck was making Allison more and more excited, she sensed that right now Daryl wasn't necessarily looking for "sexy time" – he seemed to be more in a cuddling mood. A few weeks ago that would have surprised her, but as they'd spent more time together he'd grown more relaxed at her touch and sometimes even seemed to seek it out. The thought of that made her flattered and…special.

"Your hair is getting long," she commented as she entangled her fingers in it.

"Yeah," he answered after a few minutes, as if he had to physically collect his thoughts. "I noticed that at the pump before when I was washing up for dinner…Carol mentioned something about it a couple days ago, or maybe a week ago, I forget…anyway she offered to cut it…"

Allison tried not to physically tense up at the mention of Carol. "Well, it's up to you…I mean, if you don't mind it, I will mention that I've always had a 'thing' about guys with long hair…I don't want to influence your decision or change your preference or whatever… I've just always found long hair on men attractive.

"Is that why you like the Beatles?" he asked with half a smirk, opening his eyes to glance at her.

"I like the Beatles because their music is good…and, OK truth be told, they are easy on the eyes, hair-wise." She smiled down at him. "Like I said earlier tonight, though, most of the music I know and like is because of the stuff my parents and grandparents had around the house. I listened to the radio some and heard the latest hits, but I couldn't afford to buy my own records or tapes so when it came to repeat listening I grew accustomed to what we had in the house." She stroked his head again as she quietly reminisced. "I was kinda weird in high school, come to think of it, because I knew more about 70s and early 80s songs than I did of what all the 'cool' kids were listening to. Never really got into hip-hop and all that…at the hospital our piped-in music was hooked up to satellite radio, and when I was on duty I always tuned it into the classic rock station or 70s hits."

Daryl reluctantly got up and quickly stripped off his shirt. He then flopped down onto their makeshift bed. He stretched out on his back and looked at Allison invitingly. "I grew up listenin' to Merle's records," he remarked, "and at the auto shop I used to work at, the boss used to play the classic rock station, too." He extended an arm upward and Allison grasped his hand. He pulled her down beside him. "So you not only know all the old TV shows, you also know the old songs," he commented, turning slightly on his side to nuzzle her neck. "You're this old lady in a young
woman's body."

She smiled as she scooted closer to fit her body against his. "I guess so. It made me totally un-cool in school, most definitely, but I wasn't willing to give up the...pleasure I got from that music just to conform." She began gently stroking his chest as she spoke. "When I was in middle school I had a friend, Mary, who had a sister who was like 10 or 11 years older...she just seemed like the coolest person I'd ever met...and she had all these David Bowie and Queen and Kiss albums, and a bunch of VHS tapes of music videos..." She paused and sighed at the memory. "Mary and I would watch those old tapes and those men with their long hair made me feel...funny in a good way that I didn't quite understand."

"Probably like Lynda Carter made me feel when she ran around in her Wonder Woman costume," Daryl replied.

Allison chuckled. "Probably," she agreed. "And maybe part of it was because Mary's mom and my granny despised those long-haired make-up wearing singers so much that made them extra-attractive..." She looked into Daryl's eyes. "Remember what I told you before about good girls falling for bad boys..."

Daryl growled slightly and pulled her face close for a kiss. "So if I let my hair grow long I'll remind you of one of those fag singers you like?" he asked.

"How very politically incorrect of you to refer to them that way," Allison responded almost automatically, even though growing up in the rural South she knew that that phraseology was more or less the norm. "Not every male singer with long hair is gay, you know," she admonished him. "Anyway," she pulled back from him for a moment to survey him critically, "you actually do remind me of one of my favorite singers, and his hair was always about the length of yours now or sometimes a tad shorter..."

"Go on," he prompted her.

"Bryan Ferry, the lead singer for Roxy Music." He looked blank at the reference, so she amplified. "They had hits like 'Love is the Drug' and 'More Than This' and others...anyway, now that I think of it you have very similar facial features to him." She reached over and caressed his face. "Very similar..." she murmured. "I had a cassette tape of one of his solo albums, and the main song I remember was called 'Sign of the Times'. I loved the melody, but what really struck me was the opening line..."Here is a rainbow for your hair..." She closed her eyes and sighed, but kept her hand on his chin. "Granted, the rest of the lyrics didn't make a lick of sense to me, but I've always thought that one line was the most romantic thing I'd ever heard."

"Bryan Fairy, 'nother gay guy," Daryl grunted, seemingly disinterested.

"You should get some sleep," Allison told him, changing the subject. "You've got watch early in the morning."

"Rick and Shane are gonna take Randall out and leave him off tomorrow," Daryl replied. "While they're gone maybe T-Dog can take watch and I'll go with Glenn back to that town where the pawn shop was to get some clothes and stuff. You said we're running out of socks and stuff, and cold weather's comin', you're gonna need some warm clothes..."

"So are you," Allison said. "All those clothes we heisted from the cars on the highway..." she ruminated aloud, "mostly warm-weather shirts. You need underwear, socks, pants...I could use a sweatshirt or two..." she paused and looked up at him. "But I hate to send you out on a clothing run. It could be dangerous."
"I can take care of myself, Angel," he replied.

"I know you can, but I still worry when you're gone. Maybe I could go with you – "

"No," he stated definitely. "I'll be fine with Short Round, OK? We've gone on runs before, we
know what to do. And," he playfully chucked her underneath her chin, "He's just girly enough to
know what kind of underwear to collect for you women."

"He doesn't even have long hair like the guys in Kiss or Queen and you're implying that he's -?"

"I didn't say 'fag', I said 'girly'. There's a difference."

"OK," Allison sighed sleepily. "I guess it's some sort of guy thing…"

"Don't be givin' me grief, woman," Daryl growled, pulling her closer to him and rubbing his chin
on the top of her head. "Just keep quiet and do as you're told," he told her, playfully smacking her
on her bottom.

‡‡‡‡ ‡‡‡‡ ‡‡‡‡

Early the next morning Rick and Shane set off in a car with Randall tucked away in the trunk. Not
long afterward Daryl and Glenn departed for their run into the opposite town from where Glenn
and the others had been holed up in Hatlin's Bar.

"I dunno that they really needed to go there," Maggie commented to Allison as the two women
watched their men drive off. "We've got plenty of clothes here in the house."

"I'm concerned about them, too," Allison told her, "but the clothes you have here are probably
enough for you, Beth and Patricia. Some of the rest of us didn't pack properly when all of this
chaos started." She noted Maggie's glare. "I know that Glenn is taking a risk going out scavenging,
and for what it's worth I asked Daryl not to go…. But truth is, the weather is getting colder and at
the very least the men are going to need some warmer clothes to protect them when they keep
watch or hunt for food."

"You're right," Maggie conceded. "Glenn keeps havin' to wear the same few things over and over,
and Otis' clothes are way too big for him…. I just fret every time he goes off somewhere…” She
hugged herself as she spoke.

At a loss for any comforting words, after a few minutes Allison finally said, "Glenn is lucky to
have someone who worries after him."

Maggie didn't look at her when she replied quietly, "So is Daryl."

‡‡‡‡ ‡‡‡‡ ‡‡‡‡

Glenn and Daryl returned to the farm mid-afternoon with the trunk of their car full of goodies.

"It's all mixed together," Glenn apologized as Lori, Carol and Allison began rooting through the
booty. There were packages of both men's and women's underpants, some long underwear, socks,
slacks, boots, and other assorted items.

"We can sort the different clothes into piles for now and then let everyone choose by size," Lori
announced with authority.

"Whatever," Allison thought as she quickly snatched up a package of tube socks for her and Daryl
to share. She'd look through the lingerie and other stuff after Her Majesty had sorted through it all.

"You two got a lot of good stuff," Allison congratulated Daryl a little later as they went back to their tent.

"Yeah, we hit the pawn shop again and found a Family Dollar store not too far from there that was off on a side street that we'd missed before," he replied as they settled down on their sofa logs. "They always seem to build them Family Dollars in weird places."

"I'm just happy that you came back safely," Allison confessed. She pulled out her knife and picked up one of the pieces of raccoon hide that she'd been curing and began slicing it into narrow strands, a project she'd been working on for the past few days. Daryl meanwhile started whittling some sticks he'd collected earlier in order to fashion them into bolts.

"I told you I always do," he assured her, focusing on his hands as he worked.

"I know, but I can't help but worry when you venture out like that...it's not like when you're out hunting in the woods, and you might find a walker or two...what with the whole Randall thing and his group, wherever they are..." She looked over at Daryl, her eyes round with concern. "I know that you can handle walkers, but creepy live humans..." She shuddered.

"I came back, didn't I?" he stated. "I always will." He was quiet for a few minutes, as if he was wrestling with something mentally. Finally he stood up and retrieved something from his pocket. "Here," he said almost hastily, extending his hand. Allison looked in his direction and saw a hair barrette in his palm. Not just any barrette, but one with a ruffled surface like one of those wiggle badges that changed the picture as it was manipulated—it caught the light and projected multiple colors. He looked down at the ground as she took it from him and he mumbled, "It's a rainbow for your hair."

"Eep," she squeaked as she examined it and then looked up at this wonderful, thoughtful man as he looked away in embarrassment. She gathered a chunk of her hair together and clasped it with the barrette. "Thank you," she managed to gasp as she stood up, letting the raccoon skin drop to the ground. She pulled Daryl close to her and hugged him tightly. "Thank you," she repeated, this time whispered directly into his ear, so consumed by emotion that she couldn't think of anything else to say.

‡‡‡‡ ‡‡‡‡ ‡‡‡‡

Rick and Shane returned just as dusk fell with Randall still tied up in the trunk, and the two of them battered and bleeding.

"What goes on?" Andrea asked as Shane dragged the prisoner back to the shed.

Rick gestured for the group to follow him back to the camp area. Once there he announced, "There's been a change in plans. Randall knows Maggie, he knows where this farm is."

"So?" Carol asked.

"So he could possibly lead his group back here," Rick replied.

"Does he have a group?" Dale asked.

"He wasn't alone when he was shooting at us in town," Rick said.

"But maybe he's the last of his group, maybe there were no others..." Dale reasoned.
"We heard someone in a vehicle call out to him and leave him behind," Rick stated. "And from what the friends of those men in the bar shouted to one another, we have to believe that Randall was part of a much larger group. We have to re-think this whole situation."

"What exactly happened today?" Lori asked, reaching a hand up to Rick's bleeding forehead.

"There were walkers at the place where we were going to leave Randall," Rick said, not quite meeting her gaze. "We got ambushed."

"So what's the plan, then?" Andrea asked.

"I don't know yet. We're all gonna sleep on it and then discuss the matter tomorrow," Rick stated.
Chapter 36

Early the next morning Allison joined Andrea and Lori on the large porch of the Greene house to inspect the piles of clothing and supplies that Lori had carefully sorted the day before. Carol had refused their offer of helping clean up after breakfast and was busy tending to that chore by herself, seemingly wanting to be alone and to keep herself busy.

The three women pulled up chairs and started browsing through items, although after a few minutes it was apparent that this was more of a chance for them to talk than to pick out underwear.

"Did Rick say anything to you about how he got so beat up?" Andrea asked Lori.

"Nuh-uh," the dark-haired woman shook her head. "Every time I tried to ask him about it he just said there were walkers at that place, whatever it was, where they were planning to leave Randall."

"Walkers don't usually leave defensive wounds like those," Allison commented. "Shane was pretty bloodied up."

"Do you think Randall attacked them?" Lori asked the two.

Andrea shook her head. "I doubt it. The plan as I understood it was to leave him with his hands tied up and a knife. He'd have to undo his own bindings, which would give Shane and Rick time to escape without him trying to follow them."

The unspoken conclusion was that Rick and Shane's various injuries had been caused by each other somehow, for some reason. There was an uncomfortable silence for several minutes. "Does Rick prefer boxers or briefs?" Allison finally spoke, holding several plastic-wrapped packages in her hands. "I imagine he's running short on underwear…"

"Like Daryl?" Andrea asked, raising one eyebrow.

"I wouldn't know, you'd have to ask him," Allison replied, averting her eyes.

"Oh for heaven's sake, give it up already," Lori said abruptly. "You two are living together in a tent 'way out there a million miles from everyone, do you expect us to believe that you spend your evenings playing checkers?"

Even Allison had to laugh a bit at that outburst. "OK, busted. Yes, I've seen his underwear once or twice and he could certainly use a new pair of drawers…or two."

The three women enjoyed the lightened mood for a bit and began gossiping as if they were actually friends.

"Tighty-whities, hmph," Lori said with disdain, handing a package of Fruit of the Looms to Allison. "You think Daryl would be interested?"

"You don't like men in briefs?" Allison avoided answering the question.

"Not really…they're…I dunno…they're something a little boy would wear."

"My main impression of boxers was my granddad walking around the house in his underwear early in the morning when he thought no one was looking, back when I was a kid. They were these huge blousy things…I wondered how he put his pants on without his underwear getting all bunched up."
Anyway, boxers have always meant 'old man underwear' to me."

"Boxer shorts aren't like that anymore, they're a bit more stylish," Andrea commented.

"I know," Allison admitted, "But there's such a thing as classical conditioning. And speaking of that….oh gosh, this is embarrassing….but as a kid I also remember looking through the underwear section of the Sears catalogs we'd get in the mail and being fascinated with the men in the pictures in tight briefs and their….you know, 'areas' showing…"

"You mean their distended pouches, right?" Andrea prodded her with a knowing smirk.

Allison squealed in embarrassment and hid her face with a package of underwear. Lori and Andrea laughed and threw socks at her.

"I do remember," Andrea recounted after the laughter died down, "this guy I worked with at a law office shortly after I'd passed the bar. I forget exactly how we got onto the topic of underwear in general and boxer shorts in particular and why he disliked them, because he'd simply been telling me about his time in Marine boot camp at Parris Island. But to this day I still remember him all of a sudden tearing a sheet of paper off of a legal pad, crumpling it up into a ball and then telling me 'imagine running five miles with this bunched up the crack of your ass!'"

Allison and Lori doubled over in laughter for several minutes. Then Glenn's voice called out from inside the house, "Hey, can you keep it down out there?"

"I guess we're disturbing something, but what?" Andrea asked, lowering her voice.

"Apparently Randall told Rick and Shane that he knew Maggie in high school, which means that he probably knows where this farm is located," Lori explained. "Rick asked Glenn to talk to Maggie about it…see if she remembers Randall or has any of her old yearbooks to prove whether or not he's telling the truth."

"Well, if he's telling the truth about being 19," Allison thought out loud, "and Maggie's 22, then she would've been a senior when he was a sophomore. It's not inconceivable that she wouldn't know him since they were three years apart. But why would he know who she was?"

"Maybe she was popular – a cheerleader or homecoming queen or something," Andrea said, as if Allison was stupid. "It's not unusual for freshmen boys to crush on senior girls, you know."

"Oh." Allison said aloud. "I wouldn't know about that," she then thought to herself. The only attention she'd ever gotten in school from boys, freshmen, sophomores or otherwise, was taunting and teasing, usually because her of good grades and associated geekiness. Or at least she tried to remember it that way. She didn't want to think it was because of her looks…didn't want to remember being teased about her big eyes or being so skinny or flat-chested. And she wasn't really, darnit…there was a difference between being proportionately small-busted and being completely flat. But in high school unless you were a double-D-Jessica Simpson-type the guys always publicly taunted you. Of course, now that she thought about it, they also loudly commented on the well-endowed females as they passed in the hallway. Oh, why the heck was she even thinking about high school –

" – and then I think he's going to have a meeting with the camp to talk about what to do," Lori continued.

"Huh?" Allison asked. "Do about what?" Seeing their puzzled looks she apologized, "Sorry, my mind wandered off for a minute."
"I was saying that Rick wants to find out more about Randall, how familiar he is with this area, about the people he was with, where they've been staying, things like that, and then he wants to get all of us together to discuss the situation, get everyone's opinion."

Andrea picked up a long, bulky dark green cardigan sweater and held it out at arm's length. "This looks like it would fit Carol, I'll put it aside for her," she commented. As she set it down and folded it she said "What if it turns out Randall does know Maggie and this farm and his way around this county? We really can't afford to waste the gasoline to drive him 50 miles out of town…" She turned her eyes upward to look at the other two.

"I dunno," Allison returned her glance. "Obviously he's an outsider. On the other hand, all of us were, at one time back when this group started forming. But he just doesn't seem like, I don't know….John Q. Upstanding Citizen. He gives off sort of a creepy vibe, if that makes any sense."

"We have been very fortunate with our group," Lori acknowledged, rummaging through the clothing. "Do you have a jacket or coat of any kind?" She asked Allison.

"To be honest, I don't even have a long-sleeved shirt."

"This looks like it will fit you," Lori said, looking at the size tag on a folded item. She handed it to Allison, who unfurled it to discover it was someone's high school varsity letter jacket. From what she could read in all the embroidered information over the breast and on the sleeves the coat had once belonged to Edwin Soobner, Class of 1989, Newnan High School. The coat was large and warm and fit her just fine when she tried it on, but to her consternation had the word COUGAR emblazoned across the back. Apparently the school's mascot. She hoped.

"Even back at the quarry, other than Daryl's brother and Carol's husband," Lori continued her original thought, "Everyone pitched in and helped with the work, and the men respected the women. I'm not averse to bringing new people in to our camp, but I think at this point we have to carefully vet any potential new members."

"'Vet' as in evaluate any potential problems, like they do with political candidates," Andrea clarified.

"Exactly," Lori confirmed. "I won't lie - I'm not really comfortable with Randall being here. He shot at Rick and Glenn and Hershel without knowing anything about them." She paused and looked at Allison and Andrea in turn. "None of the men in our camp have shot at the living, no questions asked, like Randall and his friends did."

Allison wondered if Lori had used the word "men" in order to exclude the fact that Andrea had shot Daryl, or if she just always just strictly thought of the men when it came to protecting the camp. Whatever her intent, she did make a good point. Before she could respond, though, Glenn and Maggie emerged from the house.

"I have to talk to Rick," Glenn said before anyone could ask questions. Maggie gave him a quick kiss and he strode off.

"Sorry we made too much noise before," Allison apologized.

Maggie smiled. "Oh, it wasn't all your laughin' that got Glenn upset; he just got all embarrassed when he heard y'all talkin' about men's underwear - pouches and stuff."

All four women burst into laughter, and Maggie pulled a chair over to where they were sitting and working their way through the piles of stuff. She sat down and looked over at Allison. "Nice
"barrette," she commented.

Allison's hand immediately went up to touch her new hair ornament and she blushed at the compliment. "Thanks," she replied. "It was...a present - "

"I know," Maggie interrupted, "from Daryl. Glenn already told me."

"Huh? What does Glenn know about it?"

Maggie leaned closer and seemed almost gleeful to share her gossip. "When they were at the Family Dollar store scavenging for clothes and supplies Glenn found Daryl in the hair care aisle studying all the elastics and clips and scrunchies and stuff. Glenn says that Daryl asked him what was it that women put in their hair to hold it besides socks. Well, of course, that got Glenn to laughin' and that got Daryl all pissed. So Daryl just went off on his own and I guess he found that - " she nodded toward Allison's head " - by himself."

Lori laughed out loud and Andrea smiled as she observed, "Must have some sort of meaning for him to go out of his way to find that for you. Or maybe he just thinks that all that long hair of yours is too unruly."

"I have to ask you," Maggie said before Allison could reply, "What the hell was he talkin' about with the socks in your hair?"

"A sock bun," Allison explained, somewhat confusingly. She looked at Maggie and said "Your hair is too short, but Lori could probably wear one..." The three women looked at her blankly. "You cut the toe off of a sock and roll the rest of it into a donut, and then wrap it into your hair to make a bun...." Allison said, lamely lifting the bulk of her hair and making rolling gestures with it.

"I guess that makes sense," Maggie commented, "But I can see why Glenn thought it was funny. Socks, hair. I would've laughed, too."

"So what did you find out about Randall?" Andrea interrupted and cut to the chase. "Did you know him in high school? Was he telling the truth?"

"These jeans look too short for Rick, do you mind if I take them for Glenn?" Maggie asked Lori, examining a pair of pants. She then turned her attention to Andrea. "I didn't recognize his name at all, but he is in my yearbook. And since my dad was pretty well-known in the area, at least to anyone who had farm animals, who knows how much Randall knows about our farm."

"We're going to need some containers - boxes or bags or something - to carry all of this clothing back to camp," Lori stated as she stood up. "Why don't we see what we can get together to use as carriers, and then we can finish sorting all this stuff?" She started to descend the porch steps and then paused and said without looking back, "After Glenn talks to Rick, we'll see what Rick wants to do next." She didn't wait for a reply and headed back to her tent.

"I guess Rick's word is law?" Andrea asked in a skeptical tone of no one in particular.

"I think she's saying that Rick will bring this all up at the group discussion tonight," Allison said. "Rick's been pretty democratic so far - I think he'll state the facts, the pros and the cons, and then get a group opinion about Randall."

"Maybe sometimes he's too democratic," Andrea replied, gathering up the underwear she'd selected.

"What are you saying?" Maggie asked.
"I'm saying that maybe – not necessarily, but maybe – Rick is not capable of making hard decisions when push comes to shove."

Allison had a feeling that Andrea was promoting Shane's line of gab…Andrea seemed to hang out with Shane more than anyone else in camp, and she'd admitted to boinking him at least once, so it wouldn't be surprising that she'd agree with his point of view.

Maggie exchanged a look with Allison. She then folded up that pair of jeans and also quickly scooped up a package of "tighty-whitey" briefs as she stood up. "I s'pose it's best if we wait and see what's said at the meeting tonight. Hear what everyone has to say."

The informal meeting summarily dismissed, Allison shrugged her arms into her new letterman's jacket and then gathered the socks, underwear, and one pair of cargo pants (for Daryl) that she could carry into her arms. "See y'all later, then," she said as she walked down the porch steps.

When she arrived back at their tent, she found Daryl there but apparently preparing to leave.

"You going somewhere?" she asked him.

"Yeah," he replied, somewhat fidgety, not meeting her eyes. "Rick wants me to…question the prisoner." He paused and then finally looked directly at her.

She dropped her bundle of goods onto the ground. "You go do what you have to do," she told him. She reached out and grasped his right hand in both of hers. "Whatever you have to do," she repeated with quiet emphasis.

‡‡‡‡ ‡‡‡‡ ‡‡‡‡

Allison began sorting through the armful of clothing she'd dropped. She'd go back to the house later and collect more after Lori had gathered up some boxes or containers, but for now she'd grabbed a few useful items… A long-sleeved flannel shirt for Daryl… "Let's see how long these sleeves last," she thought to herself as she folded it neatly… A pair of dark brown cargo pants that were probably a little too big in the waist, but at least he had a belt he could use to cinch them in… A bra and a cotton camisole for her, along with a package of men's briefs that she might well end up sharing with Daryl if there were no ladies' underpants left at the house. How did she miss picking out some drawers for herself? Two pairs of sweatpants; she'd keep the smaller pair and see if Daryl would be interested in the other… they probably weren't practical for hunting, but they'd be warm for sleeping…

While she worked the whole Randall situation nagged at the back of her mind. Should she have told Daryl about Shane's conversation with her? Would that just open a whole different, unnecessary can of worms? Daryl didn't much care for Shane as it was; he certainly would not be pleased to hear that she'd gone off alone with him. She wondered how Daryl's "interview" was going…and what would happen if he reported to the group that Randall seemed to be trustworthy. She could almost hear Shane calling him out, accusing him of lying just to protect Randall and curry favor with Rick. She sighed and fastened the sheath holstering her machete to her belt. What we need is a witness, a second pair of eyes and ears to confirm whatever Daryl finds out from Randall, she decided. She set off toward the shed. Daryl would never let her inside the shed with the prisoner, but she could at least stand nearby and listen to the goings-on. Didn't the police always have two cops in the room when they interrogated a suspect? Of course they did. She wasn't silently creeping up to the shed door because she was nosy, it was for legal and ethical reasons. Or so she'd convinced herself. Whether Shane or anyone else would consider her testimony unbiased was something she could worry about later…

‡‡‡‡ ‡‡‡‡ ‡‡‡‡
Standing a few steps away from the shed door, she heard the muffled "whomp" of what was most likely Daryl's fist on Randall's face. Probably not Geneva Convention-type methods, she thought, but they had to make do with what they had. The meaty thuds of Daryl's knuckles on Randall's skull, however, didn't upset her as much as what she heard next...Randall, in that whiny, weasel-y voice of his, describing two girls that members of his gang had raped in front of the girls’ father. "Real young, real cute," he'd said. If he had truly been a disinterested bystander, if he'd been as repulsed by the situation as he proclaimed, he would not have described rape victims like he would young girls wandering the local shopping mall. What was worse, she realized, was that any person being beaten to a pulp is naturally going to say whatever he thinks will appease his captor and make him stop hitting. So this little maggot obviously thought a gleeful story of rape would engage Daryl, make him think "Hey, cool, way to be!".

A few minutes later the shed door opened and Daryl emerged. He was startled to see her standing there, but didn't say anything as he re-fastened the padlock. He gestured with his head for her to follow him away from the door so that Randall wouldn't overhear. Then he laid into her.

"What the heck do you think you're doing?!"

"I, um, was just...listening. A second set of ears, so that if anyone at camp questioned what you said...." Her voice drifted off as Daryl's ice blue eyes bore into hers. Those eyes could take the place of a CT scan, the way they seemed to look directly into her soul.

"You don't like it when people think you're stupid, so don't play me that way," he told her. "If you're just bein' nosy have the decency to admit it."

She fell into step beside him as he started walking back to camp. "It's not just that..." she tried to explain. "This is probably going to end up as a life-or-death situation for Randall, and I wanted to... well, if I'm going to be called upon to vote on that type of decision, I wanted to hear some of the evidence for myself. Not that I don't trust you, but -- "

"He said some stuff that wasn't fit to be heard, 'specially by a lady," Daryl grumbled.

"My point exactly. I know you, and I know that if you repeated to the group what he said about that....that incident...you would temper your words, explain it in the least offensive way possible. That's very nice from an aesthetic point of view, but to be honest I'm glad I heard him speak the way he did. Even without seeing his face, his tone of voice and his words spoke volumes."

"S'alright," he said as they approached camp. "I ain't mad at you. I just remembered too late that you're Miss Bionic Ears." He gave her a tiny smirk and then paused so that she could walk ahead of him.

"We'll know soon enough," she heard Rick say as they arrived.

"That boy there's got a gang. Thirty men, they've got heavy artillery and they ain't looking to make friends. They roll through here, our boys are dead. And our women are going to wish they were," Daryl reported matter-of-factly, without pathos. Just as Allison had suspected, he was presenting Randall's case equably, preferring for everyone to make up their own minds. He'd make a lousy lawyer, she thought to herself, he's too fair-minded.

"What did you do?" Carol asked Daryl, pointedly looking at his bloody knuckles.

"Had a little chat," he replied.

"OK, no one goes near this guy," Rick admonished the group.
“What are you going to do?” Lori interrupted.

“He’s a threat. The threat has to be eliminated,” Rick said tersely.

“So, what? You're just going to kill him?!” Dale asked, simultaneously stupefied and outraged.

“People are scared, they need to be safe. I owe ‘em that," Rick replied. "It's settled. I'll do it today."

Rick tried to turn to leave, but Dale was relentless, grasping his elbow and sputtering on and on, his various objections tumbling over one another. "All I'm asking for is one day to talk to everybody," he pleaded.

Rick finally paused and turned to address the group. "We'll reconvene at the house at sunset. We'll discuss the matter and then what happens...happens." He strode off, Dale still anxiously following him and protesting with every step.

Allison gently picked up Daryl's injured right hand and examined it. "Let's go get this cleaned up," she told him.

‡‡‡‡ ‡‡‡‡ ‡‡‡‡

"Make a fist...now extend your fingers..." Allison instructed Daryl, sitting beside him on his log. "Doesn't seem like you broke any bones," she commented, daubing his knuckles with antiseptic. "These are just abrasions rather than cuts, best not to bandage them and just let the air heal them."

Daryl seemed more thoughtful than usual and she sensed that the whole Randall situation was weighing heavily on him. Seeking to lighten the mood she instructed him abruptly: "Examine the fingernails on your left hand." He obeyed without question but looked confused. Allison then chuckled.

"What?" he asked.

"Nothing, just proved that you're a typical male."

"Huh?"

"No one knows why, but 99% of the male population, when told to look at their fingernails, will do what you just did – turn the palm upward and curl the fingers down into the palm. But most females extend their hand out, palm down, fingers flexed upward slightly."

"Oh," was all he said at first. Then, with a sideways glance at her, "Just another piece of useless knowledge, huh?"

"I like to think that no knowledge is useless," Allison said, packing up her medical satchel. "Even tiny bits of trivia help to exercise the brain."

"I remember reading somewhere that doin' crossword puzzles helped to prevent Alzheimer's Disease, or something like that," Daryl commented.

"Yes, research has shown that older people who had worked a daily crossword puzzle over the years or answered the questions on Jeopardy every night or played chess a lot tended to not develop the brain plaques that are connected with Alzheimer's Disease." She shrugged. "Brain exercise," she repeated.

"Then I guess I best remember all these little facts you share with me so I don't get senile," he
replied with a smirk.

She stood up and picked up her bag. She reached over with her right hand and quickly rubbed her knuckles on his scalp, giving him a noogie. "Absolutely – that pretty little mind of yours would be a terrible thing to waste." She danced out of the way as he attempted to gently smack her backside. She ducked inside of their tent to put her bag away and a few minutes later she vaguely heard Carl's voice talking to Daryl.

"Did it hurt when you hit that guy?"

"I've been hurt worse," Daryl replied after a moment, as if he was considering the somewhat strange question. "So have you, buddy," he added playfully.

Carl continued to hover nearby. It was obvious that he was lonely and wanted someone to talk to. Finally he pointed at Daryl's crossbow and asked "Can you teach me to shoot that?"

"Your arm's not long enough," Daryl replied. He was uncomfortable talking to the kid one on one, especially when the kid was asking questions about violence and weaponry. He preferred it when Allison was there; she'd do most of the talking and then he could just throw in a comment here and there. And she had the gift of being able to deftly change the subject whenever necessary.

"Yeah it is," Carl argued with the absolute conviction of a 12-year-old.

"Where's your old man?" Daryl asked, at a loss for anything else to say. "Why don't you go pester him?"

Allison stepped out of the tent at that moment and addressed the boy. "Don't get upset, Squirt, he doesn't let me touch his crossbow, either, and my arms are longer than yours." She playfully reached down as if to grab the weapon and Daryl reflexively clasped it protectively closer to him. "See what I mean?" she joked.

"You don't mess with my bow," Daryl said to her somewhat dramatically, in the tone of voice he always reserved to poke fun at her, "It looms large in my legend."

Carl chuckled, enjoying being included in a conversation, even if he didn't understand all of it. "How big were you when you got a legendary bow, Mr. Daryl?" he asked, not quite catching Daryl's sarcasm.

"I was probably not much more than your size when I got my first bow," Daryl replied, relaxing now that there were three of them talking. "But it was a youth model 24-inch recurve."

"What does that mean?"

"It means it was only about yay long," Daryl said, extending his arms to about the width of Carl's shoulders, "and it was very light weight. Didn't take as much strength to pull the string."

"Oh," Carl seemed to consider what the authoritative hunter told him. "Do ya think we could find one like that sometime? A small bow that I could learn to use, I mean?" His eyes were wide and shiny with eagerness.

"Maybe," Daryl replied, setting his bow aside. "Depends on what your folks say; if it's OK with them, then maybe next time we make a run into town we can search that ol' pawn shop for something your size." His gaze suddenly turned to the right; Carol was walking toward him.

Not noticing Carol, Allison told Carl, "Your folks are probably wondering where you are, I'd better
take you back to the house." She shooed the boy ahead of her and walked off. To her surprise, Lori intercepted them halfway.

"There you are, baby," she said to the youngster, who winced at the endearment. "Do you know where your daddy is?"

"Last I saw he was goin' to the barn," Carl replied.

"OK," she looked in the direction of the barn and hesitated. Before Allison could offer to continue walking him to the house Lori told her, "Thanks for keeping an eye on him, I'll take it from here."

"No problem," Allison replied and turned to return to her tent. She saw Carol standing by Daryl and handing him something white – a cloth or maybe bandages? As she grew closer she heard Carol's voice get louder and more agitated.

"You couldn't hit me so you beat up some kid?" she accused Daryl.

"He's no kid, and he'd do worse than hittin' if he had the chance," he replied evenly.

"That's not what this is about and you know it," she leaned into his face.

"What do you want me to do? Huh?" Daryl asked, genuinely confused at her sudden passion.

"Don't pretend that you don't care," she continued as Allison stepped nearby. "You want your friendship back? Every smart or nice thing you've ever said? Fine, I've lost worse." She pointedly looked at Allison. "You used to be different. You've changed. You want to pretend you don't care, go play some outlaw Bonnie and Clyde routine just because of…." She continued to glare at Allison for several moments and then began to retreat. "But don't sit and tend to your bloody fists and pretend that you don't care," she shot back over her shoulder.

"What the heck was that about?" Allison asked as Daryl looked questioningly at the gauze Carol had handed him.

"Beats the hell, heck, out of me," he shook his head. "But somehow I think it's your fault."

"Yeah, I got that impression, too," she replied. Then she smiled at him. "You know, this is the first time in my whole life that I’ve been accused of being a 'bad girl.' I find it oddly exciting."
Daryl and Allison sat on their respective logs, he fine-tuning some of the bolts he'd fashioned out of tree limbs and she cutting the cured raccoon hide into a pattern that she could sew into a sheath for Daryl's newest hunting knife. She'd already spent a few afternoons cutting some of the dried skin into rawhide laces that she was going to use to sew the pouch together. And, she proudly noted as she hunched over her lap, Daryl had strung the raccoon's tail she'd made for him from one of the saddle bags on his motorcycle. He'd been saving squirrel tails lately from his kills and had joked that she should cure them and make a necklace or something out of them for herself to match his string of geek ears. Too bad they didn't have a camera so that they could take a picture of the two of them wearing their hunting trophies, she thought to herself, maybe posed with Daryl's foot up on a deer carcass and her holding her machete aloft. Wouldn't that just further irritate Carol….

"Bonnie and Clyde" indeed….

"Probably too late to get any huntin' in before the big meeting," Daryl spoke aloud, "but might have time to check the snares, see if we caught any rabbits."

"Sounds good," Allison agreed, most of her attention focused on the fur in her hands. "I think there's still some squirrel marinating in that one container…might be able to work up a stew of some sort if we don't get any other meat tonight."

"Nothin' is gonna taste good after that roast raccoon you spoiled everyone with," he remarked. Allison crimsoned with pleasure. Everyone had exclaimed at dinner that night about how good the 'coon was, but it made her extra-happy to hear Daryl's compliment.

"Couldn't have made it if you hadn't caught it," she demurred.

"Guess we make a good team, huh?" he grunted.

"Guess so." She tried to sound off-handed in her reply, but she couldn't deny that she felt all warm inside when he referred to them as a "team."

Daryl stood up and started collecting bolts in preparation for going afield. He wouldn't be hunting, but he was always prepared for walkers. Allison stood up, stretched, and was about to go place her handiwork inside the tent when both of them noticed Dale approaching. "I'll be right back," she told Daryl before disappearing inside the tent.

"Only reason I moved out here was to get away from you people," she heard Daryl say.

"Gonna take more than that," Dale replied.

"Don't need my head shrunk," Daryl told him. "This group's broken. I'm better off fending for myself."

"You act like you don't care."

"That's 'cause I don't."

"So," Dale continued, "live or die, you don't care what happens to Randall?"

"Nope."

"Then why not stand with me if it doesn't matter one way or the other?"
"Didn't peg you as a desperate son of a bitch," Daryl muttered as Allison stepped out of their tent.

"Your opinion makes a difference," Dale tried to convince Daryl.

"Ain't no one lookin' to me for nothin'," Daryl dismissed him.

"Carol is." Allison rolled her eyes at that remark. "And I am, right now. And you obviously have Rick's ear."

Daryl shrugged into his jacket and turned to face Dale. "Rick just looks to Shane." He eyed the older man evenly. "Let him."


"Why? Because he killed Otis?" Daryl asked derisively.

"Did he tell you that?"

"He told me some story…how Otis covered him, saved his ass." He narrowed his eyes for emphasis. "He showed up with the dead guy's gun. Rick ain't stupid; if he didn't figure that out it's 'cause he didn't want to." He hoisted his crossbow onto his shoulder. "Like I said, group's broken."

Dale suddenly noticed Allison as she walked past him to follow Daryl.

"What about you?" he asked her.

"What about me?"

"You're a doctor, you treated Randall."

"Yeah, and Dr. Samuel Mudd treated John Wilkes Booth. Look what happened to him."

Dale looked momentarily confused and then continued on. "I'm asking you from a compassionate point of view, can you justify the execution of a kid based on what he might do?"

"I have some very definite thoughts on the matter," Allison replied, "and I'm still pondering the situation. Right now all I'll say is that he's not a 'kid.' He's 19 years old, which makes him old enough to vote, old enough to sign a legal contract, old enough to enlist in the military. In the previous world, if he had pulled a gun on you on the street and taken your wallet, I doubt that you would have hesitated to call the police because he was 'just a kid.' I'll save all my further comments until the meeting tonight so that I don't have to repeat myself."

She turned and followed Daryl into the woods.

‡‡‡‡ ‡‡‡‡ ‡‡‡‡

They found a large hare in the first snare they checked and as Daryl removed it Allison asked him, "What was that you said about Shane killing Otis? I thought walkers got him."

Daryl strung the rabbit on a rope and hoisted it to his shoulder. "That was Shane's story. Anyone with half a brain – um, no offense – could see through that BS, though. He came back with Otis' weapon and the bag full of supplies…it wasn't no 'Otis got overtaken by walkers' scenario like he said."
"I guess I never really thought about it," Allison mused. She suddenly mentally kicked herself; what the heck had she been thinking - why had she trusted Shane's word about anything after seeing how he attacked Lori at the CDC? And now, after that fact, how he'd encouraged her to permanently sedate Randall… "How stupid can I be?!" she thought.

"I don't trust Shane," she said aloud as the two of them headed back to camp.

"Who does?" Daryl asked rhetorically.

Oh, but you don't know who he really is, how he really can be, she thought to herself. But, on the other hand, no matter how bad a picture of Shane she painted, wouldn't Daryl just naturally assure her that he could take care of himself? Maybe he sees through Shane more than you realize….oh, if only her mind would just quit swirling with thoughts for a minute or two!

They arrived back at their camp and Allison quickly skinned and gutted the rabbit. While Daryl went off to bury the remnants, so as not to attract walkers, she began cutting up the animal into pieces and washing the meat. She still had a couple of Tupperware containers on loan from Patricia; for now, she'd seal the meat up in them, keeping it fresh for another day in case folks weren't hungry after tonight's meeting.

As she worked she heard a faint sound and looked up to see Beth ambling nearby. "Hey," she called to the young girl. "You lost?"

Beth took that as an invitation and came closer. "No, just…wanderin'."

"You have a knack for showing up just when the kitchen work is about finished," Allison chided her.

"Patricia says that all the time," Beth smiled.

"Wandering around alone is probably not a great idea these days," Allison told her. "Where's Jimmy?"

Beth bristled ever so slightly. "He's helping my dad mend some fences where the steer broke through. And Jimmy ain't my keeper, he's just a … friend."

"I thought he was your boyfriend."

"We'd been dating for three months when all this happened. He came here when his town got overrun and his family…well…anyway, he had nowhere else to go so Dad let him stay with us." She kicked at a stone on the ground. "Doesn't mean I'm married to him or anything."

"Sixteen is young to be thrown together with someone you don't know that well," Allison agreed. "I mean, when you're dating, it's fun to go out and spend a few hours with someone, right? But part of the fun is coming home alone to gossip about it with your sister or your girlfriends on the phone. To suddenly have to live with the guy…"

"Exactly," Beth agreed enthusiastically. "I mean, we'd never said 'I love you' to each other or anything close – never had gotten that serious. We hadn't even….." she lowered her eyes and fidgeted uncomfortably, "…you know…..yet."

Allison smiled. "So you go from heavy hand-holding to having to share a bathroom with him. Definitely some culture shock."

"At first when Dad said Jimmy could stay I was all excited and thought it would be so cool, but…"
"Those are things that women twice your age experience when they first move in with a man, whether it's a man they marry or just co-habitate with," Allison replied. She briefly chuckled in her head at the irony of her giving relationship advice with such authority to this young girl.... She who had never really had a boyfriend and who now shared living quarters with the first and only man she'd ever had sex with. But, nevertheless, she'd read some things and talked to lots of women over the years...and these past few weeks with Daryl in such close quarters had really been like a crash course in couple-hood. "It's always a major change from him showing up at your door on Saturday night all shaved and showered and on his best behavior to seeing him scratching himself at the breakfast table."

Beth giggled. She hadn't really been able to talk about the Jimmy situation with anyone; her mother had already gotten sick and turned before he'd moved in, and Maggie had always had something of an attitude bordering on jealousy – Dad would never have let her have a boyfriend move into their house, she'd told Beth more than once. "To be honest," Beth confided, "Sometimes I think of Jimmy as more of a brother now."

"There's nothing wrong with that," Allison said. "Males can be platonic friends with females, you know."

"Well, except that he doesn't think of me as a sister..."

"What do you mean? Is he...pressuring you...?"

Beth kicked the dirt angrily and sat down on Daryl's log. As it happened, Daryl just happened to be returning to their tent when Beth asked aloud, "What is it about guys and sex?"

"Um, I'll see y'all later," Daryl spun on his heel and was about to double-time it out of there.

"No you don't," Allison called, making a beckoning gesture, "Get back here." He reluctantly obeyed. If he'd had time to consider the situation, he would've heard Merle in the back of his head calling him pussy-whipped for complying. "We need a man's opinion. You men always complain that you don't understand women, here's a chance to help us understand you."

"Oh, Christ, do I hafta...." He moaned.

"Hush," Allison hissed, and then to Beth she asked, "What were you saying about Jimmy...?"

"Well, like I said, I'd be perfectly happy to live with him like a friend or a brother, but lately he's been hinting that we're meant to be together and would probably be married if the world hadn't changed so quickly, and that we should..." her voice drifted off. She was quiet for a moment and then looked up and asked Daryl, "On a scale of one to 10, just how important is sex to a guy?"

"Thirty-nine," Daryl replied without hesitation. He thought for a moment and then said "Why are you askin'?"  

"Well, it's just that..."

"You're too young," he interjected before Beth could finish.

Suddenly offended at being treated like a child, Beth bristled. "Well, how old were you?! When you first... you know."
"That's different, I'm a guy."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, don't listen to him, that's just the typical double standard," Allison protested.

"Darned right it's a double standard, and I ain't gonna argue 'cause for once the men got the better end of the deal," Daryl stated.

"Bottom line, Beth," Allison continued, "it's your body, your life, your say. Personally, I think 16 is too young, but that's me. You are the only one who can decide what's right for you. And you have to make your decisions strictly based on what you want, on how you feel."

"It's gettin' about that time," Daryl changed the subject, looking up at the sky. The sun was beginning to set. "You almost finished? Gotta get washed up and then get to the house."

As he spoke Carl wandered into their little camp area.

"Why the f – um, heck, are you walkin' around by yourself?" Daryl asked him.

Carl seemed jumpy and flinched at Daryl's harsh words. "I dunno, I was just…" his voice trailed off.

"What have you been up to? Why are you all muddy?" Daryl questioned the boy.

"Nuthin' I dunno," Carl drawled, squirming uncomfortably.

"Beth, why don't you take Carl with you back to the house. We'll be there directly," Allison said.

As they rinsed their faces, hands and forearms at the pump, Daryl and Allison chatted.

"That boy was up to somethin', don't know exactly what," Daryl stated.

"You're right, I'm sure," Allison replied. "I'm not too old to remember coming home covered in dirt after playing at the construction site that was strictly off limits…Granny would say 'Girl, what have you gotten into?' before plopping me into the bathtub and my answer was always 'Nothing…'"

They finished washing in silence and then proceeded up to the Greene house to discuss Randall's fate.

‡‡‡‡ ‡‡‡‡ ‡‡‡‡

"So how do we do this? Take a vote? Should it be unanimous?" Andrea asked the assembled group.

"How about 'majority rules'?" Lori suggested.

"What's the point?" Dale asked, pacing in a small area. "I think we all know which way the wind is blowing…there's only two of us who think Randall should be spared…" he looked pointedly at Glenn.

Glenn fidgeted in his seat. "Um, look, I usually think you're right about everything…"

"Oh, no," Dale groaned, "They've got you scared!"

"He's not one of us!" Glenn persisted. "And we've lost too many people already."
"What about you?" Dale turned to Maggie.

"Couldn't we just keep him as a prisoner?" she suggested.

"Just another mouth to feed," Daryl grumbled.

"Gonna be a lean winter," Hershel commented.

"Maybe we could ration better," Lori said.

"Look, I think we all know what needs to be done," Shane interjected.

"He's just a kid," Dale said with emphasis on each word. "Are we going to sentence him to death for a crime he might not commit?"

"How would you do it?" Patricia asked timidly. "Would he suffer?"

"We could hang him...snap his neck," Shane offered.

"Would we bury the body or - - " T-Dog began to ask before he was cut off by Dale.

"You're all acting like the decision has been made!" he protested. "If we do this...this thing...then we're saying that we're no better than the group we're afraid of." He paused and looked around the room. "Maybe he could join us – be an asset!"

"I don't know if I would be comfortable with him walking around loose," Lori shook her head.

"We could put a guard on him," Maggie suggested.

"Who would volunteer for that duty?" Shane asked.

"We're just going 'round in circles here," Daryl complained.

"This is a young man's life!" Dale stamped his foot in frustration. "We need to have more than a five minute conversation to decide his fate."

"Stop it!" Carol spoke up. "Just stop it. I didn't ask for this. You can't ask me to decide this. Do whatever you have to do, just leave me out of it."

"Making the decision to kill him or not speaking up, it's the same thing," Dale admonished her. The whole group began to speak at once until Rick silenced them.

"Dale's right. If anyone has anything to say, a concrete argument, they need to take the floor now," Rick announced.

The room was quiet and then Dale walked toward Allison. "You've been silent so far. You told me earlier that you'd express your feelings at the meeting. Well, now's the time."

Allison sighed and surveyed the room. She considered her words before speaking. "First of all, had it been me, in all honesty I probably would have left Randall impaled on that fence in town. He shot at Rick, Glenn and Hershel. In the previous world, that was called 'assault with a deadly weapon' and maybe even could be interpolated to be 'assault with intent to murder.' I'm not a lawyer," she glanced at Andrea, "but that alone would be reason enough to imprison him for what, 15 or 20 years?"

"He was trapped, he didn't know what he was doing," Dale protested. "Who knows what any of us
would have done under similar circumstances."

"I know that when I first encountered Rick, T-Dog, Glenn and Daryl, 'way back when in Atlanta, they had me cornered and outnumbered and they didn't shoot at me," Allison replied. "We talked and we all lowered our weapons." She paused before continuing. "Again, with 20/20 hindsight, I honestly think I would've just left Randall back in town, impaled on that fence. But Rick and Hershel didn't have a lot of time to consider their decision, so what happened, happened. And we certainly don't have the resources to keep him jailed for however many years."

"But you're a doctor, you took an oath, you operated on the boy," Dale exclaimed.

"And, as I told you before, Dr. Samuel Mudd set John Wilkes Booth's broken leg just hours after Booth broke it. In case you don't recall, Booth broke his leg after jumping from the balcony of Ford's Theater after shooting President Abraham Lincoln in the head. Dr. Mudd was sentenced to life in prison simply for providing humane medical care to a felon. Guess what? Every prison in America has doctors who care for the prisoners…Ted Bundy, John Wayne Gacy, Gary Gilmore – all of them, convicted murderers with overwhelming evidence proving their guilt. But while they were in prison some physician tended to their medical needs. It's a doctor's job, just like it's the job of a defense lawyer to take their case no matter how many smoking guns the prosecution has… doesn't mean that the doctor has sympathy for the patient or believes in his innocence."

"But – " Dale started to speak but Allison stopped him with a hand gesture.

"I'm not done," she continued. "You told Carol that not speaking out was equivalent to voting Randall guilty. With that in mind, isn't Randall just as guilty for sitting back and allegedly not speaking out or participating when his cohorts were gang-raping two young women in front of their father?"

Lori and Patricia cringed and covered their mouths in horror.

"Daryl is too much of a gentleman to have gone into specifics, but that happens to be one of the unspeakable acts committed by Randall's gang that Daryl hinted at earlier today. Randall described it in glorious, gory detail during his interrogation but he insisted that he didn't participate. So, Dale," she looked at the older man, "by your reasoning, that makes him just as guilty of rape as his cohorts."

Daryl was looking down at his feet, shifting them uncomfortably. He hadn't meant for anyone else to hear that revolting story.

"As far as inviting Randall to join us, think about it. He's been chained in the shed for how long now? He was blindfolded and tossed into the trunk of a car. He's been in fear for his life since he arrived here. Do you really think that once we unlock his cuffs he'll walk around with us whistling a happy tune?" She paused and was silent for a few minutes.

"One last thought I'll add, Dale," Allison said quietly, "is that it seems to me that you are being somewhat selective when it comes to deciding who deserves a second chance and who doesn’t." Dale looked at her with his trademark eyebrows knit in confusion. "When Daryl's brother was handcuffed and left alone on a rooftop, you were hesitant to provide the necessary tools to free him. You spent time negotiating, as if there was a choice – like Merle might have been left there to rot if your terms hadn't been met."

"But that was diff - - you can't compare - - Randall's a kid and Merle Dixon was – " Dale's objections tumbled over one another; the man had obviously been caught off-guard.
"Dale's right," Andrea interjected. "We need to find another way."

"Anyone else?" Rick asked the group. No one spoke, and since it had previously been established that the vote would be ruled by the majority it was obvious that the decision had been made.

Dale was nevertheless still an emotional mess, verging on tears as he left the room, muttering about "this new world is not one I want to be a part of." As he walked toward the front door of the house he paused and placed a hand on Daryl's shoulder. "You're right," he murmured, "This group is broken."
Chapter 38

The rest of the group slowly trickled out of the house and back to camp, except for Rick and Shane who remained behind.

"Daryl?" Rick called. "Can you hold up just a sec?"

"I'll wait outside," Allison told him, stepping out onto the front porch. A few minutes later Daryl called her back into the house.

"We need your expert opinion," Rick told her. "What would be the most humane way of…taking care of Randall?"

"Humane?"

"Well, the quickest way and with the least amount of pain, anyway," Rick replied.

"I still say we string him up, just snap his neck," Shane commented.

"That don't always work, does it?" Daryl asked aloud. Looking at Allison he added, "People don't always die when their neck gets broke, right?"

"True," she agreed. "Without professional equipment – an official gallows like a death penalty prison would have – there's a good chance he could dangle there for many minutes and slowly suffocate." She shuddered involuntarily. "To tell the truth, I've always thought that hanging would be the worst way to go if I was ever on Death Row." The three men looked at her curiously. "No, I never planned to actually end up on Death Row," she explained hastily. "It's just that I'm a True Crime buff and have read a lot of books on the subject." The men continued to eye her silently. "Geez, mention you like to read about the gas chamber and people immediately think you're weird…" she muttered.

"So if not hanging, then what?" Rick asked.

"Lethal injection is probably the most humane method in a controlled environment, but we don't have the right drugs, and I'd frankly hate to waste any of the painkillers that we do have on hand," Allison said. "Honestly, in this situation I'm thinking the best route to take is…" her voice trailed off; she was finding it difficult to actually come out and say the words.

"Bullet to the brain," Daryl finished for her. "One clean shot, it's all over."

"Yes, exactly," Allison agreed.

"Fine, whatever," Shane was growing impatient. "As long as we get it done."

"If that's what you, or we, choose, I'll add that I think it would be best to not let the prisoner know what is planned."

"What do you mean?" Rick asked. "How can he not suspect when we blindfold him and - - "

"That's what I'm saying," Allison explained. "You don't blindfold him, or give him any indication that he's walking the last mile. Uncuff him, maybe walk him to wherever we're going to burn or bury him so you don't have to carry the body a long ways afterward – tell him that we're temporarily moving him to the barn or something – and then just do it quickly from behind. He
won't be panicky or pleading for his life. His last thoughts won't be filled with fear or terror. I think it’s better if he doesn't know what's coming."

Shane and Daryl seemed about to agree with her when Rick spoke up. "That seems unnecessarily cold and cruel. I think at the very least he deserves a chance to speak his final piece…to die with some sort of dignity." He looked at the others for objections. When there were none he nodded. "Fine. Shane, Daryl, meet me outside the shed in about 30 minutes." He exited the house.

"He's gonna pussy out, sure as shit," Shane muttered under his breath as he started to leave. He paused and then turned to Allison. "I gotta say, Doc, I'm impressed. Didn't think you'd be on board with this." He gave her a half-smile, as if he was admiring her moxie.

"I am not enjoying this, Shane," Allison assured him. "The whole situation makes me sick to my stomach. But right now I can't think of a viable alternative when it comes to keeping the camp safe." She sighed. "All I can do is try not to go crazy second-guessing myself and this decision…"

"Let's get you back to the tent," Daryl said, gently gripping her elbow and prompting her toward the front door.

"Did I weird you out or anything back there?" Allison asked Daryl anxiously, insecure as ever, as they traipsed back to their camp. "I mean talking about walking Randall out somewhere and shooting him…? I dunno, it was like I was solving a logic problem or something in my head, but when I said it out loud it seemed like it sounded…well, cold and unfeeling."

"Angel, you live with a Dixon outta your own free will. That makes you 'weird' by definition," Daryl nudged her shoulder playfully. "What you said about Randall, well, that just made a lot of sense, really… Besides, Rick asked you for a scientific opinion, and that's what you gave him." His voice softened. "I know you… You're not unfeeling. It's just that sometimes you're strictly logical, like Mr. Spock temporarily takes over your brain. I'm guessin' that that's something that comes in handy when you're a doctor."

She smiled slightly. "Yeah, it does. It's part of our training to tread that fine line between giving hope to a patient while also being realistic. But even if we as doctors can't reassure a patient too much prior to surgery, studies have shown that the better the mental attitude, the better the surgical outcome. So it definitely helps to have someone – a family member or whomever - reassure the person that everything will be all right…"

"'Whomever'," Daryl snickered.

"What?"

"Only you would bother to use such proper English at a time like this," he leaned over and kissed the top of her head as they reached their tent. "You best wait here while I go meet Rick." He paused and then added in very exacting speech: "To take care of the matter which is at hand."

"Fine, Mr. Wise Guy, get out of here before I decide whether I'll ever tend to any of your matters with my hand - or with any other bodily part – anytime soon."

Daryl walked over to his motorcycle and started looking through one of the saddle bags. "Angel? Do you have my gun?"

Allison walked over to join him. "Your pistol? No, why would I? I don't use handguns."

He started looking through the other saddle bag, even though he was very meticulous when it came to his belongings and he knew where he'd left his gun. "That's weird…” he mumbled.
"You never misplace stuff," Allison remarked. "Who could've taken it?"

"I dunno…" He thought for a moment then closed the bag back up. "Oh well, best get to the shed." He started to leave then paused, as if he was pondering something. Finally he turned and asked Allison, "That thing you said before, 'bout Merle…" Allison looked at him questioningly. "'Bout Dale not wanting to rescue him or somethin'…. What was that about? And how did you – I mean, you weren't even there."

"Oh, T-Dog happened to mention it to me once when we were talking," she replied. She silently hoped that Daryl didn't press her for details as to when and why; she still hadn't mentioned her little conversation with Shane to him. "We were talking about family and stuff, and he said that he still felt guilty for dropping the handcuff key."

"I don't blame him," Daryl said gruffly. "Was an accident."

"He knows that," Allison assured him. "He also said that even though Merle wasn't his favorite person, he was still a human being and someone's kin, and he wanted to make things right. And that's why he was surprised that when Rick asked Dale for his bolt cutters Dale hesitated. That he was already upset at some of his tools being left behind and he didn't hand over the cutters until he negotiated some sort of deal with Rick…."

"I never heard any of that," Daryl commented. "I was in the van waiting to go and just saw them over there talkin' and wastin' time."

"I don't mean to paint a bad picture of Dale," Allison quickly backpedaled, "but this is what T-Dog told me, and he had no reason to make up stories for my benefit, as far as I know. I only brought it up at the meeting because it occurred to me that Dale was playing on everyone's sympathies rather than sticking to facts."

"Folks had their reasons for not liking Merle," Daryl commented as he turned to depart. "I appreciate you speaking up for him."

"He's family," Allison said simply. "You take care now, y'hear?"

Lori, Carol, Andrea, and most of the others were gathered around the main camp when Rick ambled up, looking vaguely uncomfortable at the expectant faces that greeted him.

"The prisoner will remain incarcerated for the time being," he addressed them tersely.

It took a few minutes for it to register that Randall was still alive, that his death sentence apparently hadn't been carried out.

"I'm going to go find Dale and tell him," Andrea said with an eager smile, jumping to her feet.

"'Find' Dale?" Rick asked the rest of the group questioningly.

"He went off and took a walk," T-Dog explained. "Didn't say much except he wanted to clear his mind."

Daryl was in the shed with Randall, where he'd been returned after the botched execution attempt. Despite Allison's recommendation, they'd marched Randall to the barn, blindfolded, and Rick had
asked him did he want to stand or kneel, did he have any last words, which of course had caused
the prisoner to wilt into a blubbering, whining mess. And then right before the trigger was pulled
Carl stumbled into the barn to encourage his father – "Do it, Dad, do it."

For cryin' out loud, couldn't someone keep a leash on that kid, Daryl thought. And sure enough,
Rick crumbled and backed down. "Take him back," he'd ordered. Shane had stormed off muttering
a stream of curse words and Daryl roughly guided Randall back to the shed and re-handcuffed him.
He was just about to take matters into his own hands when he heard an agonized scream in the
distance. Grabbing a lantern, he dashed off in the direction of the voice that continued to yell and
moan loudly.

A few minutes later he found Dale on his back, being clawed at by a walker. "Help! Help! Over
here!" Daryl screamed while knifing the walker in the head. Rick, Lori, Andrea and the others ran
up quickly in response to his cries. Lori and Andrea both recoiled in horror when they saw Dale
lying with his intestines splayed across his belly and spilling onto the ground.

"Hershel! Allison!" Rick called out frantically, over and over.

Hershel arrived shortly after the others and immediately surmised that Dale was beyond help. He
shook his head sadly at Rick when the sheriff demanded that he start a transfusion, or otherwise
operate on Dale right there and now.

Allison was in her tent when she heard the screams and was one of the last to arrive on the scene.
When she got to the grisly scene, Rick was shaking his head, tears pouring from his eyes. "Hershel
won't do anything," he looked earnestly at her.

"There's nothing that can be done," she replied softly.

"He's suffering, someone do something!" Andrea pleaded.

Rick pulled out his pistol and pointed it at Dale's head. "Go ahead," a voice said. Allison looked up
to see that it was Shane speaking. Rick hesitated and then lowered first his arm and then his chin to
his chest. It obviously pained the lawman to see his mentor, his surrogate grandfather, in such
agony but he couldn't bring himself to do what needed to be done. Daryl stepped forward from the
shadows and reached down, taking Rick's gun from his hand. He placed his other hand briefly on
Rick's shoulder. Rick stood up and stepped back. Daryl crouched down next to Dale. Dale's pain
had rendered him unable to speak, but he communicated his final wish by lifting his head up to
meet the barrel of the gun in Daryl's hand.

"Sorry, brother," Daryl said to the man softly before squeezing the trigger.
Chapter 39

The report from the single shot seemed to echo endlessly. When it finally stopped it was replaced by the muffled sobs of Lori, Carol, and Carl, and the banshee wails of Andrea, who sounded like her own flesh was being torn into shreds. After a few minutes Rick gathered his family and urged them to return to camp. Hershel said that he would escort them back, along with Patricia and Beth. Allison hadn't noticed before how many people had responded to the sound of Dale's screams.

"It's not safe to be wandering around alone," Hershel commented. "We don't know if this is some lone walker that strayed in here, or if there are others nearby."

Allison thought to herself that Hershel must have had some sort of epiphany recently – he'd never referred to the geeks as 'walkers' before. She remembered that day at the house not too long ago when he had insisted that they were people, sick people.

"It's not safe to walk around unarmed, either," Shane added. He walked over to where Dale's rifle lay on the ground. It must have fallen from his grasp when he was surprised by the walker. Shane picked it up and handed it to Hershel, who accepted it without protest.

After that part of the group had left Rick announced that it was too late and too dark to do anything further; that they would dig a grave at first light tomorrow morning for Dale.

"We can't just leave him here!" Andrea cried.

"If someone can go back to the RV and get me one of Dale's shirts and a large towel I can begin preparing him for burial," Allison said. "I'll have to run back to my tent and get some gloves out of my bag….and then we'll need a blanket or tarp or something to wrap him in…"

Having a plan and some instructions to act on seemed to snap the others temporarily out of grieving mode. That's why folks baked casseroles for families when a loved one has died – it keeps them busy and makes them feel useful, Allison thought. It's therapeutic.

"I'll get the shirt and a bath towel," Carol said, wiping her nose. "If someone can walk me back to the Winnebago."

"I'll go with you," Andrea volunteered. "I think that Dale deserves to be wrapped up in one of his own blankets."

"Glenn, why don't you go with Carol and Andrea back to the RV and then bring back the stuff they pick out," Rick advised.

"In the meantime I'll dash back to my tent and get my bag – " Allison began to say but was cut off by Daryl.

"Oh no, you don't," he stated firmly. "You'll stay right here with Rick. I'll go get your bag."

Allison bit back her protestations of Daryl not going off alone… He was capable of taking care of himself, she repeated in her mind.

"I'll go get a truck," Shane said. "Take Dale to the….the burial area when you're done. Guess we'd better haul this guy off to the burn pile while we're at it."

Alone with Rick, Allison reached down to Dale's left arm. She gently removed his wristwatch.
"I don't mean to steal from the dead," she explained, "but Dale used to set such store on keeping time, and winding this watch…it would be a shame to bury it with him. I think you or Glenn or someone should have it…you know, sort of continue keeping track of time to remember Dale."

Rick's voice was unsteady as he replied; he was obviously still choking back tears. "That's a good idea," he said slowly. "I s'pose we should check his pockets, too…see if there's anything else we should save."

All they found, though, was a neatly folded handkerchief. Daryl returned and as he held the lantern Allison donned a pair of gloves and began delicately replacing Dale's intestines back inside his abdominal cavity as best she could. Andrea came back alone - Glenn had apparently escorted a distraught Maggie back to the house - and Allison used the bath towel she'd brought as a large, makeshift bandage over Dale's gaping belly wound. She then buttoned the Hawaiian shirt he'd been wearing over it, and with Daryl's help sat Dale up in a partially sitting position and pulled on the shirt that Andrea had brought with her over the first one so that Dale now sported two shirts. Allison pulled it tightly shut and buttoned it so that it held the towel and everything else in place. They laid Dale back down onto the ground. He looked about four months' pregnant now, but at least all the blood and guts were now concealed and he looked somewhat more like his old self.

Shane pulled up in a truck and exited the cab. "Found this near the barn, thought you could use it," he said, holding out a length of coiled rope. Andrea and Rick spread out the blanket she'd brought flat onto the ground and Shane and Daryl lifted Dale's body onto it and then rolled him up like a mummy. Using his hunting knife, Daryl cut the rope into three shorter pieces and he and Shane tied them around the blanket to keep it securely wrapped. They gently lifted the bundle into the bed of the truck, and then not-so-gently heaved the corpse of the walker beside it.

"I'll ride back with you," Rick told Shane, "Help you…unload." He paused and then turned to Andrea. "I remember that first night I was at the quarry and Dale was talking to you about how important it was to keep track of time. I think that he would have wanted you to have this." He reached out and grasped her right hand and placed Dale's watch into her palm. She clasped her fingers around it and her face contorted into a sob.

"I didn't mean to upset you," Rick said anxiously.

"No, no," she held up a hand to assure him she was alright. "It's OK…it's just….oh, God! I can't believe that Dale…." She closed her eyes and took a moment to compose herself. "Thank you, Rick," she said, nodding to the watch in her hand.

"We'll drive you back to the RV," Shane told her. "You shouldn't be walkin' alone at night. You two gonna be OK?" He asked Daryl.

"Yeah," Daryl replied succinctly.

‡‡‡‡ ‡‡‡‡ ‡‡‡‡

Allison and Daryl made it back to their tent without incident, but she was uncharacteristically silent the entire way. As they sat down and kicked off their boots, Daryl reached down into one of Allison's many bags and produced a bottle of Old Granddad.

"Here," he unscrewed the cap and handed it to her.

"No, I'm fine," she shook her head.

"You're not fine," he told her, still extending the bottle her way.
"I don't want to get in the habit of relying on liquor every time I'm upset," she protested.

"For Christ's sake, with everything that's gone on in the past few weeks, or months, how often have we busted out the booze?! There's no crime in having a shot or two once in a while to relax. You're an emergency room doctor – didn't you ever prescribe sedatives to someone who'd been mugged or attacked somehow?"

"Well, yes…"

"Well we don't have a supply of Valium, so this is the next best thing. I know you, Angel, you're blaming yourself for Dale wanderin' off alone. Just because you disagreed with him at the meeting. It wasn't your fault, but I also know that I ain't gonna convince you of that right now. But you do need to get some sleep, and in order to do that you need to relax first. We don't have the luxury of taking a leisurely walk or ordering a massage from room service, so I'm prescribin' this."

She took the bottle from him and downed a healthy swig. The warmth going down her throat was somewhat comforting, she had to admit. She passed the bottle back to him. He took a sip and handed it back to her. One more large swallow and she was, indeed, beginning to relax a bit.

"A massage from room service? What kind of hotels have you stayed at?" she asked him.

"I've seen movies," he replied.

"Oh," she mumbled, taking another sip. "I stayed at a Hilton once…I think that was the only place I've ever stayed that had actual room service. Do you know that they charged $7 for a Coca-Cola?!"

"Hilton," he snorted, handing the bottle back to her. "I knew you were a rich chick…"

"No, no…my roommate at Duke won a radio contest once – you know, be the right caller and get entered into a drawing. Anyway, it was a trip for two to Chicago to see the King Tut exhibit at the Field Museum. I was more excited about the plane ride and seeing Chicago than looking at old Egyptian stuff, to be honest. I always thought Atlanta was a big city, but Chicago seemed so much bigger…"

"Chicago's almost twice as big as Atlanta," he replied, capping the bottle and stashing it back in Allison's suitcase.

"Oh. I never really paid that much attention in social studies class…populations and geography and such used to make me doze off."

"I've always been fascinated with maps and cities and all that sort of stuff…airports, roads, things like that," Daryl commented. "Science and social studies were the two classes I always did good in at school. And I loved lookin' at the atlas and the globe and readin' the almanac in my spare time…"

Allison sighed and snuggled against Daryl's side. "I can't believe Dale's gone," she said softly.

"He shouldn't have been walkin' around out there by himself like that," Daryl murmured, kissing the top of her head. "Maybe this was a wake-up call for us – walkers are getting' onto the property now."

"Hershel had mentioned that some cattle had broken through a fence the other day – maybe that's where that walker got in?"
"Even so, for them to be close enough to find a break in the fence is too close. I dunno how safe this farm is right now," Daryl seemed to be thinking out loud.

Allison sat up straight at looked at Daryl with fear in her eyes. "What are you saying?"

Trying to calm her down he wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "I'm sayin' that we need to check all the fences on the farm and make sure they're secure." But in the back of her mind she could sense that Daryl wasn't 100 percent convinced that just mending fences would keep them safe. Before she could question him further he kissed her tenderly on her temple and spoke quietly.

"We need to get some sleep," he said. "Got a lot of stuff to tend to in the morning."

She looked at him with those huge violet eyes that always made him melt inside. He leaned forward and kissed her on the lips and she responded in full measure. As her tongue demanded entrance into his mouth, he cupped the back of her head with one hand while attempting to unbutton her shirt with the other. She pushed his hand away and unbuttoned her own shirt and shrugged it off with a lightning-fast motion. She then grasped his head with both of her hands and pulled him close to her as she lay down on their bedding. She gripped his hair with fingers and ran them over the back of his head. He moaned and paused for breath and she took that cue to reach between their bodies to attempt to unbutton his shirt. With a slight grunt he raised himself to a kneeling position and quickly doffed his shirt. He crouched back down over her and trailed his kisses from her mouth to her neck to her collarbone and then finally taking her nipple into his mouth.

"Oooohmmmmph," she moaned as waves of pleasure washed over her brain, her hands reflexively pulling his head closer. Her reaction excited him and he continued to tease and suckle her breast with increasing fervor.

She reached down with one hand toward his crotch and found it encumbered by his trousers. She used both hands to push him upward and started to fumble with his zipper. He took over and quickly wriggled out of his pants and underwear while she did the same. Doubly excited by the feeling of his flesh against hers she began to moan and rhythmically buck her hips up against him. She grasped his length and caressed it and guided it toward her opening. With a slight grunt he raised himself from his kneeling position and quickly doffed his shirt. He crouched back down over her and trailed his kisses from her mouth to her neck to her collarbone and then finally taking her nipple into his mouth.

"Oh, baby, you feel sooo good," he pressed his face against her ear as he made that first deep stroke. She tightened her muscles and wrapped her arms around his lower back to pull him as close as possible. He began to move in and out and she arched her back and whimpered with pleasure. She opened her eyes and stroked his chest as he continued to pump into her. "You're so beautiful..." she murmured. "You look just like a Greek god... I love to watch you..."

"You're the beautiful one," he gasped, his breaths coming faster and faster. Suddenly he clenched his eyes tightly shut and grunted "Uh, uh, oh, oh, unnnngghh!" He gave two more short thrusts and then collapsed on top of her. She wrapped her arms around the back of his head and kissed his scalp.

"I love you, Daryl," she whispered.

"Mmmm, I love you, Angel," he replied sleepily, rolling over and lazily extending an arm across her, "but you wear me out!"

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ 
Allison felt Daryl stir and she tentatively opened an eye. It was still somewhat dark, but she knew from experience that it was getting close to morning, as Daryl rarely slept past sunrise.
"Sorry to disturb you, Sleeping Beauty," he said when he saw her open her eyes. "But gotta get to it – lot to be done today."

"I know," she said quietly, not relishing the thought of yet another funeral.

When they arrived at the farm's makeshift graveyard, Allison was surprised to see that T-Dog and Jimmy were almost finished digging the hole for Dale's body. "They must've been up all night," she thought to herself.

As the others slowly gathered, Shane announced that he was assembling a team to go out and secure the perimeter of the farm – fix any broken fences and eliminate any walkers that might be wandering nearby. Andrea, Daryl, T-Dog immediately volunteered to go with him. When Jimmy and Allison also offered to accompany the quartet Shane denied them, stating that they needed some folks who could handle weapons to stay and protect the camp.

Dale's funeral was a very somber occasion…for better or worse, he'd been the father figure for the whole group since their days at the quarry. As Rick spoke about Dale and his "look", expressions of recognition flashed across the group's faces. Everyone was familiar with Dale and his eyebrows and how he could make you blurt out a secret just by raising them at you. It seemed to Allison that of all the funerals they'd held thus far, Dale's was charged with more emotion than any other. No doubt it was because he'd been there since the beginning…it was his RV that had provided shelter for so many of them, not to mention plates and eating utensils and an indoor commode. And it was his fishing gear that had allowed the group to vary their meal entrees from squirrel and rabbit once in a while. Dale, whose lectures on morality sprinkled with literary quotes were sometimes tiresome, but then again they also provided food for thought, which could be a welcome distraction in this new world. Dale, who was forever trying to maintain some sort of normalcy in this new world using the laws of the Way Things Used to Be. He was certainly right in many ways, Allison thought to herself; heck, it was probably thanks to his effect on the "group think" that the men in their camp were so respectful of the women. But some of the Old Rules had to change, didn't they? Wasn't she right in voting for Randall's execution…? Even so, she'd never forget the absolute despair in Dale's face when he left the house that evening…

After the service was over, Shane had a quick conference with those that were going to accompany him on the "search and secure" mission. They would be taking guns with them, but would only use them as a last resort. He instructed them to collect other implements – shovels, pitchforks, scythes, whatever didn't make an explosive report – and to meet him by the pick-up truck near the house within the next 15 minutes.

"I'll walk you back to the tent first," Daryl told Allison. She was about to protest that she'd be perfectly safe making her own way back until she saw the steely look of resolve in his eyes. He wasn't in a mood for negotiation, she decided as she fell into step beside him.

When they got to their tent, Daryl filled his quiver with bolts and made another perfunctory look around for his pistol.

"You want one of these rifles?" Allison asked him, starting to reach for her duffle bag.

"Nah, the others will have guns. I've got my bow and my knife, I'm all set. Just wonder what the heck happened to my gun…"

"I hate to point fingers," Allison said hesitantly, "but there's only one person I remember seeing wandering around here in the last few days…"

"I know, been thinkin' the same thing…him all covered with mud, like he'd been over in the
swamps…” Daryl finished her thought. "But I ain't about to go accusin' a kid outright of stealing." His voice dropped off a bit. "I used to hate bein' accused of stuff I didn't do, just 'cause I was a kid...."

"Well, I'd like to think that all the adults in camp are above stealing from one another, especially when it comes to weapons," Allison commented. "Let's face it, kids get into trouble when they don't get enough attention from their parents, and if there was ever a child who was being ignored it's Carl…"

"Maybe you can mention that to Lori next time she has a doctor's appointment with you," Daryl suggested. Allison almost did a double-take when Daryl referred to the sheriff's wife by her actual name rather than some snide nickname.

"I'll see if there's a delicate way I can bring it up," she replied.

"Don't wander away from here while I'm gone," Daryl told her as he prepared to leave. "Once we secure the farm, I've got a meeting with Rick. He said he wants to talk to me about Randall. So I might be gone a while."

"No problem, I've got no plans to go anywhere," Allison said. "I've got things to work on and I've got my knife and machete…I'll be fine." She leaned forward and gave him a quick kiss. "Take care of yourself," she admonished lightly.

"I always do," he replied. "Be back soon as I can."

Watching him as he walked away Allison replayed their conversation in her mind. Was it her imagination or had Daryl sort of squared up his shoulders and stood more upright when he mentioned his private meeting with Rick later? Maybe that's why "Olive Oyl" had suddenly become "Lori". She knew Daryl – he wasn't one to suck up to anyone, much less an authority figure. No, this was some sort of purposeful sudden show of respect… She didn't know exactly what all Rick had discussed with Daryl, but apparently it was something serious. She picked up her needle, rawhide thread and cut skins and went outside. Seated on her log, she resumed stitching the sheath she'd been working on for Daryl's new Buck knife. She was so engrossed in her work that she didn't know how much time had passed when she heard the sound of approaching footsteps. She looked up to see Beth and Carl walking toward her.

"Hey," she greeted them. "What's up? You guys lost?"

"Nah," Beth replied shyly, "Just got nervous being alone… saw you sittin’ here…”

"Alone?" Allison asked. "Where's your dad?"

"He's off talking to Rick or somethin'," Beth replied. "Shane and the others are out fixin' the fences and stuff, and Jimmy's busy hammerin' boards onto the outside of the house, and I dunno…." She lowered her voice "That sorta scares me."

Allison didn't bother to ask where Carl's mother was or why she wasn't watching her son. "I'm guessing that Jimmy's boarding up the windows just in case. That doesn't mean that the house is in immediate danger, he's just preparing for a worst-case scenario." She noticed that Beth bit her lower lip and fidgeted in fear at that remark. "Here, have a seat," she scooted over on her log. "I remember back when Hurricane Isabel hit in 2003…I was living in the dorm at Duke and they had us all evacuate to the two rec centers, because they were sturdier buildings, had less windows, whatever. Anyway, I remember being really scared, thinking 'this is the end, this is how I'll die, in this big ol' gymnasium' but all that happened was the power went off for a few hours. Isabel did
some serious damage to the Outer Banks in North Carolina, but we were fairly lucky in Durham. But it seemed like folks were more scared and panicky when we first gathered in that building, rather than when the lights actually went out. Maybe because it was so different than what we were used to – a huge disruption in our daily routine, a fear of the unknown." She shrugged. "You've lived in this house for what, 16 years? So boarding up the windows is a big change and will take some getting used to. But you'll adjust. And, like I said, it doesn't automatically mean doom and gloom, it's just a precaution."

"I guess so…it's just scary with everyone out there building barriers and patrolling with guns and stuff. It never used to be like that, we used to all hang around the house together and…" Her voice trailed off. "Even when folks started getting sick, we still had family meals and regular chores. It was like the sickness was Out There and everything inside the house was still normal."

"Like I said, a disruption in routine," Allison repeated herself. "Some people welcome change, others get very upset by it. I'm one of those in the 'upset by change' category, or at least I used to be. After the lease was up on my first apartment and the building was sold, I seriously considered not moving even though the place was in dire need of repairs and the landlord was going to raise the rent without making any improvements. I just dreaded the thought of packing my stuff and then finding a new place and then unpacking…I was used to everything being just so and hated the idea of having to adjust to a new place." She chuckled as she tied a knot on the end of a stitch. "Living in a tent and having to move at a moment's notice in the past few months was a definite crash course in adjusting to new places, let me tell you."

Allison turned her attention to Carl, who seemed to be antsy or uneasy. He paced back and forth and hadn't spoken since he and Beth had arrived. "Something wrong, Squirt?" Allison asked him. "You're kinda quiet."

"Nope," he replied brusquely.

"You catch heck from your mom for coming home all muddy yesterday?" she asked, gently prying for information.

He shrugged and kicked at a pebble on the ground. "Don't think she even noticed." He paused and then sat down on a log abruptly. "All she did was chase me away when y'all had that meeting."

"I can understand you being upset because she wouldn't let you stay, but she has her reasons," Allison told the boy.

"She treats me like I'm a little kid," he muttered petulantly.

"Remember what I told you before? About how even when you've got kids of your own she'll still call you her 'baby'? She's just trying to protect you as best she can from not-so-pleasant things. I'm sure a year ago she also didn't let you watch gory R-rated horror movies, either."

Carl didn't reply so Allison continued. "I know you think you're all grown up… Well, I hate to break it to you, but no matter how adult you feel, in many ways you are still a kid. I'm not saying that to put you down, but the truth of the matter is, from a medical standpoint, you are still a child. You are 12 years old and unfortunately even though part of your brain is telling you that you're a man now because of everything you've seen and done recently, your endocrine system begs to differ."

"My what…?"

"Endocrine system," she continued. "Chemicals produced in the brain that change your body as you
grow older. You know, like when men start having to shave. Those chemicals also help your brain
to gradually start thinking reasonably, logically. Heck, I was standing nearby just the other day
when you asked Daryl if it hurt when he hit Randall. There's nothing wrong with that question, but
it's a question a kid would ask, not an adult."

Carl squirmed uncomfortably.

Allison spoke more gently. "It's not your fault, it's nothing you have control over…it's Nature and
millions of years of evolution. Males develop physically before they do emotionally because it's a
necessity – they have always been the hunters, the protectors, the ones who built houses and
barns… Males needed to grow big and strong quickly as a matter of survival, so over time the
major portion of their brains focused on just that – physical stuff, survival knowledge. So, what I’m
saying is even though you’re old enough and strong enough to take down walkers and hunt for
food, that doesn’t necessarily mean you’re mature enough to make adult decision. I know," she
added when he rolled his eyes upward impatiently, "I hated hearing that when I was your age.
Grown-ups always telling me I was just a kid, I didn't know this or that. But looking back, I now
know that it was a good thing that my 12-year-old self wasn't allowed to sign a legal contract or sit
on a jury. Most humans don't start maturing mentally until after they hit puberty."

"And even then it takes some folks…especially guys…a couple of years after that to really grow
up," Beth commented.

"That's a fact," Allison smiled. "So how did you manage to get so muddy, Squirt? Were you out by
the swamp or something yesterday?"

"Um, I dunno," the boy seemed to get uncomfortable any time the events of the previous day were
mentioned.

"You don't know?" Allison quizzed him. "How can you not know? Did you have your brain with
you all day yesterday?"

Beth burst out laughing, but Carl didn't join in. He still looked distinctly unsettled and fidgety.

"Is something bothering you?" she asked the boy in a softer tone. Before he could respond Maggie
strode up to join them.

"Hey," she greeted the trio. "So this is where everybody went."

"Everybody?" Beth asked. "There's just the three of us."

"Well, mostly everybody. Or some of you. Folks I'd talk to…"

"Meaning Glenn's off somewhere working on something," Allison smirked at her.

"Well, yeah," Maggie admitted. "Glenn's working on the RV, emptying the toilet tank and stuff," she
paused and shuddered. "Dad's out talking to Rick and Daryl – from what I overheard before I
think he's wanting to move y'all into the house – and Andrea's still helping Shane patch up the
fencing." She paused and then shrugged. "Got lonely all by myself at the house."

"Well, pull up a log and sit down," Allison invited her. "If we all do move into the house, I doubt
you'll ever be lonely again," she added.

"Even without walkers getting on the property, it only makes sense," Maggie replied. "Weather's
gettin' colder, y'all can't be sleeping outdoors in tents come winter."
"And," Beth added with a sidelong glance, "it's a convenient way to not have to sneak outside to meet Glenn somewhere for…you know….

"For what?" Carl piped up.

"For private conversations," Allison said, restraining herself from putting her hands over the boy's ears.

"Like Jimmy hasn't been living in the house for the past how many months," Maggie remarked to her half-sister.

"Jimmy and I aren't like that," Beth snapped, growing defensive.

"Like what?" Carl asked.

"Like very special friends," Allison answered, standing up. "I think we'd better get you back to the house now, your mom is probably worried about you."

"Oh," Carl said as they headed off, "I thought she meant like lovey-dovey, all kissing and stuff."

His mother is way overdue for "The Talk," Allison thought to herself.
"Wait up, we'll come with you," Beth called. As the four traipsed toward the house they saw a figure in the distance walking their way.

"Looks like Glenn," Maggie observed.

"There you are," he said when he caught up to them. "I've been looking for you."

"Looking for whom?" Allison asked, presuming he meant Maggie.

"All of you, actually. Rick's having a meeting with everyone at the house."

"Sounds serious. What's going on?" Allison asked as they climbed the porch steps.

"Dunno, guess we'll find out soon," Glenn replied as he held the door open for them.

Allison stepped inside the large dining room where most everyone else was already seated. She walked over and stood next to Daryl, who was in the corner near the doorway, and left the last two remaining chairs for Carol and Beth.

"Shane and the others did find some walkers on the property," Rick began. "How many?" He turned to Shane.

"'Bout half a dozen, all told," Shane replied. "They were feeding on the few steers that had broken lose before. The ones Hershel and his family hadn't rounded up," he added pointedly.

"We patched up the holes in the fences that we found," T-Dog added.

"With the cold weather coming, the swamp's drying up," Hershel commented. "The sludge at the bottom used to hold 'em, but it won't much longer."

"With 50 head of cattle on the property we might as well be ringing a damned dinner bell," Maggie said.

"Watch your mouth," Hershel automatically admonished her. "The fact is," he continued, "you people are no longer safe staying outside. We should've moved you indoors a long time ago."

"Fifteen people inside the house, it's gonna be crowded," Rick said.

"We'll make do," Hershel stated. "The only thing is that everyone must understand it's my house, my rules."

"We'll have no problem abiding by that," Rick assured the man, giving a sidelong glance at Shane.

"What about the prisoner?" Shane asked. "What we gonna do about that situation?"

"Daryl and I will drive him out a ways tomorrow and leave him with some supplies while y'all are securing the house and moving in."

"We're back to that now?" Shane asked.

"It was a good plan originally, just a poor execution the first time," Rick told him.
"Yeah, that's an understatement," Shane grumbled. "You wanna take Daryl as your wingman, that's fine with me. I still think you're makin' a mistake turning Randall lose."

"It's my say," Rick leaned into Shane's face. "Swallow it." He addressed the rest of the group. "Everyone should start packing up all their belongings tonight and be prepared to move into the house tomorrow. We'll meet at the main camp fire at first light and prepare a strategy – who will stay where, who will stand watch, where to move the vehicles, all that. Understood? Y'all on board?"

"Yeahs" and "Mm-hmms" were murmured all around and the group slowly began to disburse.

"You headin' back now, or do you need to talk with Rick some more?" Allison asked Daryl.

"Rick and I had our meetin' already, but I probably won't be goin' back to the tent just now. There's some fortifyin' that needs to be done around the house and such…. Shane's gonna build a lookout platform up on the windmill, I'll probably help Jimmy board up the rest of the windows on the house and reinforce the roof here and on the barn…. Make sure everything's secure."

"OK, I'll go get started on packing up our stuff, then." My least favorite thing, she thought to herself. No matter how mobile they'd had to remain in the past months, she still hated packing things and moving and then having to find everything she'd haphazardly stashed away. As she started mentally packing their belongings it occurred to her that she and Daryl would probably not be sharing sleeping quarters inside the house. She would have to pack their things separately, no?

"It is going to be crowded with so many people in the house," she said aloud. "I wonder where they'll fit everybody…"

"I guess that'll all be decided tomorrow," Daryl commented. "Right now we have to worry about securing the house and stockpiling provisions." Allison was about to reply when Patricia approached the pair. "Just wanted to tell y'all that I'll move in with Beth and you can have my bedroom."

Allison and Daryl exchanged quick glances, totally taken aback by Patricia's offer. Daryl spoke first. "No thanks. I ain't puttin' no one out of their bed," he said definitely.

"We do appreciate the offer, Miz Patricia," Allison said, taking the older woman's hand in hers earnestly, "but, like Daryl said, we do not want to evict you out of your own room. Plus," she added, "all of us moving in here is such an upheaval for Mr. Hershel – I…well, I don't want to further upset him by sharing a bedroom with a man I'm not married to, erm," she was suddenly struggling for words, worried that she'd upset Daryl or implied that she was embarrassed by their relationship, "whatever, I just think it would be disrespectful," she finished awkwardly.

Patricia just smiled and gave Allison's hand a squeeze. "Maggie could probably stand to hear some of your wisdom," she murmured. As she turned to leave she said "Not to leave Daryl out in a sleeping bag on the hard living room floor, but you're welcome to come bunk with me in my room if you like."

"Thanks very much, I'll consider it," Allison replied as the other woman left.

She turned to Daryl and immediately began to apologize. "I didn't mean that to sound like – "
Daryl halted her rambling penance with a kiss to her forehead. "It's OK, Angel. Hershel is Old School and the last thing we need to do right now is upset him. Besides," he added, looking into her eyes, "it made me think of the 'regular world', as you call it – I wouldn't share a room with you at your grandmother's house if we went to visit her. Like you said, it's disrespectful to her and it would just make me feel funny, too."

Allison hoped that her cheeks wouldn't reveal the warm flush that wafted over her heart like an ocean wave when Daryl mentioned being with her in the regular world and meeting her kin. It was probably part of her inexperience with men, her overall insecurity, that always made her feel almost giddy any time Daryl made any sort of reference to their relationship or their couple-ness. She was certain that "normal" women took this sort of thing in stride. She really needed to grow up.

"OK then, I'll go back and start getting all of our things together…guess I'll see you when I see you…?"

"I'll be there directly. Like I said, just want to help and make sure the house and such is secure first. Be back in time for dinner." He gave her a crooked smile.

"I guess that means that in addition to packing I should also get some food going on the campfire," she replied.

"You guess right, woman. Gonna be hungry after all than manly physical labor."

She grinned and gave him a quick kiss.

"You got your machete?" he asked her while automatically reaching for her hip to check for himself.

"Armed and ready, sir," she replied. "See ya later."

As she walked back to their tent a dozen thoughts tumbled through her head, but uppermost were some of Daryl's most recent remarks. It occurred to her that he suddenly referred to Jimmy, Rick and Shane by their names. A week ago he probably wouldn't have known the name of the skinny young man who was always hanging around Beth. And Rick had mostly been the "Sheriff" or "Officer Friendly." Daryl was apparently taking his new responsibilities very seriously. Come to think of it, he'd never really had "meetings" with Rick before…and now that she thought about it, Shane didn't seem entirely pleased when he referred to Daryl as Rick's "wingman." Rick and Shane had been partners on the police force for…who knows how long. From what Allison had read in her true crime books and seen on COPS, that was almost a sacred bond. And now Rick seemed to be taking Daryl into his confidence more than Shane, turning to him for advice and for assistance…A smile spread across her face. She'd always been proud of Daryl, but to have the leader of their group suddenly rely on him, to unofficially 'promote' him to a position of prominence…well, she hoped that for once Daryl would finally begin to see himself as she did: an intelligent, strong, observant, compassionate man. She could bolster his confidence only so much, since she was his girlfriend and by definition someone who *had* to think highly of him. This show of confidence from Rick could really mean so much more to Daryl, she thought to herself. Not only another male tapping into his mind for advice and strategy, but a governmental authority-type male – a police officer, a person who previously would never had given Daryl the time of day other than to yell "Show me your hands!" and pat him down for no reason other than Driving While Being a Redneck.

Whether it's God or Fate or some other Divine presence, Allison thought as she ducked into their tent, *something* certainly moves in mysterious ways. Had this disease and this plague not occurred, she would probably never have met this man who had captured her heart and treated her
like a princess. She would have continued working long hours at the hospital fending off the occasional sloppy pass of some new hire. She would've been too tired and too afraid to go out and actually try to meet men. And perhaps Daryl would never have finally received the validation he so sorely needed to help him see that despite his upbringing he was a worthy, deserving human being. She hated to think of their situation in those terms, seeing as so many people had lost loved ones because of it, but sometimes it seemed like this walker apocalypse was actually a... a good thing... in a weird personal way. She shuddered now to think about life without Daryl. Dear God, what was wrong with her, having such selfish thoughts.... She started folding the clothes that were tossed in a small pile in the corner of their tent.

"Hey, Allison, is Daryl around?"

She looked up from the fire where she was attempting to make yet another somewhat appetizing squirrel dish to see Shane approaching.

"No, he's still at the house, I think. Helping Rick," she added.

"Yeah, helping Rick," Shane repeated in what sounded slightly like a semi-mocking tone. Allison didn't comment and waited instead to see what the man wanted.

"I wanted to talk to you two about everyone movin' into the house, and whether y'all thought it was a good idea."

"You taking a camp-wide survey or something?" she asked.

"No, not yet, anyway. I just thought... well, you were on the same page with me about the Randall situation, so I thought you might agree that the house is going to be too crowded with all of us in there all winter."

"Well, what else would you suggest we do? It's going to be too cold to stay in tents outdoors."

"I'm still thinkin' that Fort Benning is the answer," Shane told her. "More room there, it's a protected area, will probably have more than enough provisions for everyone for the winter. Besides," he continued, leaning forward as if about to share a confidence, "I still don't think we're safe with Randall so close. It's like having walkers in the barn all over again."

"Rick and Daryl are taking Randall out somewhere tomorrow and dropping him off," Allison reminded him.

"Yeah, that's what they say, but Rick already done pussied out twice, sure as shit he'll do it again. I know the man. Frankly, he don't got what it takes to survive in this world. Rick's a nice guy, and that don't cut it these days."

"Why are you talking to me about this, anyway?" Allison questioned him. "It's not up to me whether we stay or go."

"No, but Rick will listen to you if you tell him as a doctor that it's better for Lori to give birth at a place like Fort Benning, where they have likely have a hospital ward or infirmary and medical supplies. Hell, they might even have an incubator and a generator."

"Women have been safely giving birth at home for centuries," Allison said. "Personally, even if Fort Benning is still operational, I don't feel safe going there. You yourself said the military was shooting civilians in the hallways when Rick was in the hospital. I saw military helicopters dropping Napalm or some sort of incendiary substance over Atlanta back when this sickness..."
started. Anyway, I thought Glenn said that one of those guys at the bar said that Fort Benning had fallen, that there was nothing left there."

"You gonna believe some lowlife who shot at our people?"

"Seems to me that if they didn't believe the place was gone then they would've made their way to Fort Benning themselves instead of scavenging around here." She paused and turned the meat in the pan. "Besides, what makes you think Lori or any of us women would be safe at a military base? Don't you remember the Tailhook scandal? And those were officers, not grunts. No," she shook her head, "I no longer think there's safety in large numbers at this point. Any sort of large refugee camp is going to be short on supplies and probably rife with sickness – colds, flus, dysentery, you name it – that will spread rapidly."

Shane swiped his hand across his head in agitation. "Well, if not Fort Benning, then someplace else. Some place where we don't have a criminal tied up just a few yards away." He paused and then added, "Andrea agrees with me that Rick hasn't been making the best decisions and that this farm isn't safe."

Allison sighed. "I don't know what to tell you, Shane. I mean, if you take a vote and the majority thinks we should move, then I guess I'll go with the group. But I honestly don't think Randall really fits into the equation any more. Like I said, Daryl is going with Rick tomorrow to - - "

"Yeah, yeah, Rick and Daryl. I get it. Daryl is suddenly promoted to lieutenant or something. Just like Pinocchio, huh? The puppet now thinks he's a real boy," Shane sneered.

Allison stood up to face him. "I'm guessing you were never on the debate team in school, because you've got a lot to learn about the art of persuasion. Now if you'll excuse me, I still have a lot of packing to do." She eyed him evenly until he understood that their conversation had concluded. He turned and stalked off.

"Shane was here before," she began quietly. "He's still making noises about the farm not being safe and wanting to go to Fort Benning." She tactfully avoided mentioning Shane's derisive comments about Daryl's new role in the group.

"He dropped a few comments about that while we were out fixing the fences this morning," Daryl replied. "Every time we killed another walker he'd harp on about the farm wasn't secure and we needed to move on."

"What do you think?" Allison asked him.

"We've reinforced the house pretty good. And we don't have enough fuel in the vehicles to go very far. I think we should save that gasoline for the house generator for the winter. It will be crowded, but I think we'll be safe here. We've got food and shelter. That's more than we'd have setting off on the road for who knows where half-cocked."

Allison sighed in relief and nuzzled her head under his chin. "That's what I was thinking, too, but it makes me feel much better to hear you say it."
"Why is that?" he asked, genuinely puzzled.

"Because you're much more knowledgeable than me when it comes to stuff like that. Survival skills and long-term planning and things. I trust your judgment."

He kissed the top of her head. "Hearing you say that makes me feel better," he murmured.

"Sweet dreams," she whispered as she closed her eyes.
Chapter 41

No matter how many times she'd done it in the recent past, lifting and toting heavy stuff as the sun was just peeking over the horizon was still near the bottom on the list of Allison's Favorite Things To Do. And now that Autumn was fast approaching and there was frost on the ground and a definite bite in the early morning air, un-entwining herself from Daryl's body heat and crawling out from under the warmth of the sleeping bag was a downright rude slap in the face. Even a cup of T-Dog's famous cowboy coffee wasn't enough to clear the mental cobwebs as Allison struggled to absorb Rick's instructions – move this vehicle here, that vehicle there, patrols, guard duty, water jugs, sleeping bags, men, women… it was all a blur. She mechanically threw the last of their belongings into the back of a pick-up truck and followed it to the house.

Once all the vehicles were parked according to Rick's directions in a semi-circle around the house, Allison joined in the unpacking process. Men here, women there, dormitory-style. She overheard a conversation between Hershel and Lori about the older man giving up his room for her and his family. T-Dog went above and beyond, as usual, assuming much of the grunt work for hauling not only his own possessions but also those of the Grimes family. She stood in the living room area loaded down with a huge backpack and a bag in each hand trying to figure out which area was to serve as the women's quarters when she noticed Glenn following Maggie up the staircase, his guitar and a suitcase in hand. Apparently he'd overcome his initial embarrassment at bunking with Hershel's daughter under the veterinarian's roof.

"Here, give me this," Patricia's voice startled her out of her reverie. The older woman took the bag from Allison's right hand. "Follow me."

"I hate to inconvenience you, Miz Patricia," Allison protested as she followed behind.

"Don't be silly, I've got a double bed and plenty of room," Patricia assured her. "Fact is, if Carol doesn't mind bunking on the floor in a sleeping bag, there's room for three of us."

Allison didn't bother to question Patricia as to why she had picked Carol as their additional roommate – no use looking gift rooms in the mouth, she supposed. Most likely it was because she'd spent more time with Carol cooking and cleaning and such and felt more comfortable with her. When Allison returned downstairs to retrieve another piece of her luggage she noticed that Andrea had moved into Beth's room. When she dropped the last of her belongings on the floor in Patricia's suite – it had a small bathroom off of the bedroom – she spread her camping pad and sleeping bag on the floor off to the side. She'd been raised to respect her elders; there was no way she'd sleep in a comfy bed if it meant Carol had to sleep on the floor. Nevertheless Allison was slightly surprised that Carol never questioned the sleeping arrangements or put up a token "oh, no, I'll take the floor"-type argument. "Oh well, she's probably got post-menopausal brittle bones anyway," she thought to herself, "so I'm doing the humane thing."

Allison went back outside to the truck and got Daryl's bedroll. He and Rick were off studying a map and getting ready to drop Randall off some place far away. She walked into the living room and found it filled with people and Lori directing the activity.

"Where should I put Daryl's stuff?" Allison asked no one in particular.

"Men on this side," Lori pointed, "and women over in here."

"Good thing," T-Dog mumbled, "Otherwise my mama wouldn't have let me come." He walked past Allison and dropped his belongings against the wall in the male-designated area.
Allison chuckled and followed him to the far corner of the living room. "I'll just leave this here for now and y'all can mark your territories when Daryl and Shane get back." She was about to go out to the truck to get some more of her bags when she saw Carol struggling to mount the stairs with an armful of bedding and a suitcase over her shoulder.

"Here, let me give you a hand," Allison said, taking the pillows and blankets out of her hands and following her up the stairs.

"I didn't know how much bed linen the Greenes had on hand," Carol explained as they walked to their new bedroom, "so I brought in some sheets and blankets from the RV just in case."

Allison collapsed into a chair as Patricia entered the room.

Noticing the pile in Allison's lap, she grabbed several things off the top and said "There's room in this closet, if you'd like to store your things there."

"Thank you," Allison replied, plopping the rest of her load onto a shelf.

"I'll make room in some of these dresser drawers for your clothes," Patricia offered. "A lot of this was Otis' stuff..." her voice trailed off.

"I don't have a whole lot of clothes, so I don't need too much space," Carol said.

"A lot of my stuff is still down in the truck," Allison added. "I'll fetch it after I catch my breath. I don't have many clothes, either, but I've got medical supplies and all sorts of other I don't know what." She chuckled. "Story of my life, I've always been a packrat. I've been hauling around all these bags every time we move and I probably don't know what all is in half of 'em."

Patricia smiled. "I used to do the same thing, Otis and I always took a week's vacation every year – he insisted on it, wanted to take me completely away from the farm and cooking and chores. Y'know, you'd reckon that he would want a break as much as me, but after a couple of days he'd already be chafin' at the bit, wonderin' if everything was falling apart back on the farm without him..."

"Men are indispensable, you know," Allison interjected. "No one else can do what they do. Not the right way, anyway."

The three women laughed and Patricia continued her thought. "I used to toss all the shampoos and soaps and things like that from every motel room during our trip into my overnight bag. I was never very diligent about unpacking it when we finally got home, and over time that thing was half-full of things I never remembered putting in there."

"That's true, what you said about men being indispensable," Carol joined in the conversation. "Ed hated to take time off from work. He was a car salesman, and worked on commission. He was very good at his job and made good money, but he always wanted more." She got a far-away look in her eyes as if she was actually recalling fond memories. "That's why we didn't take many vacations... no more than a week-end away some place. He'd grumble that we were costing him money, that he should be back on the lot sellin'."

Allison struggled to maintain a neutral facial expression as Carol spoke. She could just picture Ed Peletier being a human canker sore during a vacation, blaming his wife and daughter every step of the way for forcing him to waste money on motel rooms and restaurant meals when he could be back at the lot selling cars. If he couldn't pay the rent next month, it was their fault. They made him do this! How could Carol reminisce about that vile man? Because she never knew any other
"Men like routine," Patricia said. "They wanna wake up in the same bed every mornin' and have their coffee exactly the way they like it then punch a clock and get to work at the same time. Make them live out of a suitcase for a few days and sleep in strange rooms where the toilet is in a different place every night…” she giggled. "They tend to get antsy."

"Otis and Ed took us on vacations just to please us," Carol murmured almost reverently. "That what good husbands do." Very deliberately she slowly turned her gaze to Allison. "Oh, I'm sorry, we probably shouldn't talk of such things in front of you…"

"Excuse me?" Allison was confused. What 'things'?

"Marriage, having a husband and such. We shouldn't upset you by talking about things you might never have…"

"Oh, I don't mind, chat away. I can file away the information for future use, maybe." She eyed the older woman, who always looked so helpless and lost with her cropped hair and dead daughter… and she thought, not for the first time, that Carol had some non-maternal designs on Daryl.

"That's true," Carol nodded, "Maybe one day in the future you'll meet a man….we're obviously not the only survivors in this new world. Who knows what the future holds." She gave Allison a condescending smile.

"Meet a man?" Patricia asked, obviously confused. "I thought you and Daryl…"

"I'm talking about love matches and long-term commitments," Carol replied. "Oh, no offense, dear," she said in an aside to Allison. "I just don't want you to pin your hopes on someone that you met in an extreme situation and with whom you have nothing in common other than you're both single and of the opposite sex." She reached over and took Allison's hand and then oozed in a motherly tone, "I hate to see you have your heart broken."

"I'll keep an open mind," was the only response Allison could manage.

Patricia was wise and non-judgmental and a Christian who rarely thought badly of anyone. She had also talked to Allison many times and had witnessed Daryl's interaction with her… and without her. She recalled that time when Allison was missing from the farm and Daryl had actually ventured up to the house twice to inquire about her. She knew from their conversations that Allison was very intelligent and shared similar values and would not share a tent with a man just because he was available. And Daryl reminded her of Otis in so many ways… a decent man who provided for not only Allison but the entire group. As far as she could tell, this was a love match and she began to silently question Carol's attitude toward Allison. There was apparently something else going on, but she didn't know exactly what.

"This will fun, won't it?" Carol interrupted Patricia's thoughts. "We three girls bunking together. Been a long time since I slept in a real bed, and I never had roommates. Was this what it was like in college?"

"I can't speak for Miz Patricia, but I can tell you that it wasn't a constant slumber party in my dorm room," Allison replied. "We didn't braid each other's hair or paint each other's nails… we sat at separate desks long into the night working on our laptops, preparing for tests and researching papers. My roommate and I would occasionally share pizza or Chinese take-out but we'd spend the whole meal chatting about what our dream specialty would be if we actually survived and got our
medical degrees."

"I didn't live in a dorm," Patricia remarked. "I grew up not far from Athens so I was able to commute to UGA while I got my nursing degree."

"UGA is the University of Georgia at Athens," Allison clarified to Carol with an indulgent smile. She could be condescending, too, she thought to herself.

"I know that," Carol replied stiffly.

"Since you lived nearby," Allison turned back to Patricia, "I'm presuming you've had a dog or two at the Varsity?"

"'What'll ya have, what'll ya have!' Patricia mimicked the brusque Varsity restaurant employees and then dissolved into laughter. "Oh yeah, the Varsity – all the best grease two and a quarter dollars could buy!"

"Mmm, chili dogs and a Frosted Orange drink….and the onion rings!" Allison closed her eyes and sighed at the memory of the deliciously unhealthy fast food the Varsity was famous for.

"Speaking of food," Carol interrupted, pulling herself up to a standing position. "I'd best get downstairs and finish packing up supplies for Randall. Rick and Daryl are going to be dropping him off somewhere directly."

"Yeah," Allison reluctantly removed herself from the comfortable overstuffed chair, "I need to go down and bring up the rest of my stuff…I'll walk down with you…"

All three of the women were outside when they heard the hubbub. They ran toward the shed where T-Dog and Rick and others were pacing and hollering. It took several moments to decipher the various rantings and ravings but it soon became apparent that Randall had somehow gone missing.

"He must've slipped his cuffs," Rick muttered.

"Is that possible?" Carol asked.

"It is when you've got nothing to lose," Andrea remarked.

"The shed was still secured from the outside when T-Dog got here," Hershel noted.

"Rick! Rick!" a hoarse voice called from the distance. Everyone looked up to see Shane approaching. Shane, with blood running from his nose and so angry that he could barely sputter his words.

"He got away! The prisoner – Randall. He surprised me, bashed me in the face and took my gun! He's out there – " he gestured vaguely to the woods.

"Why don't we just let him go? Wasn't that the plan?" Carol asked.

"Not when he's nearby and armed," Rick replied. He paused for a fraction of a second and then began barking out orders. "Daryl! Glenn! You come with me. T-Dog, round up everyone else and take them back to the house."

In those few fleeting moments as everything transpired, Allison couldn't help but focus on Shane's bloody nose. How it didn't look like the result of someone surprising him and attacking him. But before she could speak Daryl was striding off with Glenn, following Rick. "Be careful," was all she
could manage to say.

"I always am," he muttered to her with a backward glance.
T-Dog and Hershel hurriedly started herding the group back toward the house amid a flurry of questions.

"I don't understand how he could have gotten away!"

"What did Shane say about his gun?"

"Can Randall get very far with his bad leg?"

"Do you think Glenn will be OK out there? It's getting dark…"

As they assembled in the living room they took seats together in a huddle and continued the discussion, trying to sort out the events of the past 15 minutes.

"They left in such a hurry," Maggie commented, "I hope they even remembered to take flashlights. And weapons."

"Shane took my gun, said he lost his," T-Dog told her, "and Daryl had his crossbow. And they've all got knives…"

"You're awful quiet," Beth said to Allison. "What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking that there's something hinky about this whole situation," Allison replied.

"What does 'hinky' mean?" Carl asked.

"It means suspicious," Allison told him. "It's a word that police use that I learned from reading true crime books -- "

"Carl, I want you to go upstairs and rest," Lori interrupted.

"But mom - - " the boy began to protest.

"No arguments, go on," she said firmly.

After Carl had reluctantly retreated Lori turned to Allison. "I'd prefer that you not discuss police and criminal activity in front of my son."

"I'm sorry," Allison managed to apologize without rolling her eyes. "I thought with his father being a sheriff and all…"

"I've always done my best to shield him from that sort of thing," Lori stated.

"Shield him, meaning banishing him away whenever he becomes inconvenient," Allison thought to herself.

"So what was it that's bothering you?" Beth asked again.

"Shane. His nose, his injury…" Allison was speaking in staccato phrases as she tried to collect her thoughts. "He looked like he'd sustained a direct blow on the nose. But he said that Randall surprised him."
"So?" Lori asked.

"So," Allison continued, "it seems to me that a surprise attack would come from behind. Shane is a big strong man with how many years experience as a police officer? Randall is a scrawny kid who has been chained up in the shed for weeks, without regular exercise and with starvation rations of food. Plus he's got a gimpy leg. I'm trying to picture a scenario where he could overpower Shane."

"And the shed was still locked from the outside," Hershel commented.

"Exactly," Allison agreed. "So Randall supposedly somehow slipped his cuffs, climbed up to the rafters and made his way quietly to the ground in his weakened condition and still managed to get the jump on Shane?"

"What are you saying?" Andrea asked.

"I'm not sure, except that something doesn't smell right. It doesn't add up."

"Why would Shane lie about Randall gettin' lose, if that's the case?" Patricia asked.

"He has no reason to," Andrea retorted indignantly.

T-Dog and Maggie silently exchanged glances with Allison. It appeared to her that they were considering the evidence and also questioning the circumstances.

"We should finish getting all the beds and sleeping areas ready for when they get back," Lori spoke up. Queen of denial or just trying to distract herself, Allison wondered.

"We never did have supper," Patricia added. "Why don't I just set out some cold meat and leftovers on the kitchen table and anyone who's hungry can help themselves."

As the night wore on, Andrea alternated between keeping vigil through the living room window and griping that she should be outside searching for the missing quartet. Lori kept convincing her to remain in the house; if worse came to worst, they needed as many sharpshooters as possible.

‡‡‡‡ ‡‡‡‡ ‡‡‡‡

No one was watching the clock, but it was obviously getting near dawn and no one had really slept apart from catching a few winks in a sitting position. Everyone was still anxiously gathered in a group in the living room and occasionally it was quietly discussed what should be done… Go out and search? Stay put?

Suddenly the front door was pulled open and Daryl and Glenn stepped inside. They were almost crushed as everyone rushed to them seeking information.

"Rick and Shane ain't back?" Daryl asked, looking around the room. Allison pushed through the group to press herself against his side. He pulled her close with one arm.

"No," she replied.

"We heard a shot. What's going on out there?" Maggie asked.

"We found Randall," Glenn said.

"Is he back in the shed?" Carol asked.

"He was a walker."
"Did you find the walker that bit him?" Hershel asked.

Glenn and Daryl exchanged looks. "He wasn't bit," Daryl said. "His neck was broke."

"So he fought back?" Patricia was trying to make sense of what they were saying.

"Weird thing is, Shane and Randall's tracks were right on top of each other, and Shane ain't no tracker," Daryl drawled. "So he didn't come up behind him…no, they were together."

Lori stepped up to Daryl and placed her hands on his shoulders. "Would you please go out there and find Rick and Shane and find out what on Earth is going on?"

"You got it," Daryl replied, taking a step toward the door.

Allison checked the involuntary "Oh, no!" that was about to spring from her lips and instead stood mutely, her eyes silently pleading for Daryl not to leave again. Daryl looked at her and gave her hand a reassuring squeeze before going outside. She was afraid to speak lest she burst into tears. She couldn't articulate it, but she was suddenly overwhelmed with a sense of impending doom for some reason. Several people followed Glenn and Daryl onto the porch and she heard T-Dog's voice ask incredulously "What the hell…?"

She ran outside and saw what could only be described as a tidal wave of walkers approaching the farm. "Oh my God," she breathed.

"Patricia, kill the lights," Hershel directed.

"I'll get the guns," Andrea announced.

"Maybe they'll just pass like the herd on the highway," Glenn suggested. "Should we just go inside?"

"Not unless there's a tunnel downstairs I don't know about," Daryl replied. "Herd that size'll rip the house down."

"What'll we do?" Beth asked aloud, panic beginning to rise in her voice.

"You can go if you want," Hershel said evenly.

"You gonna take 'em all on?" Daryl asked.

"We have guns, we have cars," the older man said, staring into the distance.

Andrea was priming herself for action. "Kill as many as we can, and we'll use the cars to lead the rest of them off the farm."

"You serious?" Daryl asked, still focused on Hershel.

"This is my farm. I'll die here," the veterinarian stated in a tone that left no room for argument.

"All right," Daryl shrugged, "It's as good a night as any."

"What?! No!" Allison piped up over the voices of the others. "What's with this fatalistic attitude all of a sudden? We shouldn't go off half-cocked, guns blazing. Let's think about what we're doing, formulate some sort of plan – "

But Hershel had already stepped down from the porch and was firing his rifle at the approaching
walkers. T-Dog and Andrea grabbed weapons and ran to a truck.

"Daryl, no – we can't – " Allison tried to protest again but Daryl gently placed a hand on the back of her head.

"It'll be OK, Angel," he assured her. "You gather up the rest of the women and take 'em in the house. Get some supplies together if you can and be ready to leave in a hurry."

"I'm going with you," she told him.

"No, you're not," he gripped her head a little tighter. "Maggie and Glenn just left, we need someone who's good with a gun here at the house." She started to object again and he silenced her with a quick kiss. "Please, for once in your life, do as you're told," he murmured against her lips.

"Be safe," was all she could say.

"I always am," he replied before giving her a half-smile and then hopping on his motorcycle and speeding off.

Jimmy ran past them and fired up the RV, and Allison turned to the people remaining on the porch. "C'mon, let's get back inside," she hollered, pushing them all back into the living room. "We need to get some supplies together in case we have to leave. Anyone who still has a weapon somewhere in the house, go get it. Grab a few clothes if you can, take the smallest tote bags or suitcases you have. Carol, can you pack some water bottles and maybe some food in a bag?" They began to scatter when Lori ran down the stairs, her eyes wide with fright.

"Carl's missing!"

"What?!" Patricia asked.

"I can't find Carl!" Lori repeated, tears beginning to form in her eyes.

"Of course you can't, you never know where that boy is," Allison thought to herself.

"He must be somewhere in the house," Carol said, starting to run off to search.

"He was supposed to be upstairs," Lori lamented. "When will he learn to listen?!"

"He's a kid, they never listen," Allison told her. "When's the last time you saw him?"

Lori was silent, wracking her brain trying to recall when she'd last seen her son.

"Maybe he went out to find his daddy," Carol called as she stuck her head into one room and then another.

"The barn's on fire!" Beth gasped suddenly.

Everyone ran to the front windows to peer at the blaze.

"Oh my God, Carl….I hope he's not in there…" Lori was muttering with a hand pressed to her chest.

"Maybe Rick and Shane set it to lure the walkers," Patricia suggested.

"He's not in the cellar," Carol announced coming back upstairs.
"He must be out there somewhere, then," Lori fretted. She stepped out onto the porch and began thinking out loud. "If he followed Rick, then he must've gone that way..."

"Ladies, please get your stuff – weapons, mainly, if you have 'em. Hurry!" Allison told the others.

Allison already had her machete strapped to her belt; she ran upstairs in record time and fetched her small satchel that had some medical supplies, a Buck knife and other sundry items in it. She grabbed the rifle that was standing on end in the corner of the room and slung it over her shoulder, then dashed back downstairs. In a very few minutes the others were gathered around her and they joined Lori on the porch. The walkers were getting closer and closer and Hershel was repeatedly firing his gun like an arcade game character.

"What's the plan?" Beth asked anxiously. "How long should we wait here? Where will we go from here?"

Allison tried to take in the surreal tableau stretched out before her. Walkers were staggering every which way, it seemed, and the night air was punctuated by gun fire and revving engines. "I don't think we should stay much longer," she said. But what to do, where to go? And everyone had looked at her like she was crazy when she'd suggested formulating a plan before they all ran off, she thought wryly.

"I'm not leaving without my son!" Lori cried.

"You have to come with us," Carol grabbed Lori's hands. "He's going to need his mother when we find him."

Hershel fired off several more shots and paused to reload. The walkers were getting dangerously close now. "Come on, let's go," Allison told the others. "Carol, you and Lori wait here, I'll be right back." She ran inside the house and called "Patricia! Hurry! We're leaving now!" She went back onto the front porch and asked Beth "Are you ready?" The young girl nodded, her eyes wide and shiny with fear. Patricia emerged from the house with a bag over her shoulder.

"Hershel! Come on! It's time to go!" Allison called to the elderly man. He appeared not to hear her and kept firing.

"Daddy! Please! Come with us!" Beth pleaded.

"They won't stop coming," he mumbled as he reloaded again.

"It's no use," Allison shook her head. "OK, the rest of you, who's got weapons?" Lori held up her small revolver. "That's it?" She sighed. "All right, we're going to try to get to that pick-up truck over there," she pointed. "Lori, you go first, Carol stay right behind her, Beth, Patricia, you follow and I'll bring up the rear. Try to stay as close together as possible. Got it everyone?" They all nodded their heads and the group moved down the porch steps and got into position. "On the count of three," Allison told them. "Don't run unless necessary; too easy to fall or get separated. Just walk quickly. Ready? One, two, THREE!"

The women began making their way to the truck. Every now and then Lori fired unnecessarily at a walker that was still some distance away. "Lori! Save your ammo!" Allison called, but Lori didn't appear to hear her. Allison heard a sound to her left and turned her head to look. In that brief second a walker lunged toward them and sunk his teeth into Patricia's shoulder. The woman screamed, causing Beth to turn and grab her arm and pull. Allison sunk her machete into the walker's eye socket, but several others were right behind it. Patricia's blood-curdling screams and Beth's cries pierced Allison's heart. "No, no, not you," she moaned as she took Patricia's other hand. A split
second later she let go, turned and cut the head off another walker.

"Let go, Beth, let go!" Lori was yelling and tugging on Beth's arm. Carol screamed suddenly and ran off in the opposite direction. Allison took a few steps backward as Patricia fell and was swarmed by geeks. While the walkers were thus distracted Lori managed to pull Beth away and the two ran off toward the truck.

"Carol!" Allison called. "Come back! You're going the wrong way!"

In the glow of the fire she saw Carol's silhouette running haphazardly, directionless. She caught up to the woman just as she turned around. Carol looked at Allison, clutched her hands to her face and screamed. Instinctively Allison dropped to the ground and rolled to the side a few inches. She saw the source of Carol's fear – a walker had been within millimeters of Allison's back. She launched back to her feet like a spring-loaded coil and severed the walker's head from its shoulders as Carol crouched and cowered with her hands over her head. As the head continued to growl and snap on the ground, Allison kicked it away like a soccer ball and reached for Carol's hand. "Come on! Hurry!" She pulled the woman up and tried to hold on to her hand, but Carol pulled away and screamed again. Allison turned around to look, but this time the walker was a few feet away. They could run past it if Carol would only cooperate. "Carol!" She shouted in the woman's face. "Listen to me – hold on to my belt and stay right behind me, OK?" Carol wrapped her trembling fingers around the waistband of Allison's slacks and the two started walking at a brisk pace, making a wide swath around the approaching walker. A few steps later two more walkers came at them from the left side, and Allison yelled "Hold on tight, and stay right behind me!" She poised her machete upward, ready to strike if necessary when she suddenly stumbled several steps forward. Catching her balance she turned to see if Carol had tripped, too, only to find that Carol was no longer holding on but was instead again running off in an apparent panic in the wrong direction. "Carol!" she yelled and then whirled to dispatch the two geeks closing in on her. "Carol!" she called again, but she'd lost sight of her. The smoke from the fire was getting thicker, making it harder to breathe and visibility was nil. A moment later and Allison reluctantly decided that Carol was now on her own.

She tried to make her way back to the truck, but what with all the smoke and having to zig-zag around and between walkers she was quickly losing her sense of direction. She broke into a trot in the direction that seemed right. The sound of gunshots was growing fainter, so at least she was getting further away from the farm. But where was the house? The truck? She kept going and started passing scattered trees. A few minutes later and the area was more thickly forested. Was she in the woods? Her head was spinning and her lungs were burning. It occurred to her that back at the farm they'd never talked about where they would drive to once they all got to the truck. And what about the others who were in the other vehicles, driving and shooting? Where would they end up? She had to pause to catch her breath. As she gasped for air she heard an odd sound coming from the woods to her right. It sounded like heavy breathing, but not like the raspy gasps of a walker. She grasped her machete and waited. To her surprise a horse stepped into view. "He must've escaped from the stable," she thought.

The creature stood and stared at her. He or she (God don't let this be Nervous Nellie, Allison thought to herself) didn't have a saddle or bridle, but he did have four sturdy legs. "OK, buddy," she tried to talk soothingly to the animal, "just relax, I'm not going to hurt you…but hopefully you're my ticket out of here..." She walked closer to it and tentatively placed her hands up on its back. "Geez, you're tall," she muttered. She paused long enough to sheath her machete and give herself a quick pep talk. Then with a super-human effort she did her best Mary Lou Retton-style vault and heaved herself up onto the horse's back. While she was still lying on her belly across its back the beast started to take a few steps. "Whoa!" Allison cried out and struggled to twist into a sitting position. She had just barely managed to straddle him when he broke into a trot. "Whoa!"
Allison repeated, frantically grabbing two handfuls of the horse's mane to keep from falling off. Who knew horses were so slippery?! The animal picked up speed and Allison pressed her face against its neck and closed her eyes. She just knew he was going to smash her into a tree. She held on for dear life as the horse ran deeper and deeper into the woods. She didn't know how far they'd gone or how much time had elapsed (every second seemed like an eternity atop this four-legged Death Machine) when a loud "bang!", like an explosive gunshot, caused the animal to rear up on its hind legs and whinny in fright. Allison tumbled to the ground in a heap and the nag ran off in the opposite direction of the noise.

"Oh, fine," she mumbled as she struggled to her feet. She looked around, trying to get her bearings, and heard a low rumbling sound. A minute later she realized that what she was hearing was an engine. She ran toward the sound as fast as she could and heard another "bang!". Aha – it hadn't been a gunshot, but a backfire. The trees thinned and suddenly she was standing on the edge of a narrow road…and there, idling a few feet ahead was the blue pickup truck from the Greene farm! "Hey!" she yelled. "Hey! Over here!" She couldn't tell who was inside, but they apparently couldn't hear her. She grasped the tailgate and pulled herself up. Just as she was about to knock on the back window of the cab, the driver floored the accelerator and made a wide U-turn. The motion threw Allison off balance, and when she fell backwards she hit her head hard on something. Very hard. The world went grey then black.

Unbeknownst to her, as she lay unconscious in the truck bed the three people in the cab had stopped arguing long enough for Beth to ask "Did you hear that?"

"We probably ran over a rock or something," T-Dog replied, gripping the steering wheel and silently cursing the women who were forcing him to drive back to the highway.
Chapter 43

Allison was dimly aware of voices as she awoke. Had she been sleeping? Or knocked unconscious? Her head hurt, she knew that. "Zig-zagging." "Asian." "Tail lights." Somehow she instinctively knew that the voice she heard belonged to Daryl, and as she struggled to collect herself and sit up, her irrational wandering mind momentarily thought of Zig Zag rolling papers for some reason. She turned over and got on all fours and moaned when the motion made her head throb. She crawled to the edge of the truck bed, her knees and the toes of her boots making scraping noises, and before she could hoist herself up she heard a whispered yell.

"I heard something!"

"I've got it." That was Daryl again.

She slowly raised her head and said weakly "Don't shoot!" Her memory did a quick flashback and she recalled another time when she'd shouted out the same plea to this group, back when they'd first found her in Atlanta. Déjà vu all over again, she thought as she rose up onto her knees.

"Holy shit, where did she come from?" T-Dog said in a shocked voice.

Before Allison could react or reply, Daryl's arms were around her, plucking out of the truck bed. The moment he saw her face peek out from the back of the truck he'd run over and embraced her in a huge bear hug, onlookers be damned. Allison struggled to find her footing once he set her on the ground – he was pulling her so close she could hardly breathe. All she could keep repeating into his ear was "Thank God you're safe, you're safe, you're safe," Daryl had one hand wrapped around the back of her head and the other around her shoulders but he didn't utter so much as a word. After a few moments he loosened his grip and Allison pulled back her head to look into his face. She was shocked to see it contorted as if he was struggling to hold back tears. He closed his eyes and shook his head as if he was too overwhelmed with emotion to speak. She gently grasped his face and pulled it close for a kiss. He pressed his forehead against hers and remained silent, eyes closed. "I love you," she whispered.

The two of them walked back to the group where Allison was greeted with hugs and murmurs of surprise. Later that night she would reflect back on the fact that Daryl had shown such a major Public Display of Affection in front of the group and get a warm fuzzy feeling, but at that moment she was trying to concentrate on the jumble of voices speaking all at once around her.

"Look at that blood in her hair – is she bit?" That was Carol's anxious voice.

"Blood?" Allison asked, confused, raising a hand to her head. "I wasn't bitten…I did hit my head in the truck, though…"

"Lemme see," Daryl said, grasping her head with both his hands and gently parting her blonde hair where it was stained dark red. "You've got a nice cut back here, and a goose egg of a bump." He gave her a small smile. "You're gonna feel that later."

"I feel it now," she admitted, wincing slightly as he touched it.

"Did you lose consciousness?" Hershel asked, stepping over and tilting her chin upward slightly. He was studying her eyes.

"Either that or I dozed off for a bit," Allison replied.
"Anyone got a flashlight or a lighter?" Hershel asked. Daryl reached into his pocket and handed the vet a cigarette lighter. Hershel flicked it on and moved it from side to side in front of Allison's eyes. "Pupils are equal and reactive," he announced, handing the lighter back to Daryl. "Doesn't seem to be any concussion, luckily."

"She can't be hurt too bad," Daryl said, mostly to Allison, giving her shoulders a squeeze, "since she took the trouble to say 'bitten' instead of 'bit'."

After her eyes had recovered from the bright flame Allison finally recognized their surroundings – they were back on the highway where they'd lost Sophia, so long ago, or so it seemed.

"Where's the rest of us?" Glenn asked a moment later when it became apparent that no further vehicles would be joining them.

"Patricia?" Hershel asked his girls.

Allison lowered her head at the mention of her friend's name. She could still see the gaping wound in her neck and hear her terrified screams. "No, Daddy," Beth answered. "I tried – we both did, Allison and me. We really did..." she sobbed and buried her face in her father's shoulder. "Jimmy?" she asked without lifting her head.

This time Rick shook his head. "He was in the RV when it got overrun."

"Andrea?" Glenn asked.

"We saw her go down," T-Dog said.

"She was surrounded by walkers," Lori added.

"I'm goin' back," Daryl said, moving to climb onto his bike.

"No!" Rick stopped him.

"What? We're just gonna leave her?" Glenn asked incredulously.

"She's either dead or not there anymore," Rick said. "Either way, we're not splitting up again, we're staying together."

"We can't just stay here, it's not safe," Hershel stated.

"Wherever we go we should keep off the main highways, too many assholes like this one on the big roads," Daryl agreed, raising his crossbow at a walker shuffling their way. "I got him."

"I say we head east, for the coast," T-Dog suggested.

"Here, we should take this water and this other stuff," Allison said, taking some of the provisions they'd left for Sophia. Lori and Beth filled their arms with the usable items and placed them in the back of the blue pickup. The group then began to disburse to their various vehicles. Allison bumped into Carol as she followed Daryl to his motorcycle.

"Sorry," Allison apologized, stepping aside for the older woman to pass, thinking she was going to join T-Dog and Lori in their truck. But Carol remained in place looking at Allison in surprise.

"Do you think it's safe for you to ride on a motorcycle with a head injury?" Carol asked in a voice oozing with concern. "What if you get dizzy and lose your balance? Daryl might not be able to concentrate on his driving if he has to worry about you falling off the back."
Before Allison could muster up a retort Hershel spoke up. "That is a pretty nasty bump, you could possibly black out again. I think it best if you ride inside with us."

Daryl listened without comment to the exchange and considered Hershel's advice. "I don't want anything to happen to you," he placed his hand gently on Allison's cheek. "I'd never forgive myself."

"OK, so I'll go ride in the truck or whatever," she replied unenthusiastically. Daryl planted a quick kiss on her forehead and then straddled his bike. She squeezed in with Hershel and Beth in the back seat of the car driven by Glenn, Maggie riding shotgun.

They rode in silence for a while then Beth gripped Allison's forearm and squeezed it. "I'm so glad you're OK," she said. "After what Carol said I thought we'd never see you again."

"I'm glad too – wait, what? What do you mean 'what Carol said'?"

"When she and Daryl first pulled up I asked her what happened to you. The last I'd seen it looked like you had run after her, but she said she never saw you after….after Patricia…" her voice grew thin. She paused and wiped her nose. "Daryl was about to take off back to the farm when we heard something moving in the back of the truck."

"Oh." Allison was about to explain that Carol had most certainly seen her, and had even held on to her at one point, but she paused and reconsidered. Maybe better not to say anything right now until she had time to mentally reenact the events of the previous evening. She was so tired, and her head hurt. Maybe Beth had misunderstood, or Carol had misspoken. Or maybe not. She would think about it later…she really hated to entertain the thought that that innocent grey-haired housewife could possibly have a sinister bone in her body. That sort of thing only happened in Lifetime movies, for heaven's sake.

‡‡‡‡ ‡‡‡‡ ‡‡‡‡

The motion of the car eventually lulled Allison into a light sleep, but she awoke abruptly as soon as the vehicle stopped. She climbed out with the others to see what was going on.

"Been running on fumes for the past hour," she heard Rick say.

"We can't stay here," Lori said.

"We can't all fit in one car," Glenn pointed out.

"We'll have to make a run for some gas in the morning," Rick decided.

"Spend the night here?" Carol asked, crossing her arms and pulling her cardigan tighter around her.

"I'm freezing," Carl complained.

"If you go out looking for firewood stay close," Daryl advised. "Only got so many arrows."

"We can't just sit here with our asses hangin' out," Maggie complained.

"Watch your mouth," Hershel admonished her. "Everyone stop panicking and listen to Rick."

"Glenn and I can make a run now," Maggie persisted, "scrounge up some gas."
"No," Rick replied, "we stay together. God forbid something happens and people get stranded without a car. We'll set up a perimeter and in the morning we'll find gas and some supplies."

"Rick," Glenn said anxiously, "Look around. We're stranded now. There's walkers everywhere, OK? They're migrating or something. We're surrounded."

"There has to be a place…somewhere…" Rick stated firmly. "We've been through hell and worse, but we found each other. I wasn't sure we would, but we did. I take that as a positive sign, and Lord knows we need that. We're together. We'll keep it that way. There has to be a place…some type of shelter…not just where we hole up for a day or two, but where we can hunker down, fortify, rebuild our lives… It's out there, I know it. We just have to find it."

"I have no idea where we are," Allison said, "but I wonder if there isn't some small city with an industrial area anyplace nearby…maybe not just up the road, but…some place. There would be factories there."

"So?" Lori said doubtfully.

"So factories are built of sturdy brick, and they usually don't have many windows. And they often are surrounded by high fences because they're in bad neighborhoods. Upscale areas don't want noisy, dirty factories in their backyard."

"She's right," Glenn remarked. "I used to deliver to a couple places like that…steel processing plants, stamping plants. They were in run-down areas and I had to be buzzed in just to get into the parking lot."

Maggie wasn't convinced. "Even if we do find a place and we think it's safe, we can never be sure. For how long? Look what happened with the farm. We fooled ourselves into thinking that that was safe."

"We won't make that mistake again," Hershel replied. For a man who had been ready to kick their group off of his property just a week ago, he was quite suddenly a solid member of the Cult of Rick, Allison thought to herself. Probably all for the better, though; the last thing they needed right now was someone butting heads with Rick, like Shane always did…. Come to think of it, where was Shane? She couldn't recall him being mentioned when they'd done the quick roll call back on the highway.

"Does this feel right to you?" Carol interrupted Allison's train of thought as she sidled close to Daryl to question him. Then Carol addressed Rick: "What if walkers come through, or another group like Randall's?"

"You know we found Randall, right?" Daryl said to Rick. "He'd turned, but he wasn't bit."

"How is that possible?" Beth asked.

"Rick, what the hell happened?" Lori confronted her husband.

"Shane killed Randall, just like he always wanted to," Daryl answered her, his eyes narrowing in suspicion. The look on Rick's face told the group that Daryl was correct in his guess.

"We're all infected," Rick said quietly, his eyes downcast.

"What?" Daryl asked.

"At the CDC, Jenner told me. Whatever it is, we all carry it."
"And you never said anything?" Carol asked, eyes widening in horror.

"Would it have made a difference?" Rick replied reasonably.

"You knew this whole time?" Glenn was outraged. "Dude, when I found out about the walkers in the barn, I told, for the good of everyone."

"How could I have known for sure? Until Shane turned, I thought Jenner might've been crazy. Besides, I thought it best that people didn't know."

"That is not your call," Glenn protested.

"I'm sure you had your reasons," Lori stepped forward to defend her husband.

"I killed him. I killed Shane. He came at me. He killed Randall to get me into the woods. He planned it. I had... I had no choice." Rick lowered his head and walked away from the group, Lori following at his heels.

The group stood in stunned silence as husband and wife appeared to be arguing in the distance. Finally Daryl spoke. "OK, we'll make camp over there," he gestured to an area behind a crumbling brick wall, "for tonight anyway and then head out at first light. No one goes off alone in the meantime."

"I'll take first watch," T-Dog volunteered, shouldering his rifle and climbing up a small hill to a vantage point.

‡‡‡‡ ‡‡‡‡ ‡‡‡‡

It was dark and the group was huddled around a camp fire while digesting their makeshift meal of peanut butter, crackers and other sundry items they'd retrieved from the hood of that car on the highway. Carol was sitting on one side of Daryl and Allison on the other. How very cozy, Allison thought to herself wryly.

"We're not safe with him," Carol hissed at Daryl in a stage whisper. "Keeping something like that from us."

Carol probably had not meant for anyone to overhear her, but Allison spoke up nevertheless. "How would we have benefited from knowing? There's nothing that anyone can do about it."

Carol leaned forward so that she could glare at Allison. She sat back and then asked Daryl "Why do you need him? He's just gonna pull you down."

"Nah," Daryl told her, "Rick's done all right by me."

"You're his henchman and I'm a burden. You deserve better."

Daryl turned and looked at her. "What do you want?"

"A man of honor," she replied.

"Rick has honor," he said.

Allison bit her tongue in order not to agree with Carol about her being a burden. In her own mind she had begun referring to the woman as Load, as in an unnecessary, useless weight to bear. And then that moral, nice part of her brain would kick in and chastise her for thinking so unkindly of the widow who'd lost her daughter.
"What was that?!" someone asked in a hushed voice when some twigs snapped in the distance.

"Could be anything," Daryl said, trying to keep everyone calm, "a raccoon, a possum…"

"Or a walker," Beth added, a note of fear in her voice.

"We need to leave," Carol stated, standing up. "I mean, what are we waiting for?"

"The last thing we need is for everyone to be running off in the dark. We don't have the vehicles. No one's traveling on foot," Rick ordered.

"Don't panic," Hershel said softly, trying to calm the group.

Maggie refused to be placated. "I'm not sitting here, waiting for another herd to blow through. We need to move, now."

"Do something!" Carol pleaded.

"I am doing something!" Rick exploded. "I'm keeping this group together, alive. I've been doing that all along, no matter what." He dropped his voice to a low hiss. "I didn't ask for this! I killed my best friend for you people, for Christ's sake! You saw what he was like, how he pushed me, how he compromised us, how he threatened us. He staged the whole Randall thing, led me out to put a bullet in my back. He gave me no choice. He was my friend, but he came after me." He paused and looked from face to face. "My hands are clean. Maybe you people are better off without me. Go ahead. I say there's a place for us, but maybe… maybe it's just another pipe dream. Maybe… maybe I'm fooling myself again. Why don't you… Why don't you go and find out yourself? Go on, there's the door." He gestured toward the oppressive pitch black in the distance. "Send me a postcard."

Everyone exchanged uncomfortable glances but no one spoke.

"No takers? Fine. But let's get one thing straight. This is no longer a democracy."

Rick glared at the group, daring anyone to challenge him. Daryl finally spoke. "I'll relieve T-Dog."

"I got it covered," Rick waved him off and went to switch places with the man who outweighed him by at least half, but who still stepped aside and gave their leader plenty of room as he passed.

"Everyone should try to get some sleep," Daryl announced. "Dawn will come sooner than we think."
Allison awoke just as the Sun was peeking over the horizon. It wasn't the first hint of light that woke her up, rather, but her bladder. As she slowly opened her eyes and became aware of her surroundings she realized that she was covered with Daryl's jacket. That sweet man, she thought to herself. She'd scrunched up her own letterman's jacket (well, Ed Soobner's jacket) under her head to use as a makeshift pillow. She sat up as quietly as possible but even that small movement roused the hunter.

"What's up? Where ya goin'?" he asked sleepily.

"Nowhere, I just have to…um…"

"I'm goin' with ya," he replied, instinctively knowing where she was going and what she had to do. He'd learned a while ago about her aversion to referring to her own bodily functions. He'd found it amusing that, as a doctor, she could discuss other people's bowel movements and bladder whatsers, but she still blushed furiously when she had to excuse herself to pee.

"I'll be OK," she assured him.

"You ain't goin' alone," he said in a voice that refused to be contradicted.

"Oh, for heaven's sake," she sighed as he followed her several hundred feet away from camp. When she found an appropriately secluded spot she told him "Turn around." He shook his head and rolled his eyes as he obeyed. "Now hum or something."

"What?" he asked in a bemused voice.

"Hum or sing or something. I…I don't want you to hear."

"Christ Almighty," he grumbled before singing in an exaggerated off-key monotone: "Camptown ladies sing this song, doo-dah, doo-dah…"

On their way back to camp Allison insisted on stopping by the small pond to wash her hands. Or rinse them off, at least. Years of medical training were hard to overcome. Daryl squatted down beside her and grabbed the bandana out of his back pocket and dipped it in the water.

"Hold still," he instructed her, inspecting the top of her head. He daubed the portion of her hair that had been stained with blood. "Looks like it's scabbin' up OK, lemme just clean your hair a little so you don't look like some punk rock chick."

"Thank you," she said simply.

When they returned to camp Carol was up and stoking the small campfire. "Where'd you go? I was worried." Allison couldn't help but notice that Carol seemed to be looking strictly at Daryl when she spoke.

"Sorry to worry you," Allison replied with a forced smile before Daryl could speak, "but we're OK. All is well."

"I was trying to find something to make for breakfast," Carol continued. "There was some Quaker oatmeal in that box of things we brought from the highway, and this one big pot that was in the back of that truck, but we don't have bowls or spoons…"
"Guess it's time to improvise," Daryl shrugged and grabbed a wide piece of timber from the small woodpile they'd collected the previous night. Using his hunting knife he began whittling at it until he'd fashioned a very primitive large flat edge on one end. It reminded Allison of the wooden "spoons" they used to get in school with ice cream cups. "We'll just have to pass the pot around and share the spoon," he said while putting the finishing touches on his newly created utensil.

"He's amazing," Carol murmured as she took the ersatz spoon from Daryl and began to prepare a pot of oatmeal for the group. "We'd go hungry without him," she clucked in admiration.

"You don't have to sell me," Allison told the woman with a tight smile.

"I'd love to stand around and listen to you ladies sing my praises," Daryl rolled his eyes, "but I best go relieve Glenn. Bring me up some of that horse chow when it's ready, 'K?"

"OK," Allison and Carol replied in unison.

Daryl shook his head as he headed up the hill. Allison cast a sidelong glance at Carol. This is getting ridiculous, she thought to herself. We've got no place to live, no food, no fuel, and yet this woman can think of nothing better to do than play Sister Wives with me.

"Mornin…ow, my back," Lori greeted them as she stood up and stretched.

"Sleeping on the hard ground is not good for a woman in your condition," Carol commiserated. "I remember when I was pregnant with Sophia my back was always cramping up."

"Don't worry about me," Lori said. "Can I help with breakfast?"

"Not much here to help with," Allison remarked. "Hope you don't mind cowboy-style oatmeal."

"Anything sounds good, I'm famished." She noticed Carl stirring. "Morning, baby," she said to him as he stood up and set his hat in place.

"I'm not a baby," he grumbled as he started to walk away.

"Wait up, where do you think you're going?"

"I hafta take a leak, if that's OK." The boy was not in a good mood. Allison couldn't blame him. He was cold and hungry, which they all were, but he was also a 12-year-old kid who'd had to shoot the man who'd been a surrogate father to him.

"You're not going alone," Lori told him, stepping forward as if to accompany him.

"Mom! No way!" Carl was horrified.

"I'll take him." They turned to see Rick approaching with Glenn. "Come on, son. Got yer gun with ya?" The sheriff passed by his wife without even looking at her.

‡ ‡ ‡

Two days later, after much scavenging for fuel and supplies (clothing, bags to carry things in, food, etc.) and hotwiring a new vehicle to add to their fleet, the group found themselves parked in front of a large house, perhaps even a mansion, though Allison didn't know exactly when a house stopped being simply "big" and was officially declared a mansion. Glenn had been the one who'd spotted a small sign beside a narrow paved road that said "Private Drive".

"That usually means it's the driveway to a big fancy house," he told the group, recalling his pizza
delivering days. "Even rich people like pepperoni sometimes," he told the curious faces looking at him.

Sure enough, the winding pavement narrowed and turned into a driveway that eventually horseshoed in front of a dwelling that looked like Xanadu to the weary group. Unfortunately neither the driveway nor the property was gated, but it was set far enough back off the road that perhaps it wouldn't be noticed by walkers. They were hopeful as Daryl, Rick and T-Dog cautiously first checked the perimeter of the building then made their way inside to see if the inside was safe. Glenn and Hershel patrolled protectively around the caravan of vehicles even though Maggie was very vocal in her protests that she could stand guard, too, and didn't need protecting.

Some time later Rick dashed back to the cars almost smiling. "There's a few folks inside, probably the homeowners, who opted out that need to be removed, but otherwise it looks good. Didn't get too good a look around, but there are still linens on the beds so there might even be food in the cupboards."

The relief on everyone's faces was palpable. Everyone smiled for the first time in days as they began to gather and pack up their belongings per Rick's instructions. Gasoline was too precious to be wasted at the moment, so he instructed Daryl, Glenn and T-Dog to help him haul the bodies out to a spot on the far edge of the property and just leave them there.

When the house was deemed safe for entry everyone pitched in and carried their gear into the house. They dropped their baggage in the huge kitchen and then scrambled in different directions to investigate the rest of the house. Carol, ever the domestic, turned on a faucet at the kitchen sink and to everyone's surprise water spurted out. "Must have a gravity-fed well somewhere," Hershel remarked.

"There's running water? I don't care if it's ice cold, a shower sounds like heaven right now," Maggie sighed.

"Some of us could do with a cold shower," Daryl muttered. Allison giggled. Obviously she hadn't been the only one to hear Maggie and Glenn making whoopee after dark when they'd apparently thought everyone else in camp was asleep.

"All right," Rick addressed the group, "after everyone finds a place to sleep, we're gonna have to move the vehicles around in a semi-circle, just like at the farm."

Allison wandered around the main floor but most of the bedrooms had already been claimed. She climbed the staircase and found a room with a king-sized bed and a small half-bath en suite. She threw her two bags onto the bed and had to restrain herself from yelling "Called it!" She went back down the stairs and saw Daryl hesitating in a hallway, a small duffel in his hand. "Upstairs," she said briefly. "Second door on the left."

Daryl set his crossbow and meager bag of belongings down in the bedroom that Allison had claimed.

"Nice," he commented to her as she sidled up behind him and gave him a quick hug.

"A bed, a working toilet, not much else we could ask for," she agreed. But before she could flop backward onto the bed and truly enjoy its luxury a voice piped up from the hallway.

"Oh, is this room taken?" Allison didn't have to turn around to know it was Carol asking the question. "Guess I'm late to the party...got busy checking out the kitchen facilities first...Looks like most of the first floor bedrooms have already been claimed..."
"As has this one," Allison told her. "Looks like there are several more on this floor that are available, though. Check further down the hall." Much further, she thought to herself.

"OK," the older woman answered before squealing, "Ooh, look, there's a nice room right next door! We can be neighbors!"

"Well, yippee skippy, God has truly smiled on me today," Allison muttered.

"Doesn't seem like there's any electricity or power," Carol came back to their room and announced just a few moments later. "Daryl, do you still have a flashlight? Do you think you could walk me down to the basement to see if there are any laundry facilities?"

"What's the point, if there's no power?" Allison asked, somewhat irritated. "Even if there's a big ol' Maytag down there, it won't be functional."

"No, but there might be big laundry sinks, and detergent..." Carol replied.

"Sure, I'll walk you down," Daryl said. He dug through his bag and produced a flashlight and gave Allison a shrug and a look that implied that he felt obligated to help Carol. "Maybe there's a generator or somethin' down there, too."

Allison eventually went back down to the huge kitchen that served as the group's communal gathering space. Maggie and Beth were excited to share their latest discovery – even though there was no power in the house, there was a propane-fueled barbecue grill out in the yard and the tank seemed to be almost full! At the very least they had a way to cook any food that they might scrounge up. Or that Daryl would hunt down and kill. Lori announced that she'd found spoiled and rotting food in the refrigerator, and warned everyone against opening the door on that appliance, but that the cupboards had an interesting assortment of canned and boxed goods. T-Dog and Rick returned from yet another perimeter check and determined that the surrounding area thus far was walker-free, but that they would still have to post someone on watch at all times since the property wasn't fenced in.

The group was still digesting all of this good news when Carol and Daryl returned from the basement to report that they'd found a pantry stocked with canned food and fresh potatoes, only some of which had begun sprouting, and onions – some not so fresh, but the rest usable. And Carol seemed most excited that she'd found an honest-to-goodness old-fashioned washboard down there, along with several bars of Fels Naptha soap.

"Who would've thought that in a big fancy house like this they'd have a washboard?" Carol asked aloud in wonderment.

With that Aunt Jemima headscarf she was sporting these days, Allison was tempted to tell Carol that she could just picture her singing 'Them Ol' Cotton Fields Back Home' while she happily hand-scrubbed her master's, er, late husband's clothes. Instead she simply asked "Anything else useful down there?"

"Isn't that enough?" Carol asked, as if Allison was unappreciative. "We've got food and, soon, clean clothes!"

"I meant did you find anything like weapons or, better yet, ammo?"

"Didn't get a real thorough look around," Daryl answered, gesturing with his flashlight. "It's too dark and I didn't wanna waste my batteries more than necessary. We'll look more in the daylight tomorrow."
"What about setting up a watch? There's a widow's walk on the back side of the house, but that only gives us a view of one side of the property," Hershel commented.

"From the outside it looks like there's a third story on the house, with windows on two sides. Must be an attic of some sort because I didn't see the stairway leading to it anywhere," Rick stated.

"Check all the doors on the second floor," Allison suggested. "Sometimes the attic stairs are tucked away like a closet."

"All right, Daryl and I will do that now, Glenn and T-Dog – wait, where is T-Dog, anyway?"

"He's in the kitchen playing Chef Boy-R-Tee," Maggie joked. "He and Lori were messing with some cans and pots before, and he's got the barbecue warming up…dunno what they've got going."

"I wanted to be a professional chef before all this started," Allison remarked. "He'd been taking culinary classes at night at some school in Atlanta."

"How do you know that?" Maggie asked, surprised. As much time as the group had spent together, there was still quite a bit they didn't know about one another.

"She's very inquisitive," Daryl answered before Allison could speak, "which is my polite way of saying she's downright nosy." He ruffled the top of her hair with his knuckles, giving her a noogie for the first time in a long time. Allison smiled despite Daryl's little dig at her; he was making jokes and touching her in public…it seemed like Daryl was actually feeling a little relaxed for the first time since they'd left the farm. And that made her relax and feel more secure.

"OK, since T-Dog's otherwise occupied, Glenn can you please go out with Hershel and make another perimeter run while Daryl and I see what the attic situation is?"

"I can go out with Glenn," Maggie said forcefully. "I can handle a gun and there's no need to wear Dad out."

"I'm not exactly an invalid, young lady," the old vet was offended. Allison had to admit, for almost certainly being in his 70s, the guy was still strong and spry and wily.

"OK, then, you go with Glenn if you two promise to keep your minds on patrolling," Rick said with a very pointed look. Glenn blushed and pushed a giggling Maggie out the door ahead of him.

‡ ‡ ‡

"So, let me get this straight," Maggie asked between mouthfuls of pasta, "You fired up that grill and fussed over it so much just so you could boil water?!" The group laughed in response. They were in high spirits from the combination of their first big dose of carbohydrates in weeks and the fine wine T-Dog had found in an elaborate wooden rack in one of the many rooms of their new sanctuary. The table was set with china and illuminated by tapers in three sets of silver candelabras placed on the table.

"You don't just jump into a new car on the lot and drive away, do you?" T-Dog protested. "You familiarize yourself with all the bells and whistles first. So I was playing with the barbecue to see how it worked, what the minimal amount of fuel was necessary to heat one pot versus two to boil…it's all very technical, you wouldn't understand." He gave her a condescending look that made everyone burst into a new round of laughter.

It was true, Allison thought to herself, laughter is the best medicine. She hadn't felt this exhilarated and carefree since….she had to pause and think back….the CDC. Of course, they weren't as
protected here as they had been at that concrete bunker, but Rick had ultimately decided that the big risk that they were taking by all sitting down for a communal dinner without someone keeping watch was worth the much bigger benefit – improved morale. The overall mood of the group had been so low for so long he didn't think they'd ever look up again. He slowly looked around the table and saw the harsh angles of tension disappear from each face as they held actual conversations, not just gruffly barked phrases about who would cover what. After this two-hour break they'd get back to serious business, but they'd all be refreshed and renewed. They'd be stronger, better prepared for whatever came their way.

"He didn't just boil water, you know," Lori came to T-Dog's defense. "He also heated up this delicious pasta sauce and also somehow managed to sauté canned asparagus so that Carl would actually eat a green vegetable!"

"Mrs. Grimes is being too humble," T-Dog replied. "She helped to make the sauce. It's not Ragu, you know. Rich folks in houses like this don't keep prepared foods in their pantries. Nosiree, this sauce is a genuine homemade combination of tomato paste, stewed tomatoes and a bunch of spices Lori threw in when I wasn't looking."

"Here's to both of our chefs," Hershel raised his glass and everyone joined in the toast. Allison couldn't help but notice that Rick hadn't looked Lori in the eye throughout the meal, and he had seemed visibly uncomfortable when T referred to Lori as "Mrs. Grimes". That second glass of wine seemed to be finely tuning Allison's social radar, or "Spidey Sense", as it were… In all the time the group had been together she couldn't recall T-Dog ever addressing Lori by anything other than her first name. She had a sneaking suspicion that while the two of them had been preparing this pasta feast Lori had unloaded her marital woes on T's broad shoulders. And dear Theodore, who loved God first and family a very close second, had probably taken it upon himself to subtly remind their leader of the responsibility he'd undertaken when he'd recited his wedding vows all those years ago.

"You should have another helping," Beth said to Lori, passing the bowl of noodles. "Shouldn't you be gaining weight when you're pregnant?"

"Yes," Allison chimed in. "And don't skimp on the sauce – lots of Vitamin C in tomatoes, as well as antioxidants."

"See, Maggie?" Hershel piped up. "Those times you gave me grief for taking advantage of the all-you-can-eat pasta at the Olive Garden? I was just doing my body good!"

There was laughter all around and then T-Dog said, out of the blue, "Hey Doc, I gotta ask you something that's been botherin' me since I was a kid."

All eyes turned to him expectantly. "My mama always got on me about wearing clean underwear all the time…she always asked me 'What happens if you're in an accident and get rushed to the emergency room?' So I gotta know – do ER doctors look down on folks with dirty drawers?"

"Eew, I don't think this is appropriate dinner table conversation," Carol screwed up her face in disgust. But the others were looking at Allison with interest, so she answered the question.

"If a patient is too ill or incapacitated to undress himself, then the nurses or aides in the ER will simply cut off all of his clothing and toss it aside without a second look. Trust me, there are more interesting things to gossip about in the doctor's lounge than tacky underpinnings."

"Like what?" Beth leaned forward with interest. "I've heard about weird things found in…inside people in the ER on Howard Stern's show…"
Allison hesitated, but thus far only Carol seemed to be repulsed; everyone else at the table, even Rick the Seasoned Sheriff, seemed to be fascinated by the discussion and waiting for an answer.

"I suppose the doctor/patient privilege thing doesn't apply if I don't mention names…and even more so since the hospital I used to work at is probably now defunct…" she paused and sighed, but then grinned slightly. "OK, it's true, I have personally attended to patients with everything from a bottle of shampoo to a halogen light bulb stuck in an…..unusual anatomical place. As a professional, I'm not supposed to judge, just treat. But I must confess that after hours I've laughed with other doctors about the universal excuse…. 'I tripped and fell on top of – ' whatever object. 'A freak accident, what are the odds?' 'One in a million' I'd say to the patient with a straight face."

Everyone, even Carol, howled with laughter except for Carl, who said "I don't get it."

"It's just a thing," Allison told him, feeling very fuzzy-headed from two glasses of wine. "Sometimes people do strange things with their bodies. I've seen grown men spraying each other with pepper spray on YouTube just to see if it hurt. It doesn't make sense – they know it will hurt, but they still want to try it."

"But what does a shampoo bottle have to do with it?" Carl was trying to make sense of what the adults were laughing at.

"It's a long story, your mom and dad can explain it to you later," Allison sidestepped the issue.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

The dinner dishes had been done, the stairway to the attic had been found, and Hershel and Rick had volunteered to take the first two watch shifts for the night, leaving Daryl free to sleep for a luxurious six hours before he had to relieve Rick. He took a quick, bracing cold-water shower in their half-bath and emerged to find that Allison had turned down the bed and was perched on the edge of the mattress wearing just one of Otis' oversized undershirts (score one for laziness – she had never fully unpacked when they were moving into the Greene house and a couple of her bags had been left in the bed of the pick-up truck) and looking at him fetchingly.

"Damn, woman, I'm not a machine," he mock-complained.

"You know you want me, baby," she replied in an attempt to be alluring. She was still sort of new to this seduction business.

He responded by pushing her back onto the bed and mashing his lips against hers. She wrapped her arms around his head and pulled him close, willingly parting her lips to allow his tongue to enter and tease.

"Ohhhh, Angel, you don't know how good you feel," he murmured against her ear as he nipped and sucked along her neck.

"I know how good you make me feel," she purred as she reached between his legs and gently stroked him.

"Mmmmmm, ohhhhhhhh," he uttered as she continued to tongue-dance with him while simultaneously stroking the top of his head with one hand and gripping his manhood with increasing fervor with the other.

"Stop, stop” he finally panted, pulling her hand away from his crotch. "I won’t last long if you keep doin’ that…"
"Then you won't have to," she replied softly, pushing him off of her and rolling him flat onto his back. "You've been doing too much physical labor lately to have to do any more….just lay back and relax…" She got onto her knees and gently rubbed his belly as she spoke.

"No, you don't have to…" he began to protest.

"Hush," she told him in between kissing various places on his pelvic region and finally making her way to his erect member. She teased the head with her tongue while looking him directly in his eyes. He moaned in response and arched his lower back. She slowly took more and more of his length into her mouth, massaging the underside of it with her tongue, until her face was pressed against his groin.

"Yeaaaah," was the only sound he was able to articulate, and he instinctively wrapped one hand around her head. He didn't force her, but rather guided her into a rhythm. A few moments later he managed to gasp "This isn't fair to…you…I want to…make you…." He ceased speaking and resumed grunting.

Allison removed her mouth from him for a minute but continued to stroke him with her hand as she spoke. "Daryl," she whispered. He closed his eyes and moaned when she spoke his name. "You do everything in the world to make me happy. Please let me do this one thing to make you happy."

He ceased any further protests and just grabbed a handful of her hair as she continued to increase her rhythm of sucking and tongue-teasing. It didn't take long before he grunted, bucked his hips and uttered an elongated "Unghhhhh, ooh daaamn!" as he exploded into her mouth. He spasmed a few more times as he watched her willingly swallow his issue and then gently kiss the tip of his manhood after she'd licked it clean. Oh God, what did he ever do to deserve a woman like this, he wondered with his last ounce of consciousness before he pulled her close, kissed her lips and then drifted off into the cloud of a warm, welcome slumber.
"Whooooooooheee!" Allison couldn't help squealing when the cold water of the shower first hit her the next morning.

"Brisk, ain't it?" Daryl called through the bathroom door.

"Oh, buddy, you ain't kidding," she hollered back through chattering teeth. She had to laugh as she soaped up with a bottle of some type of body wash that was sitting on the shelf and rinsed off as quickly as possible, thinking how back in July she would've danced in glee under this arctic spray. Her hair was in desperate need of a good scrubbing, so she grabbed the nearest bottle of shampoo and lathered, rinsed, repeated. After several minutes the water didn't feel quite so much like cold shards of glass penetrating her flesh, so she lingered a bit longer, washing the grime of the past several days out of her hair.

Stepping out of the shower she wrapped herself in a huge, impossibly thick and soft towel. She picked up the bottles of bath products she'd just used for closer inspection. Crabtree & Evelyn Seaweed Volumnizing Shampoo and Biotique Sea Kelp Shower Gel. Well, it smelled good, anyway, she thought as she rubbed the circulation back to her limbs. To Daryl's questioning knock on the door she answered "Come on in." He saw the bottle in her hands and shook his head.

"What the heck is that crap, anyway? Tried lookin' for a normal bar of soap, but couldn't find anything but that pansy stuff."

"Seaweed and Sea Kelp," Allison chuckled as she whipped the towel off of her head. "You'd think if any of this stuff really worked your average catfish would be a lot more attractive."

Daryl was browsing through the medicine cabinet and under the sink. "What do ya think the chances are they got some plain ol' Crest or Colgate stashed someplace?"

"Maybe below stairs in the servants' quarters," she told him. "Otherwise, you're stuck with - " She paused and plucked a tube from the cabinet - "PreviDent 5000 Plus. Made with Umbrian Clay," she read from the back of the package.

"Christ," he grumbled, taking the tube from her and squirting a daub onto a toothbrush (there had been at least a dozen brand-new boxed ones under the sink…could it be possible this family had actually deigned to shop in bulk at one time?) and bent over the basin. "I grew up poor, but in all that time I never had to brush my teeth with dirt," he said in between spitting out the vile mixture.

Allison went back into the bedroom and dug through what luggage she had. Most of her clothes were stiff with filth, so she browsed first through the chest of drawers then the closet to see if there was anything she could wear until she did some much-needed laundry. She found a pink velour track suit that was a size or two too large, but would do for the meantime. "Want me to find you some clothes to wear from the closet here?" she called to Daryl.

"Why?" he asked.

"So I can wash your regular wardrobe."

"They ain't that bad," he protested, emerging from the bathroom in the last pair of boxers he had that weren't capable of standing up on their own.

"Trust me," Allison said. "Your socks alone could walk to the basement by themselves. Here,
there's some men's underwear in this drawer….and I'll check the closet for some slacks…"

"Dunno if I wanna wear someone else's underwear, seems kinda weird…"

Allison handed him a pair of boxer briefs and said, "Oh please, you'll eat raw squirrel but you get squeamish at the thought of wearing another man's underwear? Besides, these look like they could be brand new."

He took the garment from her suspiciously, as if she'd attached a time bomb to it. He examined the label. "DKNY? Never heard of it."

Allison certainly wasn't going to tell him that the initials stood for Donna Karan New York – she knew that he'd go commando before wearing underwear with a woman's name on the label. "Neither have I," she said instead, "and it's only until I get your other stuff washed."

"You're gonna wash my clothes, right?" he asked anxiously as he squiggled into the distasteful lingerie. "Not Carol?"

"I promise, if Carol's down there, I'll just do my stuff and go back later for yours. And -- " she added, reading his mind, "I'll hang your undies up here over the shower curtain rod to dry instead of downstairs on the clothesline. If they have one. But they probably do, if they have a washtub."

"Thanks," he grunted, shuffling through the clothes hanging in one of the closets. "These jeans might fit," he said, taking a pair off the hanger. A moment later he said, "They're a little big, but at least it doesn't look like I'm wearing a pink wind sock." He gave her a wry grin and then ducked when she threw a sock at him.

"These pants aren't that big," she countered. "Besides, don't you have better things to do today than mock my fashion sense?"

He pulled a T-shirt over his head and then took the socks she handed him.

"Goin' out with Rick in a bit," he said, lacing up his boots.

"Hunting?" she asked.

"No, not today. He wants to go out and take a closer look at the property...see how secure it is, what the landscape is like, see if maybe there's a way to fence part of it in, how we can best protect ourselves, stuff like that. Then we'll go through the house while it's light and see what all we can find."

"Would be nice if we could secure it enough to stay here a while," Allison remarked as they went downstairs to breakfast. "Maybe even through the winter."

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

T-Dog had managed to whip up a big platter of pancakes for breakfast using Bisquik mix and powdered coffee creamer mixed with water as a milk substitute. They weren't as fluffy as traditional hotcakes but they tasted heavenly, especially with the real maple syrup he'd found in the pantry. Allison passed up the "cowboy coffee" he'd brewed with boiling water on the grill outside, but the men all threw back a cup or two. After the hearty meal Beth volunteered to wash the dishes while Allison, Lori and Carol made several trips to the basement with armfuls of dirty laundry. Glenn, Maggie and Carl volunteered to patrol around the outside of the house, and Hershel accompanied Rick, T-Dog and Daryl as they further investigated their surroundings.
Hours later Allison's fingers were aching from trying to raise some suds with the Fels-Naptha bar soap in cold water as she rubbed garment after garment on the rough metal of the washboard. The three women had been taking turns scrubbing, rinsing and hanging up clothes. They'd chatted now and then about random things about how nice it was to be inside a house again, and the nice furnishings and what a nice surprise it was to find out that T-Dog was such a wizard in the kitchen.

"I guess he really didn't have time to do any cooking when we were at the farm," Carol mused. "He was usually outside standing guard or doing other work."

"And it was more or less Patricia, Maggie and Beth's domain back then," Lori added. "Their house, their food…"

"I really miss Patricia, she was such a nice person," Allison said wistfully.

"She's with Otis now," Carol replied, "in a better place."

Allison recalled back at the farm when Carl had mentioned Carol saying a similar thing about Sophia. Out loud she said, "She loved Otis so much…it must be wonderful to have that kind of relationship – to still be that much in love after 18 years." The minute the words were out of her mouth she mentally slapped herself. What the heck was wrong with her, talking about wonderful marriages to the widow of a wife-beater and the wife whose husband was barely speaking to her these days.

Instead of sniping at her, though, Lori seemed contemplative. "I used to think that those kind of marriages only happened on TV or in movies…it's nice to know that it sometimes happens in real life. It makes you wonder, though, what was their secret? How did they do it?"

"I don't know if there's any particular secret," Allison said with a shrug. "I just got the sense from talking to her that they had a lot in common…similar values, similar interests, and they…well, they were very nice, compassionate people. They cared about each other and other people, too. Patricia told me how Otis used to come back to the hospital where she worked to check on patients he'd dropped off, to see how they were doing. He was genuinely concerned about others."

"Rick always was, too, and I used to consider that a fault," Lori sighed. "I can't count how many times I accused him of putting other people before his family. That's probably part of why…why we….and, besides, we were so young, I was awfully selfish, looking back…."

"Lori, stop," Carol told her. "You're letting recent events cloud your memory of the good times."

"No, I don't think so." Lori turned to Allison. "I see the way you look at Daryl, and how he looks at you. The things you do for each other. Rick used to do things for me like that, but I never reciprocated, not really. All I ever did was complain…" She buried her face in her hands momentarily and then looked up. "I was so selfish…" she repeated.

Knowing the woman as she did, Allison didn't doubt her words but she felt like this was the time to be encouraging. She patted Lori's shoulder. "You're undernourished, you're pregnant, your emotions are all over the place, and we've been running in fear for days on end. You'll see, once we're able to stay in one place again for a while, everything will work out OK."

Lori started to sniffle. "I've been a shitty wife, and a bad mother…"

"You mean like Shaft was a bad mother?" Allison asked, trying to lighten the mood.

To her surprise, Carol laughed but Lori looked confused. "That old song," Carol wrapped her arms around Lori and gave her a hug. "What was it? 'Theme from Shaft' or something….'You know that
"Shaft's a bad mother.'"

"Shut your mouth.'," Allison responded.

"Yeah," Lori wiped her eyes with the back of her hand, "I remember now. Or should I say 'I can dig it'?" She looked at the other two women and they all burst out in laughter. Allison momentarily felt truly sad for Lori. It was bad enough that the whole world was currently turned upside down, but to be pregnant and simultaneously trying to mend a fractured marriage at the same time…. She mentally made a note to count her own blessings later.

"We'd best get this laundry finished," Carol interrupted her thoughts. "Won't be long before the men will be back for some lunch."
Rick and his team returned late in the afternoon, hot and exhausted but optimistic. Hershel estimated that they'd probably covered about 12 miles worth of land and hadn't seen any walkers or signs of any ever being near the property. Daryl was pleased that he'd spotted some deer tracks during their mission and was anxious to get out and hunt. There was also a stream not far from the house that might be good for fishing, if they could find or make some gear. Since for the time being the extended area around the house seemed deserted, Rick deemed it safe for everyone to sit down together for a quick late lunch. It would be a good opportunity to brainstorm and make some plans, he thought, and the table was a jumble of voices with everyone eager to discuss what they'd discovered about their new refuge.

"Saw what looked like goose scat near the stream," Daryl commented between mouthfuls of T-Dog's improvised tuna salad. "No way of tellin' how old it was, since it dries up pretty fast, but maybe if we're lucky there are still some of them birds hangin' around…we can roast a goose on that grill…"

"I always do enjoy chatting about animal excrement at the dinner table," Allison remarked, scrunching up her nose. "But I have to admit roast goose sounds heavenly, doesn't it?"

"What's 'excrement'?" Carl asked.

"Poop," his father replied succinctly.

"Found a small woodshed not far from the house," Hershel mentioned. "Was about half-full, but we should cut some more to last us as the weather gets colder. I counted at least four fireplaces in this house."

"It would be nice to set up something so that we could boil water in one of the fireplaces," Lori suggested.

"For when the baby comes?" Beth asked with a giggle.

"No, for things like taking a bath or for the laundry sometimes," Lori replied when the laughter died down. "It would be more convenient that heating water up outside and then hauling it indoors."

"That's something they used to show on old TV shows and in movies," T-Dog commented, "boiling water when a woman gives birth. They don't do that in hospitals, do they Doc? What was the deal with that, anyway?"

"No, they don't do that in hospitals because there are more modern ways of sterilizing instruments now. But back before indoor plumbing featured hot and cold running water, midwives often had several pots of hot water on hand to help wash mama and the baby up after the birth, among other things," Allison told him.

"Did anyone check out the garage yet?" Glenn asked.

"Yeah, we had a look around," Rick replied. "There's a Mercedes SUV and a Jaguar parked inside."

"Sweet!" Glenn said, his eyes lighting up.

"We can't afford to waste fuel driving those two gas guzzlers on errands," Rick told him. "We can
siphon whatever gasoline is in them into our own vehicles, though."

"We were losing light by the time we go to the garage," Daryl commented. "We'll have to go back tomorrow and have another look-see. Looked like there were some tools hanging on a pegboard, and there might be a flashlight or something useful in the glove boxes."

"Or a road map," Rick added thoughtfully.

"Speaking of maps," Beth piped up, "I found a telephone book in one of the end tables in that room over there." She gestured vaguely. "Maybe y'all can find some gun shops listed in the Yellow Pages."

"Good idea," Daryl told her and she beamed with pride. It was a rare feat indeed, she knew, to receive a compliment from the redneck.

"So," Carol asked hesitantly, "what do the prospects look like? Do you think we'll be able to stay put for a while? I mean, will we be safe here?"

All eyes turned expectantly to Rick. He looked thoughtful as he replied. "Obviously I can't predict the future, but so far we've done a fair sweep of the land a few miles in each direction and we didn't encounter any walkers. None of us have spotted any during watch, either. But who knows how long our luck will hold." He paused and sighed. "If only this place had a fence around it…"

"Could we build one?" Carl asked.

"With what?" Lori asked. "We don't have any chain link or barbed wire…"

Daryl snorted at her urban naiveté. "Folks have been buildin' fences long before they had such modern supplies. Maybe you've heard about Abraham Lincoln splittin' logs for a livin'…?"

"As long as we didn't get a huge herd like at the farm, a split-rail fence would keep out walkers in small numbers, don't you think?" Maggie asked, considering the idea.

"I worry, though," Rick said, "That the noise we'd make constructing it might attract walkers. Chopping wood for fire right close to the house is one thing, but pounding pilings into the ground and hammering and nailing further out might be risky…"

"Too bad we can't dig a moat around the place, like they used to do around castles in medieval times," T-Dog said.

"It seems like we should be able to do something," Carol insisted. "After all, the Egyptians built those huge pyramids with very primitive tools."

"That's true," Allison confirmed, rolling her eyes. "All we need is 10,000 more people and then we can build our own Wall of China around this house."

"Sarcasm won't solve anything," Rick chastised her. "Right now we're brainstorming, and as far as I'm concerned any and all ideas should be put on the table for discussion."

"Sorry," Allison muttered, and she couldn't help but notice Carol's smug smile.

"I think that maybe some weapons training might be a good preparedness measure for the women," Hershel commented. "Maggie's good with guns," he added quickly, noticing his eldest daughter rearing up to retort, "but Beth has never handled one, and Allison mentioned some time ago that she's not familiar with handguns." Allison didn't mind being called out; she knew the old man was
being diplomatic by not mentioning Lori's ignorance of rifles and Carol's total inexperience with any and all firearms.

"Until we check those Yellow Pages and get ourselves some more ammunition, we can't afford to waste any bullets," Daryl observed.

"I realize that," Hershel said, "and I think that Rick is right about keeping the noise level down, so even if we had unlimited ammo we still shouldn't risk live target practice. What I'm talking about is breaking down our existing guns and learning how to maintain them, how to determine whether there's a bullet chambered, what the safety is, all the basics. Then they can dry fire to get the feel and learn how to aim."

"Solid suggestion," Rick agreed. "I also think that we should all practice some defensive skills that don't involve guns."

"You mean like hand-to-hand combat?" Glenn asked.

Exactly. I started to – " he paused and swallowed hard, thinking of that day at the Merit County Public Works building when he had emphasized to Shane the importance of using knives rather than guns to kill walkers – "consider this some time ago…that we should all start learning how to use knives or swords or whatever sharp objects we could get our hands on to kill walkers. It's quiet and it saves ammunition for more extreme situations."

"Like in the military," T-Dog expanded on Rick's point. "A group learning to work as one unit with knives and bayonets. You form like a circle and attack from all sides at once."

"I didn't know you were in the service," Carol said.

"I wasn't," T admitted, "but I saw Full Metal Jacket about a dozen times."

Everyone laughed and then Rick said, "T's right, y'know. That's the kind of stuff we need to be practicing, just in case. We can't afford to be complacent or let our guard down. Even if it turns out we can stay at this house for the next year we all need to keep in fighting form."

The mention of a possible lengthy stay in this luxurious house with soft beds and flush toilets made everyone eagerly nod and agree with their leader.

"There are knives in the kitchen and pokers by the various fireplaces. There might be sharp tools out in the garage. We'll start a daily practice of learning how to use those as weapons, how to communicate with one another, how to quickly move into a formation when the situation calls for it."

"What can we use as a target? Too bad we don't have some life-sized stuffed dummies or something," Maggie commented.

"Maybe we can eventually make something like that," Rick stated, "but in the meantime we can draw an outline on a tree or a big piece of wood or something. We'll make do."

Their meal finished, Rick, Daryl and Glenn went to study the Yellow Pages that Beth had found while Lori, Carol and Beth cleared the table. Maggie went upstairs to nap so that she'd be rested for her watch duty later, and Allison went outside and patrolled the perimeter of the house with Carl.

Dusk began to fall and the two were quiet for a while while their eyes adjusted to the impending darkness. Allison had her Remington Versa Max rifle and Carl was carrying the handgun that he'd pilfered from Daryl's saddlebag back at the farm. She and Daryl had both noticed it in the boy's
hands after they'd evacuated, but neither mentioned it to him, especially after they'd heard the story of how he'd had to shoot Shane after he'd turned and was about to bite Rick. The kid was handy with a pistol, it turned out.

"You like it here?" she struck up a conversation after their second circle around the house.

"Yeah, the house is nice…" he seemed bothered.

"Something wrong?" she asked.

"I dunno…" he paused, but Allison noticed that he still kept his eyes scanning the horizon. Poor kid, he'd been forced to grow up awfully quick. "I just wish my mom and dad were OK."

"Your dad is probably just worried about your mom and the baby," Allison tried to soothe his worries.

"He doesn't seem worried to me, he seems mad," Carl told her. "They hardly talk to each other, but when they do do dad always seems so angry at her."

"Married people get that way sometimes," she told him. "Especially in a situation like this, when your dad has to worry about all of us as well as your mom."

"But Mr. Daryl takes care of all of us, too, and he's not like that with you. He's always nice to you, and he doesn't holler at you…"

"Well, we're not married," Allison said, searching for an explanation that Carl would accept. "And we haven't known each other as long as your mom and dad have. After a lot of togetherness, sometimes little things irritate couples and they fight. It doesn't mean they're really mad at each other."

"They used to fight a lot before dad got shot, too" Carl seemed to be thinking out loud. "Mom always seemed to be mad at dad. And then, after Shane died, she seemed mad at him all over again, but now he's mad back at her." His eyes looked somber under the brim of his daddy's hat.

How in the world do you explain to a 12-year-old that his father probably resents the fact that his mother is most likely carrying another man's child? From what Lori had said weeks earlier, Carl didn't even know where babies came from. But he wasn't naïve, he had eyes and ears and he knew that something was amiss.

"Both your folks have a lot on their minds," she finally told him. "Remember how hard your dad looked for Sophia? He probably still feels bad about what happened, it takes a lot of time to accept the death of a child. And when a woman is expecting a baby, there are chemicals in their bodies that make them more emotional than usual."

"What do you mean, 'emotional'?"

"It means that sometimes they cry for no particular reason, or they'll yell at someone they love for something silly like the room is too hot or there's no Cool Whip in the freezer. Things that aren't anyone's fault. And eventually the woman's husband just stops talking to her and avoids her while she's like that, just so he doesn't upset her…and also because he's tired of getting blamed for every little thing." She smiled and gave him a gentle punch in the shoulder. "All you can do right now is try not to worry, and just help out your folks however you can when they need it. Hopefully things will get better soon, once we're able to stay put in one place for a while."

Carl didn't seem completely convinced, but he still nodded and said simply, "OK."
Chapter 47

A few weeks passed, maybe even an entire month…one of these days she should start keeping track somehow, Allison thought to herself…and the group had settled into something of a routine at the big house. They weren't exactly settled, as without a proper fence they still very were vulnerable – thinking about what had happened at the Greene farm made them all skittish. But the benefits of having a regular place to eat and sleep and wash were not mixed. Lori had gained a bit of weight and had finally developed a visible baby bump. Most of them actually even smiled now and then and overall they'd become less of a "group" and more of a "family." Even the previously ever-surly Daryl had developed a seemingly unlimited wellspring of patience, especially when it came to their daily weapons practice. And Allison couldn't help but notice how Carol always went to Daryl when she needed further instruction on how to hold and aim a rifle – how she seemed to daily forget the proper stance and need him to stand close to her and wrap his arms around hers on the weapon to demonstrate.

"I know it shouldn't bother me, but it does," she confessed to Lori one afternoon when the two women were closeted away in the Grimes' bedroom for as much of a physical exam as Allison could provide. Luckily one of the bags that had been left in the truck bed was her medical call bag, so she still had her stethoscope and some other supplies. She put her blood pressure cuff back in her bag and added, "And I know Carol's a close friend of yours, so I shouldn't be telling tales out of school, I guess… But I have to ask you – has she ever said anything to you about…y'know, liking Daryl or having feelings for him or whatever?"

"I'd like to think that we're all friends," Lori said, buttoning her shirt. "If not family by now."

"I'm sorry, I just meant that you and Carol have probably talked a lot more than you and I have… but you're right, after everything we've been through, we don't really have time for the high school mean girls drama." Besides, Allison thought to herself, it's only since shortly after they left the farm that Lori had ceased being so, well, so Lori-ish and had been helping out with chores, taking rather than giving orders and actually being approachable. She's probably desperate for companionship since her husband snubs her and Shane, her protector, is gone forever.

"To answer your question, Carol has never said anything specific to me about Daryl…just now and then she'd mention that he was really a nice man and that he was misunderstood. Things of that nature." Lori didn't add that Carol had told her a few times back at the farm that Daryl really needed someone to take proper care of him, and had always stopped just short of accusing Allison of not doing the job.

"Maybe I'm being paranoid," Allison suggested. "I have to remind myself sometimes to not be the quote/unquote jealous woman; T-Dog told me once that men hate being accused of infidelities where none have occurred."

Lori bit her lip trying not to smile; she was sure that those hadn't been T-Dog's exact words – now that they tended to chat more, she was getting used to Allison's sometimes stilted way of speaking. "What makes you think she's 'after' Daryl, anyway? I never really see the two of them off together or anything. Other than Rick, you're the only person Daryl really talks to a lot, and with Rick it's only because they're making plans or organizing something."

"Just some things she's said to me… or maybe the way she's always rubbing up against him during gun practice like a grizzly bear marking a tree…" Allison was getting more agitated as she spoke.

Lori chuckled. "I won't say you're imagining things, maybe some of these things happen when I'm
Allison laughed out loud at that remark, then added shyly "He went out and got this barrette for me, too," gesturing to the clip that held her hair back.

"Really?" Lori asked. "I just presumed that that was something you happened to have with you." She grew a bit more thoughtful. "The only reason I knew so much about your necklace is because Maggie told me about him and Glenn going into town to that pawn shop…she thought it was funny that Glenn expected Daryl to head right to the gun rack but instead he started browsing over the jewelry case." She paused and then looked up at Allison. "She didn't mention him getting a barrette, too."

"No, he got this for me later," Allison explained. "During another trip into town. We'd been talking the night before, and I told him about this song I really liked because of the lyric that went 'here is a rainbow for your hair' and…" her voice began to trail off when Lori looked away and her lip quivered ever so slightly, "the next day he came back from a supply run with this." She looked curiously at Lori and said "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to upset you," not knowing why Lori was suddenly on the verge of tears.

"It's OK," Lori reached over and patted Allison's hand, "it's not you, it's just…that's so sweet of him. I was trying to think of the last time Rick brought me such a spontaneous gift…"

"Well, that's not really a fair comparison," Allison told her. "Daryl and I aren't married and we haven't been together all that long, really. I'm sure Rick did sweet things for you during the 'honeymoon' part of your relationship, too."

Lori looked into the distance as she spoke. "Don't get me wrong, he was always a good provider, and he remembered birthdays and holidays…but we were so young when we were in what should have been our 'honeymoon' stage, and Rick had to work a lot of hours…I'd gotten pregnant with Carl not long after we were married, and we hadn't really planned on a baby that soon." She sighed. "It seems like I was always exhausted or changing a diaper and Rick was never home. Then, a few years later, Rick kept saying that Carl should have a brother or sister, that he shouldn't be an only child. He'd been promoted by then and we were doing better financially, but by that time I just thought he wanted to get me pregnant to keep me tied down, keep me at home, keep me busy with something. But I wanted more out of my life than just that. So I keep putting him off and eventually he stopped mentioning the subject."

Allison wondered how Rick must have felt back at the farm, then, that day when he found out that his wife was pregnant during such an uncertain time after years of protesting that she wasn't ready. He must've known immediately that Shane was the father. To be honest, Allison had somewhat suspected that Rick might have had a vasectomy at some point since Carl had been an only child for 12 years. It was odd family spacing, to say the least. Poor guy; what a huge, humiliating slap in the face.
She turned to Allison and said firmly, "I want you to know, though, that I was always faithful. Shane and I didn't...until -"

"It's none of my business, really," Allison protested.

"No, I need to talk about this, and Rick won't even look at me, much less talk. And Carol has her own sadness, losing Sophia and all that, I don't want to burden her with my problems..."

Of course not, Allison thought to herself wryly. Let's not burden Carol, let's unload on captive audience Allison, whom you've barely given the time of day to before. Until you were out in the cold and desperate. Just like in high school...the popular girls ignored her until they needed help with their homework or they were being ostracized by their regular clique of friends.

"In Rick's defense," she told Lori, "I think that not talking about feelings is a general 'guy' thing. I remember overhearing Glenn talking to T-Dog and Dale back at the farm one day when I was delivering laundry." Lori didn't seem to notice Allison's subtle emphasis on those last two words. "Glenn was confused because Maggie always asked him what he was thinking or feeling, and he didn't know what she meant, how he should answer. The other two men basically said that women always go on about stuff like that and that men don't know why. That usually what they're thinking is 'Will the Falcons make it to the playoffs this year?' or 'Will my shorts unbunch themselves if I sit long enough or am I going to have to stand up to adjust them?'"

"Maybe that was part of our problem," Lori murmured, "My expectations were too high. I expected him to take the time to converse with me and share feelings with me like I was an intelligent human being."

Oh, brother, this woman should have one of those beeping warning signals attached to her, the way she backed up so suddenly, Allison thought.

"Did Shane share his thoughts with you?" Allison asked, somewhat brazenly.

"He told me he loved me all the time," Lori said. "But like I said, that wasn't until after...well, when I thought Rick was gone. Dead. I didn't fool around with Shane or anyone else before that." She looked downward somewhat guiltily. "Although, to be honest, I think I knew for several years that Shane had feelings for me, and I might have subconsciously encouraged that a little bit...but what woman wouldn't enjoy being pursued by an attractive man when her husband is so inattentive?" she finished defensively.

"I guess it could be exciting, but I wouldn't know," Allison replied. "I've never had two men fight over me. And I know that Shane said he loved you, he told me that more than once -"

"He did?" Lori sat up with renewed interest.

"Well, yeah, but one time was when he was defending what he'd done to you at the CDC. And then the few other times he talked to me about you was always mainly a laundry list of the times he'd saved you and Carl. Like he was keeping a tally sheet somewhere to prove how much better he was than anyone else in camp."

"Oh, I don't know," Lori sat back and buried her face in her hands for a moment. "I just handled everything so poorly..." She looked up at Allison. "Even when Rick returned, I can't deny that it felt good to have both Rick and Shane looking out for me and Carl. It was like an extra safety net. And then that day of the fire, when we made camp that first night and Rick told me that he'd killed Shane...I was so confused - my emotions, my thoughts....my first reaction was to spit at him."
“You mean you wanted to actually spit at your husband?” Allison was shocked.

“I mean I actually did spit at him,” Lori replied miserably. “I regretted it later that night, but I think by then the damage had been done. And somehow I think Carl senses that there is tension between us…”

“Well, the main thing you have to do right now is take care of yourself. You can't get your blood pressure all in an uproar like this, especially since you had complications during your previous pregnancy. It would be nice if we could stay in this house for a long time, but just in case we don't have the luxury of a proper place if you need to be on bed rest….”

“You're right,” Lori said. “I appreciate you listening to me, anyway.”

“Sorry I couldn't be of more help. But I think if you try to relax more and not concentrate on the past, Carl will feel a little more secure and things will eventually work out…”

Lori gave a deep sigh as the two women exited the room. "I hope you're right."

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

Allison entered the kitchen first and found that lunch was close to being served. She hadn't realized she'd been talking to Lori that long.

"Where ya been?" Daryl asked her, washing his hands at the sink. "Been waitin' for you."

Lori entered the room and Allison gestured at her. "Was just checking on Lori, making everything's OK with her and the Little Stranger. Didn't know it was this late or that you were waiting lunch on me."

"Not what I meant," Daryl stepped aside and held a towel while Allison washed her hands. "I was gonna go check the snares after lunch and Carl wants to come with me."

"So…?"

"So," he lowered his voice a bit, "that kid asks me too many questions these days. I'd prefer if you came along with us, take some of the heat off of me."

They found places at the table. "Surely you know where babies come from?" Allison asked Daryl mockingly.

"That's not what he wants to talk about. Just come with us, 'K?"

"Everything OK?" Carol asked Lori as the two took bowls and spoons from the cupboards and drawers.

"Allison says everything's fine," Lori assured the woman. Beth opened the back door and held it while T-Dog stepped inside holding a large steaming pot. He'd been simmering some chicken soup all morning, courtesy of several cans of chunked chicken stacked among the canned goods. During their various searches of the property the group had also discovered a small vegetable garden staked off. The tomatoes had rotted on the vine, but there were still some usable potatoes, onions, turnips and carrots that they pulled from the ground.

"Watch out, hot soup comin' through!" their chef called as he set the pot on the counter. "Tell you what, I think it'll be easier for me to fill the bowls here and y'all can pass 'em around."

Carol began handing empty bowls one by one to T-Dog, and Lori carried them to the table, despite
Beth's protests that she shouldn't be on her feet so much. Hershel came in from watch duty and said everything seemed clear enough for him to take a quick lunch break. He sat at the table and then Beth addressed him and Allison.

"While I've got you two here together, maybe you can go through these medicines with me." She reached into a cupboard and pulled out a large Tupperware container filled with prescription bottles. "I found these back here next to the extra spices the other day. Thought if there was anything we could possibly use in the future we could put it out in the truck, but I don't know what half of these pills are."

Rick had suggested a few weeks ago that they all should leave some bags packed with a change of clothes and some other necessary supplies (like bottled water, a roll of toilet paper, ammunition) in the back of one of the pick-up trucks just in case they ever had to leave this place in a hurry and didn't have time to pack. "That's a good idea, Bethie," Hershel complimented his daughter on her forward thinking. "Read us the labels, and we'll see what you have there."

She began to call out prescription names, sometimes haltingly, as everyone was served their soup. "Lisinopril."

"What's that for?" Glenn asked.

"High blood pressure," Allison replied. "I guess it wouldn't hurt to keep it. Next."

"Metformin."

"What's that for?" Maggie asked this time, imitating Glenn with a smile.

"Diabetes," Hershel and Allison replied in unison. "Without being able to test anyone's blood sugar, we can't hand out pills like that haphazardly," Hershel decided. "Leave it."

"Norvasc."

"Angina and/or high blood pressure," Allison supplied before anyone could ask.

Beth read the names off about eight more bottles before getting to the last one.

"Sildenafil."

Allison snickered. "Viagra."

"What's that for?" Carl piped up.

"Never mind," Hershel, Allison and Lori said in unison. The rest of the table burst into laughter.

Feeling like they were laughing at him, Carl defended himself. "I know what it's for, really. I remember the TV commercials…it's something for…" he furrowed his brow as he tried to remember the wording, "…some kind of dysfunction."

"Did you know," Allison asked, trying to divert the attention from poor Carl, "how Viagra's current, er, use was discovered?" All eyes turned to her expectantly. "It was originally developed as a possible treatment for high blood pressure. Any prescription medication has to go through a series of tests before its approved by the FDA, and one of those is called a 'blind trial' – that's where they have a group of volunteer test subjects who take the pill for a certain amount of time and are monitored. But half of the test subjects are given a placebo and half are given the actual pill and no one knows for sure whether they're taking the real deal or not. Anyway, in the case of Viagra the
test results for blood pressure management weren't encouraging, and the company asked the test subjects to return the unused portions of their pills. Funny thing was, of all the test subjects, the females returned everything but the males only returned the placebos. The company found this unusual and investigated further. Turns out that the men in the trials had discovered this interesting side effect of Viagra and didn't want to part with their remaining pills."

"Or their wives didn't want them to," T-Dog suggested.

Everyone laughed and Allison continued, "Anyway, that's how the researchers started on a different path when it came to a use for this pill that they'd already spent $500 million on in research and development."

"Talk about turning lemons into lemonade," Glenn remarked.

"Five hundred million? Just for a pill for...well, for one that's not a matter of life and death," Carol commented. "Seems like an awful lot of money that could be better spent elsewhere."

"Five hundred million is actually about the average spent on any prescription before it hits the market, whether or not it even hits the market," Allison told her. "I'm no fan of Big Pharmacy or the outrageous prices we have to pay for medicines, but on the other hand, I can see the point of testing and re-testing and triple-testing any pill before it's prescribed to humans." She paused and sighed. "I've been on both sides of the prescription pad. People understandably want a medicine to fix whatever is wrong with them, and they want it now. But obviously manufacturers and responsible doctors are likewise always trying to prevent disasters like Thalidomide and Fen-Phen."

"Still plenty of soup left," T-Dog announced, standing up and peering into the pot. "Pass 'em up for seconds, everyone." Since they still had no means of refrigeration or preserving food, they had to eat everything they cooked or else it went to waste. Of course, most days there wasn't enough food for seconds and Allison couldn't remember the last time they actually had leftovers.

As the bowls were being refilled and passed around the table Rick cleared his throat and said, "After lunch I think we should have an hour or so of gun training for the girls, and then some hand-to-hand combat training. I would like everyone to be there for that."

He noticed that Lori, Carol and Allison were exchanging glances as he spoke. "What?" he asked with a hint of annoyance.

"Nothing...it's just that...well, I haven't really been a 'girl' since my Special Friend first came to visit me in the eighth grade," Allison told him. "At least that's what the school nurse told me."

"Oh, Christ," he huffed when all the women joined in the laughter, "I don't have time to be politically correct right now, OK? Any female who needs instruction in firearms is what I meant."

"We've been practicing for a while now," Beth commented, "do we need more classes?"

"Until you can reload a gun in a matter of seconds with one hand in the dark, you will continue to practice," Rick told her.

"Um, I was plannin' to take Allison with me to check my snares after lunch," Daryl said to Rick. "She hasn't been out that way yet, I think more than one of us should know where they are."

"That's fine," Rick replied. "She already knows her way around a rifle, and I'll rely on you to give her any help she needs with handguns."

"She's right here, feel free to speak to her directly," Allison felt like muttering, but Rick was
already agitated and under a lot of pressure, so she kept her snarky remark to herself for a change.

They all agreed to meet Rick three hours hence for hand-to-hand training. Even though there were only a few members of their group with working watches, over time they'd all developed a sixth sense that allowed them to somewhat accurately gauge how much time had passed. Somehow they would all manage to gather at the prescribed time within a few minutes of one another.

“We caught a couple of rabbits in our snares the other day,” Carl told Allison enthusiastically as the trio walked toward the area where Daryl had set up the traps weeks ago. Allison had to smile to herself; Carl thought of himself and Daryl as "we" all of a sudden. No wonder Daryl was getting a bit fidgety when it came to spending time alone with the boy. She knew from experience that his previous tactic was to tell Carl to "go pester your ol’ man", but after weeks of working closely with Rick and gradually becoming his unofficial second-in-command, Daryl was probably starting to feel a little more responsible when it came to the boy.

"That's great," she congratulated the youngster, making him beam. "Snares are a good way of catching game when you can't go out and actually hunt."

"That's what Daryl said," Carl confirmed. Allison noted that he no longer referred to the hunter as "Mr." Daryl, and having grown up in the rural South she knew what a milestone that was for a child – to have an adult tell you to address them simply by their first name. Heck, she remembered that her own daddy used to call his father-in-law "Mr. Earl" because he'd never been given official 'permission' to address the man otherwise. "He's teaching me how to make a good snare," Carl continued, "and the difference between an English trigger and an Indian trigger….do you know the difference, Miss Allison?"

"You can call me 'Allison', and no, I don't know the difference. I should probably learn, though."

Carl was visibly pleased that he knew some trivia that Allison, the doctor who always seemed to know facts about every little thing, didn't know. He babbled on about the intricacies of the different types of snares as they followed Daryl through the woods. Suddenly they all halted at a hand signal from Daryl and watched as he squatted near a pile of twigs and kudzu vines.

"Look here," he gestured to Carl. "Something triggered the trap but got away. What do you think we should do?"

"Build a better trap?" Carl asked hesitantly.

"Right." Noticing the boy's crestfallen face Daryl quickly added, remembering that Carl had helped him construct this particular snare, "Mind you, just because one animal wrangled his way out of a snare doesn't mean it wasn't a good snare to begin with. Some critters are just like that – ornery and always fussin' and fightin'…” He gave a sidelong glance at Allison.

She caught his look and asked, "Why are you looking at me? Surely you are not comparing a feisty animal to…what? Women in general? Or me in particular?"

Daryl gave his best innocent face and said "I'm not doin' anything but just sittin' here, dunno what you're goin' on about." But Allison noticed that he gave Carl a condescending "see what I mean about women" look. She didn't mind, she knew that this was why she'd been invited along on this particular mission…Daryl had a lot of wisdom and good advice to impart, but he wasn't very good at serious one-on-one conversation with anyone but her. She didn't mind playing the "stooge" or comedy sidekick with him if it meant helping out someone…especially Carl, the lone kid in a
"Why don't you see if you can get us some more twigs – but don't wander too far off – and then we'll refashion this snare. Allison, you got your knife?" She gestured at her belt where her knife always hung. "Cut us off some more vines, then."

Fifteen minutes later the trio was sitting around the site of the tripped snare, cutting vines and whittling twigs. They worked in silence for a short while before Carl piped up with a question totally out of the blue.

"Allison, you're a girl," he began, "What is the best way for a boy to…well, tell a girl he likes her."

Before Allison could reply he continued in a rush, "And it's not just a crush, or puppy love, like Daryl said…"

"What did Daryl say?" Allison asked, mainly to buy some time.

"He told me that it's normal to think some girl is pretty at my age, but that it's just puppy love and that it don't mean anything. But this is different," the boy insisted, leaning forward, his face earnest. "I have…well…feelings."

Allison exchanged a glance with Daryl. She was the first to speak. "I was probably about your age when my Granny used to watch her Time-Life videos of The Ed Sullivan Show just for the clips with Tom Jones – he's a singer, by the way…she would keep commenting through each segment that he was sinful, the way he moved his hips and did this and that, but, as Granddaddy said, 'Must not be so sinful that you won't watch it over and over…'. Anyway, I watched some of those shows with her, and I liked his songs like 'She's a Lady', but I remember feeling kind of…'funny' when he got all sweaty and stripped off his bow tie, and thrust his skin-tight pants toward the camera…"

She paused and caught her breath. "I didn't know exactly what it was, but it made me feel good to watch him."

"Do you need a cold shower?" Daryl asked her. "For God's sake, there's a child sitting right here, remember yourself, woman."

"Oh, like you never felt the same way looking at a Playboy centerfold or something," she countered.

"No, not Playboy, but…" his face took on a dreamy look as he reminisced, "Lynda Carter as Wonder Woman. Didn't care much for comic book characters, but I watched that show every week when I was a kid…something about her in that costume, especially in the slow-motion scenes showing her running…" He closed his eyes and looked positively serene. Allison cleared her throat loudly and Daryl visibly collected himself.

"Anyway, Carl," Allison said, "those feelings you're having are perfectly normal, but I have to warn you that, unfortunately, a lot of times the person you like might not like you back. It happens to both boys and girls, and it hurts. I'm no expert, but I've been through the 'hurt' thing several times, and all I can tell you is that eventually you will get over it."

Carl was quiet as they finished re-setting the snare and then he asked, "But really, how do you let a girl know that you like her?"

The trio picked up their gear and headed to the next snare and Daryl remarked, "Just be nice to her, be a gentleman. If she needs help doing something, you step up. Just don't be too obvious, don't scare her off."
Allison smiled as they approached the snare. She didn't know who the object of Carl's affection was, and she'd bet that Daryl didn't know either, but Daryl's generic advice made her all warm inside. He was trying to coach the boy gently without coming right out and giving the typical adult admonishment of "You're too young! Quit thinking about girls!"

As they approached the next snare, they were all surprised to see a colorful bunch of feathers on the ground.

"What's that?" Carl whispered.

"Looks like we got ourselves a pheasant," Daryl replied.
"Formation!" Rick called again, and T-Dog, Glenn, Maggie, Daryl and Allison automatically formed a circle, facing outwards, weapons brandished. He barked another command and they broke into two groups, knives and fireplace pokers raised. They'd been practicing like this for a week, and each day the training session lasted a little longer. It was tedious, it was exhausting, but it was absolutely necessary as one day their very lives might depend upon how well they worked together as a defensive team. Rick had chosen those who he had determined had the most strength, stamina and skills to be on the hand-to-hand team. Beth and Carol meanwhile were busy learning their way around handguns and rifles – how to clean them, load them, fire them. Eventually, Rick had told everyone, their goal was to develop "muscle memory" when it came to defending themselves: to be able to reload a gun in an instant, to decide in a trice whether to slash up through the jaw or into the eye socket of a walker, etc. It was somber stuff, but they all knew they could not afford to grow complacent again like they'd done on the farm.

"How's our bird doing?" T-Dog asked Lori as the group slowly returned to the house. Allison had deemed weapons practice a bit too strenuous for Lori, so the woman had volunteered to pluck and clean the pheasant that Carl had triumphantly carried in the day before when he'd returned with Daryl and Allison from checking their snares. T had originally stated that pheasant was a little out of his league, but he'd accepted the challenge and had prepared a sauce of some sort with wine and also had some rice boiling in a pot on the grill. Rick had suggested that, since it was autumn and they were safe and together for the time being, they could have a sort of Thanksgiving meal with the bird as their entrée.

"Starting to smell pretty good," Lori replied, unwrapping a bit of foil from around the bird and peering inside. She poked at the meat with a barbecue fork. "Not quite at the falling-off-the-bone stage yet, I'm guessing maybe another half hour or so will do it."

"Good thing 'cause I'm starving," Carl said as he walked past them. He was taking a quick break from his guard duty with Hershel to run inside the house and use the bathroom.

"I think everything will be ready by the time everyone gets washed up," Lori said pointedly, with a slight smile.

"Are you suggesting that we smell or something after all that exercise?" Maggie asked her.

"Well, let me put it this way…usually I like to think that women don't perspire, they glow," Lori told her. "But I have to be honest – right now y'all are just plain sweaty."

It got dark earlier these days, so dinner was a candlelit affair, which somehow made it more of an occasion, especially since everyone was at the table for a change. Rick had been stricter about someone always being on watch lately, so it had been a while since they'd had a "family" meal like this.

"I've never had pheasant before," Carol remarked. "I thought it would taste gamey, but this is actually delicious. You did a great job, Theodore."

"The wine sauce reminds me of some French food I had a long time ago," Allison commented. "We were visiting some relatives in Michigan, near Detroit, and they drove us across the border to Canada one night and took us out to dinner at a French restaurant." She smiled at the memory. "I
even had snails."

"Eeeew!" Carl crinkled his nose in disgust.

"They were surprisingly delicious," Allison told him. "Of course, they were drowning in garlic butter, so maybe that helped."

"Wish we could grow some butter out in that garden," Beth sighed.

Hershel chuckled. "Even if we had a herd of dairy cows here I can't picture you hunkering over a churn for an hour to make butter." Everyone murmured about how sore their muscles were already, which prompted the old man to shake his head and continue. "You youngsters are finally learning what it's like to do without. Why, during the Depression things like butter and sugar were expensive luxuries that were rationed out. Sometimes a slice of bread smeared with lard was all we had for lunch, but we never dared complain."

"I wasn't really complaining, Daddy, I just —"

"Even you, Rick, and Allison and the rest of you," he looked around the table, apparently gearing up for a lecture, "probably never really appreciated everything you had until it was all suddenly taken away like this. And I'm not just talking about air conditioning and cable TV…I'll bet, for example, none of you ever saw a 'Quarantine' sign hanging on a neighbor's front door because someone inside had the measles or scarlet fever or diphtheria. You probably never had a classmate who had to wear leg braces because they'd had polio." He paused for a moment and then continued. "Somehow we took it all for granted, and now we have to start all over again. We've done it before, it can be done again."

"Oh, so that was a pep talk in disguise?" Glenn asked after the vet had finished his speech. Everyone chuckled uncertainly; not everyone was as optimistic as their senior member. Hershel's rant had also reminded Allison of a thought that occasionally nagged at her – that prescription and over-the-counter drugs all had a limited shelf life. No matter how many antibiotics they hoarded, they wouldn't remain potent forever. What did the future hold, if they all managed to outlive every last walker? Was there anyone left anywhere who knew how to turn the electricity back on, how to refine oil to make fuel, how to compound prescription medicines?

"I think Hershel makes a good point," T-Dog interrupted her reverie. "My mama always taught me that God doesn't give us anything more than we can handle. Yeah, our circumstances are shaky, we don't know what's going to happen from one moment to the next, but right now we've got a good group, we work well together, we're learning new things together…Heck, I probably would've never had the opportunity to roast a pheasant until this all happened!" He grinned at the group.

"In a way," Glenn ventured, "It's sort of like Gilligan's Island. I mean, I probably would have never become friends with someone like Maggie or Allison before all this, just delivering pizzas and hanging out with the crowd I used to. And, to be honest, I would've been afraid of someone like Daryl or T-Dog had I met them in a bar or at a party…no offense, you two. But because of these bizarre circumstances, here we all are, living together as a family."

"I hadn't really thought about it like that before, but you're right," Carol took a sip of her wine. "I mean, when I was married to Ed, I didn't really get out much or make a lot of friends…and police used to really intimidate me, but now I see that cops are human just like the rest of us."

"So, since this is a sort of Thanksgiving, maybe we should count our blessings," Lori said, "including all those blessings in disguise."
"I don't know about the rest of y'all," Allison remarked, taking a sip of her wine, "but what I'm looking for is a blessing that's not in disguise!"

"Here, here!" Rick raised his glass and everyone else joined in the toast.

+++ +++ +++

It was probably around 2AM when Daryl heard a noise behind him while he stood watch up on the third floor. It was a little too early for T-Dog to relieve him, so he was surprised to turn and see Carol approaching him with a mug in her hand.

"What're you doin' up so late?" he asked her.

"Couldn't sleep," she replied. "I was concerned about you all alone up here, thought you might need a hot cup of tea, since it's so chilly tonight."

"Thanks anyway," he grunted, "but I don't really like tea much."

Carol sipped the tea herself and sidled up beside Daryl. "Kinda romantic up here at night, all alone, don't you think?" she asked him coyly.

"What?" he asked her, totally taken aback.

"Oh, I dunno, it's just so quiet, and all those stars in the sky…" she paused and then looked up at him through her lashes. "Wanna screw around?"

"Psht," he made a noise of disbelief.

"Seriously," she said, lowering her voice, "I'm more than willing to keep you warm up here, and…" she reached a hand toward his pants region, "elsewhere."

"Stop it," he said forcefully, stepping backward. He was genuinely confused by her words and her intent.

Carol looked into his eyes silently for a moment and saw something there she hadn't anticipated. Rejection. Disinterest. Here she was offering herself to a man in a way she'd never done before in her life, and he was not taking the bait. Suddenly it hit her with painful clarity.

"You really care for her, don't you?" she asked him, looking soulfully into his eyes.

"Well, yeah, 'course I do," he replied, knowing who she meant and still confused by her sudden passion.

Carol reached up and gently placed her hand on his cheek. "She's very lucky," she whispered before scuttling away.

+++ +++ +++

Allison had been shivering under the quilt in bed alone, her dreams filled with images of snow and ice and walking barefoot in Alaska. But then a slow warmth seemed to embrace her, and as she slowly woke up she was aware of a noise in the bedroom. She sat up to see Daryl sitting in a chair beside the previously unused fireplace poking at a couple of logs, stoking a fire.

"I didn't hear you come in," she said sleepily.

"The way you were sawing logs, I'm not surprised," he replied.
"I do not snore!" she protested for the umpteenth time. "That fire feels nice," she added, stretching her arms overhead and then groaning.

"What's wrong?" he asked her.

"Nothing, just feeling muscles that I didn't know I had before…all that weapons practice…taking its toll on the biceps and deltoids and et cetera…" She turned and looked at him. "Aren't you hurting?"

"Nah, been hoisting that crossbow for months now, I'm all ripped and in shape," he gave her half a grin and flexed his arm like Popeye.

She hugged herself and tried not to moan. "It didn't hurt so bad before, but now I guess everything has stiffened up…"

"Here," he stood up and then sat down on the edge of the bed, "Turn around." She did as instructed and he began to massage her shoulders and upper back. She quietly marveled that such calloused hands could feel so very soft as they caressed her flesh. She sighed and slumped against his touch.

"Mmmmm….feels so good….you really shouldn't…..you've been on watch all night….I know you're tired…." She murmured to him.

"Just hush," he told her as he moved his hands over more of her body, reaching forward to gently knead her breasts. She leaned backward into him and moaned lightly as she grasped his hands with her own and guided them. He kissed up and down the side of her neck and she squealed. His hands continued to explore her body and finally reached down between her legs over the top of her sweat pants. She involuntarily began to grind her hips against his probing fingers.

She finally turned around to face Daryl and kissed him aggressively, her tongue virtually assaulting his mouth. Her fingers feverishly unbuttoned his shirt and tossed it aside, and after a few minutes the two broke apart long enough to completely disrobe. He pressed her down onto the bed and lay atop her, trying to connect every inch of his flesh with hers, while wrapping his hands around her head and in her hair. Neither one of them could articulate words; instead the room was filled with the guttural sounds of their lovemaking. Just prior to reaching his peak, Daryl reared back onto his elbows and looked directly into Allison's eyes. She could only keep her eyes open for a few seconds before succumbing to her own climax and arching her neck backward while moaning his name over and over. He in turn grunted and bucked like an animal, and she wrapped her legs around his waist to pull him into her as tightly as possible.

Moments later, he'd kissed her lips, her forehead, her face and had gasped "Oh God" before collapsing beside her.

"I agree," she whispered with a smile. She turned onto her side to snuggle against him. "I love you," she said, kissing him gently.

"I love you, too, Angel," he replied, his subconscious mind banishing all thoughts of Carol and their previous conversation from his mind. On his way back to their bedroom after watch duty he had vaguely recalled Allison mentioning to him previously that Carol had "feelings" for him, and he had considered telling Allison what had occurred earlier that evening…nah, Carol was probably just tipsy from drinking all that wine during dinner…
One afternoon after combat practice, as she termed it in her own mind, a hot, sweaty and tired Allison literally bumped into Daryl as he stood stock still gazing up into the sky.

"You bird watching or something?" she asked, somewhat irritated. The unseasonable humidity was making her cranky.

"Look at that sky," he replied, ignoring her jibe. "See that orange hue?"

She looked upward. "Yeah, so it's an orangey sky, always it's some other guy…it's just a broken lullaby…" She finished her statement in a mocking sing-song.

"I'm not quoting old songs by the Cars, I'm trying to make a point if you'd take the time to stop being sarcastic and be observant for a change."

Allison was taken aback slightly; usually Daryl wasn't so stern and impatient with her. She resisted the urge to snap back at him and instead said, "I'm sorry, it's just this unbearable humidity…it's really dragging me down…"

"That's it exactly!" Daryl told her, as if she'd just said something insightful. "This humidity. How often has it been this muggy in Georgia in October or November?"

"Well, now that you mention it, this sort of terrarium atmosphere is something we usually get in July and August….the dog days of summer." She looked at Daryl's concerned face. "Does it mean something?" She knew that he could read the sky like she could read an X-Ray….she was constantly amazed at how he could pick out constellations while star gazing. She'd had to sheepishly admit to him that the few times she'd been to a planetarium on a class field trip, she'd fallen asleep….what with the darkened room, chairs that reclined, and soft music, she'd defended herself.

"I seen this once before," he replied somberly. "November 2010, I was working a job in Buford, outside of Atlanta – "

"I know where Buford is," Allison interjected.

"Anyway, we were all commenting all day on how humid it was, how unusual that kind of weather was for late November, 'specially since it had been so cold just the day before…and I'll never forget how the sky had this orange tint to it in the late afternoon. Like nothing I'd seen before. Anyway, 'bout 7PM or so…after we'd packed up for the day and I was headin' home this big ol' storm hit. Hail that I thought would bust the windshield on my truck. Wind like I'd never experienced before – huge trees were literally bending over backwards. Then pelting rain…" he shook his head at the memory. "I pulled over to the side of the road and waited it out, but lookin' back that was so stupid and risky. I saw utility poles topple over, highway signs ripped out of the ground…anyway, it turned out to be a big storm system that included a couple of tornadoes."

"You think there might be a big storm on the way now?" Allison asked him. "It's not very cloudy…"

"That's the weird thing…just like that day, it wasn't cloudy most of the afternoon, but the sky had that orange overcast look to it. Then in the evening, there was a very line of dark blue-green clouds low on the horizon."
"If your hunch is correct, should we be doing something to prepare?" Allison asked him.

"Hard to say…tornadoes and storms like that are unpredictable. Used to be you'd prepare by getting candles and oil lamps ready for when the electricity went out. But that doesn't really matter now since we've been livin' without power ever since we got here. Other than that…I mean, the warning sirens ain't gonna go off, since there's no electricity…all we can do is keep an eye on the sky and then go down to the cellar if it looks really bad."

Hershel and Beth, who were working watch duty, approached the duo after finishing a circle around the property. "What's up?" Beth asked, noting Daryl's tense face.

Daryl briefly explained his suspicions about a possible impending storm and Hershel quickly agreed. "I thought as much earlier, when it was so damned hot and humid this late in autumn. Reminded me of that same storm front you're talking about that came in a few years ago." Allison silently noted that the previously pious veterinarian now regularly peppered his conversation with profanities, something he used to chastise his daughters for doing. The times, as Bob Dylan had once said, surely were a-changin'.

Once they were upstairs Allison told Daryl to go ahead and jump in the shower first, since she needed to dig around in her bags for some clean clothes. They'd been so busy with training lately that even Carol hadn't attended to laundry duty for several days. What with the humidity lately, she'd been sweating through clean clothes just as fast as she had in July. She was down to the bottom of one bag where she found one last pair of clean socks. She pulled them out and noticed a large lump in the toe of one. Shaking it out onto the floor she thought to herself, "Holy cow, I'd completely forgotten about that!" She picked up the small box that had fallen out. It was an authentic Swiss Army Knife she'd lifted from a house they'd scavenged months ago. She now remembered rifling through a handsome carved wooden desk in what looked to be some businessman's den and pocketing the knife to give to Daryl later. It had occurred to her later that she could hold onto it until his birthday in November and then give it to him as a present, and she'd tucked it away in a sock for safe keeping. "Too safe," she now thought. "I not only forgot about the present, I also forgot about his birthday."

After she'd scrubbed off in the shower she stepped back into the bedroom where Daryl was sitting on one of the wingback chairs lacing up his boot. Rubbing her hair with a towel she asked him, "Earlier when you were talking about the weather you mentioned something about late November. Do you think it's really that late in the year already? I mean, I know we had a sort-of Thanksgiving the other day, but we could've been early."

"Can't be sure, but it's probably two weeks or so into November, I'd guess," he replied. "Why do you ask?"

"Well," she suddenly felt awkward and shy for some reason, "I feel kinda bad now, because I wasn't keeping track of the date…" She stopped speaking when his eyes went wide. "What?" she asked.

"You started it, you best go on," he said almost cautiously.

Confused by his tone she reached into her bag and then handed him the small box. "I think I missed your official birthday, like I said, I don't have a calendar…and so this is probably late, but happy birthday," she finished in a rush.

He looked from her face to her outstretched hand and back to her face. Suddenly he let out a whoosh of air like a punctured balloon. "That's all? That was what you wanted to tell me?"
"Well, yeah…" She shifted her feet uncomfortably. "I'm sorry it's not wrapped, or it's not something…nicer…"

Daryl suddenly understood her consternation and actually laughed out loud. He stood up and embraced her. He then held her back at arm's length and looked into her eyes. "No, no, Angel, it's not the gift….you've got to understand what goes through a man's mind when a woman suddenly tells him 'I haven't been keeping track of the date.'" He gently knuckled the top of her head. "For a minute there I thought we were gonna have to start scavenging diapers for two."

"Oh my gosh!" Allison's hand flew to her mouth in realization. Then she giggled. "Didn't mean to scare you like that." She started wriggling into her clothes while Daryl inspected his gift.

"Holy cow, this is an authentic Victorinox!" he exclaimed, reading the tiny warranty folded inside the box.

"It's supposed to be a Swiss Army Knife," Allison was disappointed. Had the wealthy businessman stashed something else in the little box?

Daryl chuckled yet again. "Victorinox is the company in Switzerland that makes the knives," he explained.

"Oh," she felt silly for the second time in so many minutes. But Daryl didn't notice her blushing cheeks, he was too busy playing with his new toy, unfolding all the different attachments.

"Look, a fish scaler and even a Phillips-head screwdriver!" The look of sheer delight on his face made Allison forget her embarrassment, and she sat down next to him on the foot of the bed. "This will really come in handy…." He suddenly paused and looked up at her with a serious expression. "Now I feel bad," he said slowly.

"Whatever for? I thought you liked it."

"I do, in fact I love it," he said, "but as I recall your birthday is two days after mine and I didn't get you anything."

"Oh, is that all, for heaven's sake," she reached up and gave him a noogie for a change. "You've given me how many beautiful presents for no occasion whatsoever," she told him. "You're always thinking of me, taking care of me. The date on the calendar doesn't matter." She paused. "Unless someday I want to make you feel guilty for some reason, then I can use this for ammunition and say 'remember that time that you forgot my birthday….'."

As she spoke those words the sky outside was suddenly illuminated by a blinding fork of lightning, followed by an enormous rumble of thunder that made the framed photos on the wall vibrate.

"Well, that was a little bit ominous," Allison commented.

"I think it's proof that God must be a woman," Daryl muttered as they finished dressing and went downstairs.

+++ +++ +++

"Wind's really starting to kick up," T-Dog commented as he carried a large pot of boiling water into the kitchen. Carol started breaking spaghetti noodles into the water, while Lori went outside to grab the pot of sauce that had been simmering on the grill. T-Dog swiped a hand across his forehead. "The grill was swaying like a willow tree, the wind is so strong," he added.
Rick stood up and took a few steps toward the back door, apparently worried about Lori out in the impending bad weather. As he opened the door she rushed inside. "Thank you," she said to him with a small smile. He merely nodded and took the pot from her and set it on the counter.

By the time T-Dog was dishing out noodles and Carol was ladling plates with sauce, Glenn and Maggie burst inside the back door. "Did you hear that thunder?" Glenn asked breathlessly.

"There's fork lightning reachin' down to the ground," Maggie added. "Don't think it's safe for us to be outside patrollin' right now." Seconds later a clap of loud thunder literally made the house tremble on its foundation. Darkness seemed to have galloped up suddenly and encased the house in blackness.

"We could probably use some more candles to shed some light here," Lori suggested, and Beth and Carl immediately stood up and rifled through a drawer in the sideboard. Beth knew where most of the kitchen and other household supplies were from having helped cook and clean since they'd first moved into the house…and Carl knew where the candles were simply because he'd been Beth's shadow for the past month or so. The pair placed several more tapers on the table and dinner was now visible enough so that folks could eat without making too much of a mess.

Rick looked at the tense faces around the table. He made a conversational effort to try to distract them from the furious noises outside battering their dwelling. "You probably don't remember this, Carl, but we took you to a birthday party at Chuck E. Cheese in Alpharetta once and a storm knocked out the power while we were eating pizza…I thought all you kids would be scared of the dark, but all y'all cared about was the video games weren't working."

"I don't remember that at all," Carl replied.

"You were only about four at the time," Rick said, "not even in kindergarten yet. But you knew how to play Street Fighter! You could barely reach it, had to scoot a stool over to it to play."

"That was for William Royston's birthday, wasn't it?" Lori asked. "I remember his daddy thinking he'd get the whole party for free since the cash registers weren't working."

"Unfortunately for him the power came back on while the cake was being served," Rick added. A flash of lightning that briefly lit up the room was followed by a crash of thunder that sounded like someone whacking the walls with a sledgehammer.

"How do we know if there's a hurricane or tornado coming without the warning sirens?" Carol asked.

"We're too far inland for a hurricane," Daryl told her. "Tornadoes are unpredictable. Even when the sirens are workin' a lot of times they didn't go off in time."

"We should probably all make sure we've got our flashlights and our weapons at hand, in case we decide to take cover." Seeing the panicky looks on Lori's and Beth's faces he added, "Just to be prepared." Most of them were always wearing a handgun or knife of some sort, but Glenn and T-Dog and Hershel quickly adjourned and then returned with rifles and shotguns. Daryl's crossbow was leaning against the wall not far from where he was sitting.

"Sometimes it helps to allay our fears if we understand the threat better," Hershel said when everyone was re-seated and hesitantly finishing their meal. "Daryl, you seem to know a bit about meteorology…what are some warning signs of a bad storm? I mean, I've heard that a tornado sounds like a freight train, but it's not even raining right now…"
"Rain sometimes comes later," Daryl replied. He didn't want to frighten Carl, but he'd been through a similar storm before. Besides, he'd spent many a lonely day as a child studying the sky and wandering the woods, learning the sights and sounds of Nature and what they meant. "Main warning sign is hail all of a sudden. That means that the wind is turbulent enough that the rain is going up high in the atmosphere and freezing." He noticed that Beth and Carol were wide-eyed and pale so he tried to keep them calm by using the Allison method of making a joke. "The time I did see a tornado strike, the hail stones were the size of canned hams."

There were chuckles all around and Allison commented, as they began collecting plates and cleaning up, "I remember once when I was about your age, Carl, I asked my Granny where rain came from. She told me that it was Jesus crying. And I asked her 'Why would Jesus cry?' and she told me 'Probably because of something you did.'" She rinsed her plate off in the sink and then added, "You know, sometimes I think it's a miracle I never ended up on a tower somewhere with a machine gun."

They were still passing plates to Carol at the sink when suddenly it sounded like the windows were being pelted with buckshot.

"What's that?" Carl asked.


They all scrambled and grabbed their weapons, some flashlights, and Carol carefully carried a lit oil lamp as she descended to the basement. They huddled together in a bunch, eyeing one another nervously, not knowing exactly what to expect.
Chapter 50

The group pressed closer together as the noise of the storm grew louder. They heard the sound of glass breaking somewhere in the distance.

"What if there is a tornado?" Carl asked in a shaky voice. "Are we gonna be OK down here?"

"Being underground in a cellar like this is about the safest place you can be," Rick assured his son. "Tornadoes bounce along and above the ground. They can't reach below the surface."

Rick's comment made Carol think about her aunt and uncle who lived in Bryans Corner, Oklahoma – about the tornado they'd survived in 2008. They'd huddled away in their basement during the storm, but Uncle Jasper had still almost died when the house had been lifted off its foundation and a huge piece of metal swirling in the wind had sliced his neck and face like a giant knife, nearly severing an artery. She wryly recalled Ed's reaction after she'd hung up the phone from talking to Aunt Birdie several days later, after Jasper had been released from the hospital and the couple had no place to go, since their house had been destroyed. "Their own damned fault for livin' in bumfuck Oklahoma," Ed had grunted. He had refused to send Carol's relatives any money or otherwise help them. Why was she thinking of all this right now, she suddenly wondered? She hadn't thought about Ed in months. "Dear God," she silently prayed, "I hope that these memories aren't a sign of some sort…please protect us all…"

Maggie started to say something but suddenly her words were drowned out by an almighty roar that sounded like a 747 Jumbo Jet landing in the front yard. A moment later the engine sound had faded away just as quickly as it had started and all was quiet for several minutes. Then the heavens opened up and the rain came - fierce, unrelenting, pounding the sides of the house like a pneumatic drill. Nevertheless, everyone felt just the slightest bit relieved once the wind had relented. Somehow the driving rain didn't seem as threatening. "Listen!" someone whispered after several minutes of silence. The wind had died down and the rain was slackening. About 20 minutes later Rick deemed it safe for them to return upstairs.

They were a somber procession as they emerged single file from the door leading to the basement. To the right, in the kitchen area, everything was as they'd left it. To the left was chaos. The roof and upper floor of the house on that side were gone, ripped away by the wind apparently, and the rain had drenched everything that was left inside. The outdoors were now part of the indoors since most of the walls on that side of the house were now gone, and they could see some of the furniture strewn in the distance on the lawn. Rick, Hershel and Daryl walked cautiously to where the front door once had been and ventured out onto the front of the property to inspect the damage. Giant trees had been uprooted and were scattered about like matchsticks. A power line lay stretched on the ground like a huge rubbery anaconda…luckily there was no danger of electrocution, so the trio gingerly stepped over it. By some miracle their vehicles were mud-splattered but otherwise upright and unharmed. The Jag and the Mercedes in the former garage, however, were not so lucky. The utility pole that had once stood just outside the garage had smashed the side windows and crushed the roof of the small sports car.

"Good thing we siphoned the gas out of those vehicles already," Rick commented as they surveyed the mess. "We should probably see what tools if any are buried in that rubble later and take 'em." They probably should have collected all the tools weeks ago, but they'd been so handy and organized on the pegboard in the garage… Rick felt infinitely frustrated; it seemed like every decision he made was the wrong one. That every time he started to feel like maybe, just maybe they'd found a safe haven and things would remain stable for a while, Fate came up and kicked him
squarely in the ass.

Hershel easily read the expression on the lawman's face. "Rick," he said gently, "we should probably go back and have everyone pack whatever is salvageable. There's no telling how the storm affected the structural integrity of the house, even the portions that seem intact." He placed a reassuring hand on Rick's shoulder. "We've been thrown another loop. There's nothing to be done about it except to deal with it."

"That which does not kill us makes us stronger, isn't that what they say?" Rick asked with a sigh of resignation as they all headed back to the house.

"I'm fuckin' strong enough," Daryl muttered, "Ain't aimin' to be Hercules."

The men walked into the kitchen and spread out a map on the table. "We can't stay here any longer," Rick answered the questioning looks. "Half the house is gone, we don't know how sturdy the rest is, and the storm might've stirred up any walkers in the vicinity."

"We've had luck in rural areas like this house," Hershel stated. "I'm thinking that we should stick to secondary roads and avoid the bigger cities."

"Less chance of finding walkers out in the sticks, I'd think," Daryl agreed. "Plus that way there's land for hunting. Canned food won't last forever."

"Are the vehicles still drivable?" T-Dog asked. When Rick answered in the affirmative T suggested, "Why don't we pack up whatever food is left in the cupboards and start carrying it out to the cars. Anything useful, bottled water, whatever. If we run out of room in the trunks, stash it in the truck beds. There's probably rope or bungee cords out in that garage, strap stuff to the roofs if you have to."

"Maggie and I can go out and get the tools and stuff from the garage," Glenn offered.

"Be careful," Hershel advised him, "half of the garage is gone, too, and what's left doesn't look too sturdy."

"Do you think it's safe to go upstairs?" Allison asked. "Just in case anything up there survived – our clothes, our bags…?"

"Stick to the areas with the least damage up there," Rick decided. "If there's a hole in the roof, stay out. If the floor is flooded, don't go in that room." He, Daryl and Hershel returned to studying the map while the others began packing.

+++ +++ +++

Hours later the group was outside, figuring out who would go in which vehicle. The humans had to squeeze in between all the supplies they'd managed to salvage, making for pretty cramped quarters. Daryl's motorcycle was tied in the bed of a pick-up truck, and Allison and Carol rode along in the cab with him. Rick, Beth and Carl followed in another truck, and T-Dog drove the Hyundai with Maggie, Glenn, Hershel and Lori in it. Glancing in the rear-view mirror at their overflowing tailgate and the bundles tied to the roof of the car Allison was reminded of the Joad Family in The Grapes of Wrath. Half an hour later it occurred to her that the Joads had probably made better time in their old Model T than this group was managing. They had to stop frequently to get out and move fallen tree limbs and other debris out of the road so that the vehicles could pass.

After the 15th or so such stop, Allison paused after helping Carol carry some cinder blocks to the side of the road when Carl called out "Walkers!" The youngster was perched on the hood of one of
the trucks surveying the landscape through binoculars. "They're a ways off in the distance and
they're walking funnier than usual," he reported. Rick climbed up beside his son and took a look
through the glasses.

"The muddy ground and flooded areas are slowing 'em down," he announced. "And lucky for us
they're tripping over the same obstacles that are holding us up." He handed the binoculars back to
Carl and jumped down. "We're safe for a bit, let's just keep clearing as quickly as we can."

Eventually the caravan made it further away from the storm area and the road wasn't quite as
cluttered. Sometimes they managed to drive a whole 10 miles before having to stop to roll a
telephone pole off to the side. They encountered a few abandoned cars which they took the time to
siphon gasoline out of and refuel their own tanks. One car they spotted was nothing more than a
burned-out shell. "Poor guy," Allison remarked as they drove slowly past it and noticed that the
driver was crispy beyond recognition and still buckled into his seat. "What a hideous way to go."

"Worse than being bitten by a walker?" Carol asked.

"Probably more painful, anyway," Allison told her.

"Why do you say that?" Daryl asked. "I remember a long time ago you said something about being
burned was the worst kind of injury or something. I thought that people usually die from smoke
inhalation."

"That doesn't mean they just fall asleep and drift away," Allison replied. "It's a form of suffocation.
But it's still better to go that way than to burn. At least that's my opinion."

"Why?" Daryl repeated his question. "What happens?"

"Are you sure you want to know?"

"Wouldn't have asked if I didn't."

"Well..." she was hesitant to continue, especially when she glanced at Carol and saw her cringing
slightly in anticipation. "Basically you literally cook to death. Once the temperature gets hot
enough, the layer of fat all humans have cooks just like animal fat does in a frying pan. Your flesh
splits open, the fat burns, your muscles contract, and then the bones blacken and break. In fact,
crime scene investigators often have difficulty determining the cause of death in a burn situation
because the skull splits open and the muscles contract, causing the person's arms to bend up into
what's called the pugilistic position. It makes it look like the person was fending off blows at the
time of death."

"Oh, God," Carol moaned.

"That's how my parents died," Allison added quietly, staring ahead out of the windshield. She
wasn't sure why she'd blurted that out; she rarely talked about what had happened.

"I thought you said they died in a car accident," Daryl said.

"They did. An accident that also involved a Texaco tanker truck. That's why there wasn't a funeral
and I was never allowed to see what was left of them. I never even got my mom's wedding ring
back or anything, either. That's probably part of what made me curious about burns and why I
considered specializing in that for a while. Granny was always so cagey about the accident and
wouldn't talk about it." She paused and sighed before turning to look at Daryl. "That's my story,
anyway. Why are you so curious about the gory details?"
He seemed about to say something, then turned and looked across at Carol for a moment. "No reason," he replied in a tone that told Allison there was a reason but he wasn't ready to discuss it.

"I never knew you'd lost your parents like that, at the same time," Carol commented. "How sad that was for you."

Allison shrugged. "It was, at the time. But now it seems so long ago… Especially with everything else that has happened in the past few months."

"Isn't it funny how radically life can change all of a sudden?" Carol asked rhetorically. "It's those things you never see coming that can turn your world upside down – like winning the lottery, or losing a loved one, or…"

"…or constantly bein' on the run from flesh-eating walkers," Daryl finished her thought. "Frankly, I think I woulda rather taken my chances with the lottery." A short blast from Rick's truck horn interrupted their conversation. All the vehicles pulled to the shoulder of the road and everyone climbed out to find out what was up.

Rick had the map in his hands. "Look at this little county road here," he said gesturing. "It's marked, but it seems pretty small and isolated. It eventually goes through Coweta County."

"I've been through there," T-Dog commented. "Not much there, couple of small towns."

"That's exactly what we're looking for," Rick replied, "small, rural, sparsely populated towns." He pointed up the road. "The turnoff is about five miles up ahead. Make a left onto Haynes Road. I'll go first, y'all follow my truck. We'll try and find a house or some sort of building along that route that we can hole up in for at least tonight."

"Lead the way," Daryl told him as Rick refolded the map. They all went back to their respective vehicles and waited for Rick's truck to get to the head of their conga line.
The line of vehicles progressed slowly down the county road. Every now and then Rick, in the lead, would pause where a side street intersected and glance down into the distance. But he kept the group heading straight until they eventually came to what looked like a tiny downtown area. There were only three buildings on the cul-de-sac, and all looked as if they'd been deserted long before the walkers took over. One was a dilapidated wooden structure that might have been a large barn, or maybe a church, or…some sort of gathering place. But it was weather-worn and looked as if a stiff breeze could easily topple it over. There was also a structure that was more or less one long awning with a tacked up sign that said FARMER'S MARKET. Rick drove to the end of the street where a large old brick building stood. He signaled to the others to wait and he slowly drove around to the back of the building and then came out from around the other side. He leaned out of his driver's side window and waved for the other drivers to follow him this time.

They pulled into the unpaved parking area in the back of what looked like it might have been a small factory at one time, or maybe a hardware store. There were a few windows up on the second story, but the only window in the front on the ground floor had a metal grating bolted over it. They parked the vehicles facing outward behind the building so that they couldn't be seen from the street. Rick and Daryl approached the building and Glenn walked the edge of the parking lot peering at the landscape through binoculars to check for walkers. There was a mailbox near a back door that was overflowing with mail, all of which was addressed to "Mr. Charlie's Fine Antiques and Collectibles."

"T-Dog!" Rick whisper-yelled. "Bring the bolt cutters."

They cut the padlock off of the back door and the three men entered cautiously, using their flashlights to peer into the darkness. All was silent, and there was no telltale odor indicating that there might be either walkers or dead bodies inside. Nevertheless, the others waited outside for the next 10 minutes until T-Dog came back outside.

"Looks all clear," he reported. "But until we can scope out more of the area outside tomorrow, just bring in necessities right now – weapons, some food and water."

They trooped inside slowly, letting their eyes adjust to the gloom and taking in their surroundings. Glenn closed the door and locked it with the deadbolt that was on the inside. Their backpacks and rifles slung over their shoulders made walking difficult, for the place seemed to be crammed from floor to ceiling with junk. Or fine antiques and collectibles, that is. Shelves had been installed every which way so that there was no rhyme or reason to the makeshift aisles. Allison fell into step single-file following Lori, who was following T-Dog, etc. Eventually they came to something of a clearing – there was enough space for them to gather as a group and set their bundles down.

"Looks like Mr. Charlie never saw a geegaw he didn't like," Allison commented, looking around. There was everything from furniture to old tools to quilts to jewelry, and that was just in the area she could see from this particular spot.

"Well, the good news is that this place seems nice and solid and fairly secure, for the time being at least," Rick commented. "We need to take a better look around, though, and see what's what…"

"Like is there a bathroom," Lori suggested. Her growing baby tended to rest on her bladder more than was comfortable lately.

"I'll go with you to look for one," Maggie volunteered, waving her flashlight. Rick nodded them
off, knowing that Maggie was handy with a knife and that the two would be safe.

"Hey, look what's over here!" T-Dog called from behind a counter that was probably once the check-out area. He emerged carrying a kerosene heater. "And the tank feels like it's almost full."

"Before we fire that up we'd better see if we can crack open any of those windows that look to be upstairs," Hershel advised.

Rick and Daryl wandered off to see if they could find out how to get to the second story, and Beth and Carol started arranging some chairs and an old sofa in a large circle so that they could all sit down while getting their bearings. Carl started poking around the shelves nearby to see if there was anything immediately useful.

"I found these under the sink in the bathroom," Maggie announced when she and Lori returned. She was holding a small box that contained a half dozen Glade scented jar candles. "Anyone got a lighter or a match?"

Carl came from around the corner at the sound of Maggie's voice and dutifully said, "Here." He reached into his pocket and produced a Zippo. They lit four of the candles and set them on a nearby end table to illuminate their sitting area.

"Once we get some daylight in here I bet you'll be able to find some Butane to fill up that lighter," Allison told Carl. "Looks like there's a little of everything in this place."

"Where's Glenn?" Maggie asked, noticing that her boyfriend was missing.

"I'm right here," his voice startled her as he emerged from between two large pieces of furniture – wardrobes or china cabinets, Allison couldn't really tell in the dim light. "I found a fireplace over there," he gestured with his thumb over his shoulder, "and there's still some wood in the rack. This place looks like it might have been a house or maybe an inn at one time, and they just kept adding on to it."

"Phew!" They heard Hershel before they saw him. "It smells like a French brothel in here."

"When were you ever in a French whorehouse?" Maggie asked her father as he approached, followed by Rick and Daryl.

"That's not important," he evaded her question, "what is that smell, though?"

"A combination of Shimmering Spruce, Apple Cinnamon, and Angel Whispers, whatever that means," Carol replied, reading the labels of the candles. "Did y'all find anything upstairs?"

"There's a couple of what looks like apartments up there," Rick replied. Allison remembered seeing older commercial buildings in her hometown that had had rooms for rent above them. "Probably too cold for us to sleep in, since we opened the windows for ventilation. But there are bathrooms with tubs and showers, in case we're here long enough to use them."

"So I can go ahead and fire up this heater then?" T-Dog asked. Rick nodded and soon some warmth started to creep into their makeshift living room.

"Found a stairwell that leads to the roof, too," Daryl remarked. "We can take turns keepin' watch up there."

"Everything looked clear for the time being," Rick added, "so I'll take the first watch after I grab a quick something to eat."
"Glenn found a fireplace over yonder," Maggie said, "so once we get that going we can heat you up some soup or something…"

"Go ahead and warm something for the rest of you, for now just give me something I can take upstairs with me."

Carol rifled through a bag and found a box of frosted blueberry Pop-Tarts they'd packed from the kitchen of their previous house. Rick tore it open and took one package out of the box.

"That's not dinner," Lori protested as he turned to leave. "You need to eat more than that."

"I'm fine," he shot over his shoulder. "Glenn, can you come up and relieve me in a couple of hours? Then at first light either T-Dog or Hershel can take over while Daryl and I go out and scout around the area."

"I'll get the fire started," Glenn said, standing up and walking off.

"I found these!" Carl appeared out of nowhere. That kid was constantly wandering off.

"Carl, I've asked you how many times to stay within my sight?" Lori pleaded.

"Mom," he replied impatiently, "I was finding useful stuff. Like these." He was holding two old, dusty oil lanterns that still had some fuel in their bases.

"Good, we can save some of our flashlight batteries and use these to browse around a bit," Hershel said, praising the boy.

Carol stayed behind to see what she could rustle up for supper, since they hadn't brought in all of their baggage yet. Hershel, T-Dog and Carl decided to look around to see what kind of furniture they could find for the group to sleep on while Allison, Beth and Maggie headed off in another direction just to explore.

"Ooh, jackpot!" Beth called out. She'd found two vending machines, one with snack foods and the other with canned soda pop, iced tea, and lemonade.

"How do we get inside?" Maggie asked, looking over the snack machine. "Should I bust the glass? Or should I find a crowbar or something to pry it open…?"

"Hold up there before you hurt yourselves." The women turned to see Daryl walking over. "Step aside." They parted and he produced a small key ring. He tried two and the third one opened the snack machine.

"Where'd you find those?" Allison asked him.

"On that peg over there marked 'Keys to Vending Machines'," he replied, shaking his head slightly. "You'd think y'all would've learned by now to scope out a situation before you go off half-cocked."

Allison was about to retort something about not being half-cocked, but she thought better of it, not wanting to leave herself wide open for some smart remark from Maggie involving the word "cock." Instead she silently peered over Beth's shoulder as she plucked some pretzels and cheese-and-cracker packets from the slots inside the machine. "I've been craving salt lately," she confessed.

"Here," Allison took off her outer shirt and fashioned it into a makeshift sack. "Dump a variety of stuff in here and we'll carry it back to the….living room." Daryl followed suit, removing his jacket
and using it to carry a bunch of canned beverages. They spread their bounty out on a low coffee table that had someone had dragged over to their seating area. It was now blissfully warm inside thanks to both the heater T-Dog had found and the fire in the fireplace that Glenn was tending.

"One nice thing about this place," Carol commented, pouring some tomato soup into a pan, "there's no shortage of utensils or dinnerware." She'd found a set of matching plates and bowls with a pale blue and grey starburst pattern that had probably been the height of elegance in 1962.

T-Dog reappeared to report that there was a wide variety of furniture scattered all over the place, it was just a matter of finding whatever was comfortable. "If you want me to carry something closer to the fire, let me know," he offered. "Otherwise, there's quilts and comforters on a shelf over there. I didn't take too close a look, but I'm betting that some of the old sofas around here have fold-away beds inside."

Later, over hot soup with cheese and crackers on the side, the group discussed their current situation.

"Should we move the rest of our stuff inside?" Carol asked. "We brought a lot from the house, we could probably use some of it now..."

"I think we should wait until Rick and Daryl have a look around the area tomorrow morning," Hershel announced. "If they think it's safe for us to stay here, then we can settle in. But in the meantime it's best to stay packed and ready to leave if necessary."

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

Early the next morning Allison ventured upstairs to check out the shower situation. The three apartments were sparsely furnished, but there were beds with linens and some towels in the cupboards. Of course the only water available was ice cold, but any running water was a luxury. She decided to wait to bathe until later, when it was decided whether they'd be staying another day or leaving right away.

Rick and Daryl came back to report that the area seemed deserted; no walkers or living humans that they found. But there was no way to tell how long that situation would last.

"We're somewhat exposed here," Rick told the group when they gathered in their "living room" for a meeting. "We're right on a main road, small as it is. But we're not off the beaten path like we were at the last house or at Hershel's farm. If bandits or a group like Randall's comes rolling into town, we're easy to spot, especially if there's smoke coming out of the chimney."

"So if we stay we shouldn't use the fireplace?" Glenn asked.

"It's something to consider," Rick replied.

"Maybe we can cook food on the kerosene heater?" Lori suggested.

"It can be done," T-Dog said, "but it's best to have some aluminum foil to do it in, rather than a pan. Maybe we can scrounge some from somewhere."

"Speaking of food," Daryl stated, "if we stay here then we might have to go out a ways to do any hunting. Maybe by now some game is moving closer to town, but most likely it would just be possums and squirrels."

"This isn't much of a town," Rick added, "but still most of this immediate area is either paved or razed. We had to drive a couple miles to find anything resembling woods or farm land."
"Maybe that's why you didn't see any walkers," Hershel commented, "because there isn't any food around here for them."

"What if the people who own this place come back?" Beth asked.

"I don't think that's gonna happen," Daryl told her. "Yesterday when I found those keys I found a small office. The desk calendar was turned to a page in July, and the coffee maker had mold growing in the grounds that were left in the filter. I don't think Mr. Charlie's been here for a couple of months."

"So," Rick paused and heaved a great sigh, "right now I'm thinking that we should consider this a temporary residence. There are two main considerations – security and food. If we could be sure that no marauders wander by and try to overpower us, we're fairly safe from walkers inside these walls. If we can maintain some sort of food chain, we won't starve. We could use one of the cars to make day runs to see what we find in neighboring towns...maybe another farm house, maybe another store where we can get some more kerosene for the heater, maybe, maybe..." He closed his eyes and his lips tightened in frustration. "But then we're using precious gasoline to make those trips, and what if we don't find any more cars to siphon from? Daryl and I didn't see any vehicles on our run today."

"Best we take it one day at a time for now," Daryl remarked. "Now that it's daylight, we should explore this place from top to bottom and see what supplies we can use, how long they'll last. There's probably guns and ammo tucked away in some of these cabinets, for one thing. We passed a couple of smaller side streets today that we didn't explore, chances are there might be houses or farms or trucks down that way. Whether we pack up and hit the road again as a group or take one car out for scavenging trips, either way we're gonna use gas. Ain't no way around that."

"Sounds like the best way to proceed for the moment," Hershel agreed. "If we have a temporary safe haven, it might be more efficient for most of us to stay put while small groups go out to search for a more permanent place."

Rick considered the input of the two men he generally looked to for advice and then almost imperceptibly nodded his head. "OK, I think that makes the best sense for the time being. We do need to set up a watch schedule, though. And we'll use today to see what all we find inside this store and then begin to further explore the area outside."

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

They'd splintered off into pairs and individuals to explore the maze of aisles in Mr. Charlie's store, and occasionally someone would call out excitedly about an interesting find. Sometimes it was useful – boxes of candles, shotgun shells, a five-gallon jug of kerosene that was just about full – and sometimes it was frivolous, like a vintage neon Budweiser sign.

"We should find someplace comfy to sleep tonight," Daryl remarked to Allison as they turned down another aisle. The previous night she'd curled up on a love seat and he had slept in a La-Z-Boy recliner. She caught his meaning and was touched that he missed sleeping together with her.

"There are beds upstairs," she commented, "but I'm guessing it gets awfully cold up there at night, especially with the windows open."

"Yeah," he agreed, craning his neck to look all around as they walked, "your feet are cold enough when it's warm outside."

"That's why God gave men warm tushies," she retorted, "so women could warm their feet on
"Here we go," Daryl stopped abruptly. Allison almost bumped into him and then turned to see what he had found. "In here," he told her, squeezing in between several dressers and chests of drawers. She then saw what he was referring to – there were several mattresses standing on end like books on a shelf. He began to slide what appeared to be a queen-sized one out and then paused and looked over his shoulder.

"Um," he asked somewhat hesitantly, "we should probably pick out a spot where I should carry this to….do you wanna be over by the heater, or..." he left his question open-ended.

Allison smiled at him and said "I think a couple of quilts and your tushie will be warm enough. Let's find a spot with some privacy."
Chapter 52

After much grunting and complaining from Daryl as he lugged the mattress this way and that (it's not like he had done all the work...she had helped, too, Allison thought to herself – after all she had been in front, giving him directions), their new bed was placed on an open floor space enclosed on two sides by tall bookcases and on the third by a Victorian-era (according to the price tag attached) armoire.

"Perfect!" She proclaimed as he dropped the mattress and then sat down hard on it. "It's like a little bedroom."

"Great," Daryl grunted. "I'll let you do your Martha Stewart thing...like maybe find us some pillows and blankets...and I'll go rustle up an oil lamp or some candles or something so we'll be able to see later." He started to leave their little alcove and then remarked, "I should've brought some of those crackers so I could leave a breadcrumb trail to find my way back...."

By the time Daryl returned to their sleeping area, Allison had covered the old mattress with a large white cotton tablecloth and had found two patchwork quilts to use as covers. She hadn't been able to find any regulation bed pillows, but she did retrieve a couple of decorative throw pillows that she'd placed at the head of the mattress.

"'Just Hello', Daryl picked up a gaudy canary-yellow satin-covered souvenir pillow trimmed with red fringe. He held it aloft and read the embroidered inscription in a monotone with a straight face.

"'I'd like to be with you for a while and hear about the folks
I'd like to sit and see you smile at the same old jokes
But since you are so far away I cannot hope to go,
I'll send along this little token just to say hello.'"

"So it's not Bed, Bath and Beyond, at least it's something soft to lay our heads on," Allison defended her find.

Daryl set an oil lamp on one of the bookshelves. "I'm gonna go upstairs and take my chances with one of those cold showers."

"Leave it running, I'll be right behind you," Allison told him. "Give me a few minutes to dig through my bags, I know I've got some clean shorts for you packed somewhere..."

Allison found the bag that contained their underwear and also grabbed a few shirts from a display rack of clothing on her way upstairs. She followed the sound of running water and located the apartment upstairs where Daryl was just finishing his shower.

"Oh, you're done? I was just going to bring you in some shampoo," she offered, holding a travel-size bottle that had been tucked away in her bag from some long-ago vacation.

"I used the bar soap, that's good enough," he replied, swiping a towel over his hair. "I left the big towel in there for you."

"Thanks," she said, stripping off her clothes. "There's some clean drawers and socks for you on the bed," she gestured at the items she'd set down, "and you can have that flannel shirt I found. Unless you'd prefer the sweatshirt with the cute pig on it." She grinned and stepped under the running
water. She washed up in record time and then gratefully wrapped herself in the warmth of the terrycloth bath towel. Daryl was sitting on the edge of the bed lacing up his boots when she emerged from the bathroom.

"Um, where should I put…" he shyly picked up his discarded boxers and looked at her questioningly.

"Put those and your other stuff that needs washing in my little tote bag there for now," she decided. "I haven't figured out the laundry situation yet, but for now we can at least keep the dirty stuff together in one place." She quickly dressed, pulling on the oversized blue sweatshirt from CRAZY ZEKE'S FAYM-US BARBECUE last. Daryl snickered at the drawing of a grinning pink pig lying cozily atop an open flame.

"Never saw an animal so happy about being dinner," he chuckled as they headed back downstairs.

"You've got to admire a company that bases its business model on a combination of illiteracy and mental illness," Allison commented.

"There you are!" Maggie's voice from behind startled Allison as she was arranging some candles on the dresser in their "bedroom." Beth followed her sister into the alcove. "Can we talk to you for a sec?"

"Sure," Allison shrugged.

The two girls stood silently for a moment regarding Daryl and then Maggie added "Um, privately?"

Daryl looked up from where he was sitting and breaking down the H&R 45-70 Handi Rifle he'd found in the shop that morning. "I guess that means I'm s'posed to get the heck out of here?"

"If you don't mind," Maggie smiled. "Girl talk," she added.

"That'll send him running," Allison told her.

"OK, I'll go see if Mr. Charlie's got a bore snake stashed somewhere," Daryl said, rising to his feet. "This rifle could stand a good cleaning. See ya later."

"What's up?" Allison asked. Maggie waited a few seconds to make sure Daryl was out of earshot before replying.

"Beth's got her period, and we're out of supplies. Do you happen to have anything she can use?"

"Isn't that the dumbest thing?" Beth spoke in a low voice. "There's no machine in the bathroom, and no supplies under the sink. They had a box of air fresheners but no … you know."

"I was going to ask Glenn to run out and see if he could find a place that might have tampons or something, but Beth was too embarrassed," Maggie rolled her eyes.

"The whole world doesn't have to know," the younger girl said emphatically, her cheeks growing red.

Allison could empathize with Beth…at age 16 she would have rather died than to have asked some guy to pick up feminine products for her. Heck, even at age 27 – or maybe she was 28 now, since it was probably mid-November – she could easily discuss menstruation with patients, but still felt self-conscious talking about her own cycle with Daryl.
"Hold on, let me browse through my bags...they're usually a clearing house for odds and ends that I collect as I travel." She began digging through the most likely suitcase first. "I picked up a bunch of products from that pharmacy back when we were at your dad's house, but I gave most of them to Patricia..."

"I'm going to have to either make a supply run myself or ask Glenn to do it soon," Maggie commented. At a look from Beth she quickly added, "I'll tell him it's for me, OK? Anyway, I've been pretty irregular in the past few months...probably stress and all the moving from place to place....but I do need to be prepared the next time Aunt Flo comes to visit."

"Aha, here we go," Allison said, pulling out three wrapped tampons from a side pocket.

"Are you sure you can part with all of them?" Beth asked hesitantly. "I mean, won't you need... something?"

"I've been pretty irregular and iffy, too, for the last couple of months," Allison replied. "But I picked up a box of Instead cups at that pharmacy and those will last me a while."

"Instead...what?" Maggie asked.

"Menstrual cups." Allison grabbed another of her bags and retrieved the box she was referring to. She opened it up and handed the instruction sheet to Maggie. "Insteads are marketed as being disposable, but that's mainly a liability issue. They can be cleaned and reused, thank goodness." She pointed to the diagram on the insert. "See...it doesn't absorb, but it collects. It fits over the cervix and can be worn for up to 12 hours at a time. A lot of female soldiers and campers use cups because they can be left in place for so long."

"How do you...I mean, how does it work?" Maggie was intrigued.

"Here, you can feel one through the wrapper. I'd unwrap it, but I want to keep it sterile until it's ready to use. You can have this one, if you like. See, it's flexible. You squeeze it until it's long and narrow, then you insert it like you would an OB tampon, you know -- one of those without an applicator. To empty it you have to reach up inside and kind of hook the edge with your finger, which is tricky at first, but practice makes perfect....then you can either wipe it out or rinse it, whatever you can do at the time, and then replace it."

"Eeew, you have to stick your finger way up inside...? And get all....gross?" Beth screwed up her face in revulsion.

"It is your body, you should not be repulsed by it," Allison told her gently.

"I'll just take these, if you don't mind," Beth said, taking the tampons.

"Are you sure you don't mind if I take one of these cups?" Maggie asked.

"Of course not. Um, they also have another benefit, so to speak...." Allison's voice trailed off. Now she was a little embarrassed. She lowered her voice. "If you're...um...you know, feeling frisky during your period, you can have sex while wearing an Instead cup and the man won't even know it's your time of the month. And..." Now she could feel her cheeks flaming, "it sort of acts as a diaphragm. Not the best or most reliable form of birth control, but if you're out of condoms or other methods...."

"Oh my God," Beth put her hands over her ears. "I'm out of here."

"Interesting," Maggie remarked. "May I keep this instruction sheet, too?"
"Sure thing."

"Thanks very much," Maggie turned to leave. "I'll still ask Glenn to keep an eye out on his next supply run, though, but I think this will definitely come in handy."

"Yes, thank you," Beth squeaked before scurrying away.

‡‡‡ ‡‡‡ ‡‡‡

After a communal supper that night, Allison could tell that Daryl was restless. He'd already done his watch duty for the day, he'd scoured the shop several times and had accumulated a nice selection of useable weapons and ammo, and now there was not much left to do. It was too early to turn in for the night and he was feeling cooped up after being indoors for most of the day. He apparently wasn't the only one feeling restless; Glenn and Maggie approached them shortly after dinner and asked "What are you guys gonna do?"

"Do? What do you mean?" Daryl asked.

"Well," Glenn suggested hesitantly, "I've got to go on watch in a couple of hours, so I don't want to go to sleep only to have to get up again…and we found a bunch of board games over in one aisle…would you two be interested in playing something?"

"I would!" Beth piped up.

"Me, too!" Carl immediately spoke up. Of course, he was interested in doing anything that put him in proximity to Beth.

Allison looked at Daryl questioningly. He shrugged so she replied, "Sure, let's see what they've got."

Glenn led them to the area he'd found earlier that contained a variety of toys and games. "Let's see," he said, pointing his flashlight up and down the shelves. "Monopoly, Clue, Trivial Pursuit…"

"I like Trivial Pursuit," Allison said quickly.

"Of course you do," Daryl replied. "Your head is so full of trivial facts that what you're really sayin' is you like kicking everyone's butts at Trivial Pursuit."

"We could divide into teams," she wheedled. "Gives everyone a fair shot."

"It's early, so there's probably time for more than one game," Maggie suggested. "How about one round of Trivial Pursuit, and then…." She looked at the stacks of boxes. "Milles Bornes. We had that game when I was a kid, I haven't played it in years, but I remember it was fun."

They took the games and two oil lamps to a round kitchen table in a furniture section of the store. "I'll go see if anyone else wants to play," Beth said, "while you guys find some chairs." As it turned out, T-Dog was headed upstairs for watch duty, Rick wanted to sleep, Hershel had found a book that was engrossing him and Carol and Lori busied themselves cleaning up the dinner dishes.

"Looks like it's just us," Beth said as they set up the board and rolled the dice to see who would go first.

"Yellow pie!" Allison trumpeted later as she moved hers and Daryl's playing piece.

"History," Maggie sighed, pulling a card from the box. Allison was in her element and blissfully
unaware that the others weren't having as good of a time. "Who was the first woman to have flown in space?"

"Valentina Tereshkova! Yes!! Pie, please!" Allison pumped a fist into the air.

"You might want to tone it down a notch," Daryl said to her, noting the faces around the table.

"Oh, sorry." She rolled the dice. "The heck I'm sorry," she muttered under her breath, "we're mopping up the floor with these people!"

"This is why you didn't have a lot of friends in college, I'm guessing," Daryl muttered.

"One, two, three, four! Center space, for the win!" Allison announced, oblivious to Daryl's commentary.

Maggie, Glenn, Beth and Carl consulted on which category might be a stumper. "Sports," they all agreed.

"What player squats an average of 300 times during a doubleheader?"

"The catcher," Daryl answered quietly.

"Yes!! High five!" Allison stood up and smacked at the empty air. She looked around and suddenly realized that she was the only one celebrating. "Um, good game, everyone." She murmured as she sat back down.

"So what's this other game, Millie something?" Daryl asked as he helped Glenn pack up the game tokens from Trivial Pursuit.

"It's a French card game," Maggie explained, opening the box. "See, different cards have miles on them…you have to accumulate one thousand miles to win. But other players can stop you with these hazard cards, like a flat tire, or an accident." She went on to explain the rules to the group and then shuffled the cards. They paired up in the same teams as before and began playing. Because it was a game of chance, depending upon the luck of the draw, everyone was on equal footing and this time all the players, even Carl, were actually having fun. The game went fairly quickly and they played three rounds before it was time for Glenn to take watch and Carl to go to bed.

"That was fun," Beth commented, helping to put everything away.

"Yeah, it was," Maggie agreed. "Thanks, you guys."

+++ +++ +++

Daryl lit one of the oil lamps in their bedroom while Allison changed into a tank top and sweat pants and crawled underneath the quilts. He sat on a chair and removed his boots and socks.

"I'm sorry if I got a bit obnoxious during the game," Allison quietly apologized. "Sometimes I tend to get a little competitive."

He snorted as he stripped off his shirt. "A little?!" He stood up and undid his belt. "It's OK, Angel, I'm used to you. I just don't think you made any friends during the game." He lowered the wick on the lamp and then slid under the covers beside her. "But as long as you had fun, that's the important thing. I haven't seen you smile so much in a long time." He leaned over and kissed her.

"Mmmm," she murmured as she returned his kiss. He squirmed closer to her and wrapped a hand
around her head. She gently placed a hand on top of his scalp and stroked his hair. Now it was his turn to moan lightly.

"You feel so good," she whispered. He kissed her more deeply, prying her lips open with his tongue and exploring her mouth. She responded in kind and alternately gently sucked and teased his probing tongue.

"Oh, God, woman," he grunted, moving his mouth down the side of her face to her neck. He nibbled at the spot where her neck connected to her shoulder and she sighed in contentment. He reached a hand under her tank top and began massaging her nipple. She arched her back and pressed her breast harder against his hand. He lifted up long enough to push her top up and off, then he pushed her back down to the mattress and assaulted her left breast with his tongue. She entwined her fingers in his hair and pulled him on top of her. She began sighing rhythmically and moving her body as he reached a hand down between her legs.

"Ohhhh," she moaned. He probed her over her sweats for several minutes until she quickly squiggled out of them and kicked them aside. He moved his mouth back up to hers and kissed her more aggressively. She reached down and grasped his hardness and began stroking it. He lifted his head up and closed his eyes as his body involuntarily shuddered.

"I can't – I dunno how long I - " his comment was interrupted when Allison abruptly sat up and pushed him down onto his back. Looking him in the eye she straddled him, rubbing herself against his erect member as she pressed it against his belly. She leaned forward, lightly dragging her breasts back and forth across his lips. He moaned quietly before lifting his head up to catch her right nipple with his mouth. He teased it with his tongue and after a few seconds she reached down to guide him inside of her. She began to gently grind against him and he grasped her other breast with his hand and began alternating suckling both of them. When she felt about to explode from pleasure she unconsciously arched her back, sitting almost upright. He sat up with her and flipped her over while still inside of her. She bent her knees and thrust her pelvis upward to meet his fervent thrusts. He propped himself up on his hands and closed his eyes as he pumped a few last times, so that his groin was pressed flush against her body and she quivered as his entire length throbbed inside of her. She tried to stifle her cries as he emitted a few animalistic grunts and then exploded with a final "Ooomphh!"

He paused for a brief minute and then collapsed in a heap beside her. She struggled to catch her breath as she stroked the side of his face gently. When she could finally speak again she whispered "Whew. Wow."

He lifted his head slightly to kiss her. "Better than Trivial Pursuit?" He smiled down at her.

"Much, much better," she kissed him back. She lay her head back down on the novelty pillow and pushed his hair back from his forehead. "I love you," she said, looking into his eyes.

"I love you, too, Angel," he replied, giving her another quick kiss before falling into a deep, contented sleep.
Breakfast the next morning consisted of hot oatmeal. Carol had found an ancient container of Quaker Oats on a shelf with some other "vintage" food items for sale. Luckily she'd also found a small bottle of blackstrap molasses, which helped to sweeten the thick glop a little bit. Even though Allison knew that oatmeal was full of fiber and helped to lower cholesterol and all sorts of other healthy stuff, she had always found it to be vile.

"Daryl and I are heading out after breakfast to do some more scouting," Rick announced to the group in between spoonfuls of cereal. "I'd still like to find us a nice farm house some place, but I also want to scope out the walker situation. So far we haven't spotted any near town here. We need to go further afield to see if our luck will hold out for a while."

"Need to find some decent hunting ground, too," Daryl said, scraping the bottom of his bowl with a spoon. "Last time I was up on the roof in the daylight it looked like there's some woods half a mile or so due north from here. Need to check it out, maybe a good place to set up some snares."

"I want to go, too," Carl piped up. "If you're setting traps, you'll need my help." His eager face shone up at Daryl sincerely. It was obvious that the teen was very proud of his previous field work.

"Well, I dunno if we'll be actually settin' up snares right now, or just scopin' out the area," Daryl hedged. Allison tried not to smile; she knew that Daryl was uneasy interacting one-on-one with Carl. He was a very good mentor and role model in certain respects, but he just wasn't comfortable with actually being one, having someone actively looking up to him – he worked better bouncing off another person, almost like being a disinterested bystander and shooting off advice in an off-handed manner.

"Either way, I think it'll be good to have Carl along as an extra pair of eyes and an extra gun," Rick decided, giving a sidelong glance at Lori, who seemed ready to object to her son going off into unknown territory. She remained silent at Rick's look, though, and cast her eyes downward, as if she was afraid to contradict her husband. "Let's finish up breakfast and get our gear together and meet out in the parking lot in…" he looked at his watch, "twenty minutes or so."

Daryl finished his oatmeal and headed back to his "bedroom" to retrieve his crossbow and a rifle. Allison followed closely behind him and cornered him as he broke the gun down and eyed the chamber.

"Um, I was wondering if you could look for something while you're on the road today…" she began.

He looked up from the weapon and replied, "Sure, whatever you need." He paused for a beat and then added with his famous half-smile, "You mean there's something you need that Mr. Charlie doesn't have stashed away someplace here?"

"Well, it's not actually for me," she suddenly felt shy and looked down at the ground. "Some of the other ladies need some….um…well, feminine hygiene supplies….they're having their – "

Daryl held out a hand in a 'stop' gesture. "Yeah, I get it, I know what you mean," he said in a rush. "But I have to warn you, the last time Rick and I were out and about, we didn't see any drugstores or anything like that in the area. The only business-type building we found was an old abandoned gas station."
"Gas station?" Allison perked up.

"Not one of those with a convenience store attached to it," Daryl explained.

"No, but nevertheless it probably has a ladies' room," she said.

"Um, I guess so," he was confused.

"If you guys happen to pass by that gas station, or another one, if it's safe maybe you can go into the ladies' room and break into the machine on the wall."

"What machine? How do you know there's a machine?"

"Every public women's bathroom has a machine on the wall with…supplies."

He took some mild offense to her seemingly condescending tone and reacted gruffly. "Well, excuse me for not knowin' what all the heck is in a women's bathroom. Not like I've ever been in one…"

"You were at least once," Allison smirked, "when we first met, remember? Back in Atlanta?"

"Yeah, but that was just in the…lobby area, or something. There weren't any toilets or machines there. Or if there were I sure didn't notice 'em." He shuddered, as if to shrug off any memory of having stepped into that strange mysterious creepy girly sanctuary that was a public ladies' room.

"Whatever," Allison rolled her eyes, "my point is, if you do find a place like that, if it's safe and you have the time, can you please retrieve whatever supplies of that ilk that are available?"

"How can I refuse when you use words like 'ilk'?" he teased her. He turned to leave but then paused. "The kid."

"Carl?" she asked, confused at his sudden change of topic.

"He's always on my tail when we go out together. What if he follows me into the can and asks me why I'm bustin' open that machine and what those things are I'm stuffin' into his backpack? How do I explain all that?"

Allison thought for a moment. "I dunno…maybe just tell him that I asked you to bring that stuff back to us and that you don't know what it is or why I want it. That will put him off for the time being, and give me time to think of something to tell him later. Hopefully he'll just chalk it off to 'girls are weird', though."

"OK," Daryl agreed. "I'm not promising I'll be able to find the stuff you need, though."

"I know," Allison replied, grasping Daryl's hands and looking into his eyes, "and I want you to promise me that you won't take any unnecessary chances…if you find a place and it's safe to go into quickly, then fine. If you don't find a place while you're out and about today, then please don't worry about it. Just come back here safely. That's the most important thing."

Daryl squeezed her hands in return and then gave her a quick kiss on her forehead. "OK," was all he said as he left to meet Rick in the parking lot.

Rick, Daryl and Carl had left, T-Dog was up on the roof on guard duty, and Allison felt restless. She looked into the air blankly, semi-surveying her surroundings, while mentally considering whether she should attend to her and Daryl's dirty laundry, or do a more thorough search of the
store shelves to collect items that might be of use. She was reluctantly leaning toward solving the laundry problem, since clean socks and undies were a necessity, and thus far she hadn't found any six-packs of Fruit of the Looms on any shelf. She gathered the soiled lingerie off the floor from the bedroom area and stuffed it into the bag she'd previously had upstairs that already contained some cast-offs. As she negotiated the staggered "corridors" leading to the stairs that led to the second floor she heard Carol's excited voice.

"Oh my, this is perfect for washing clothes!"

Allison worked her way over to where Carol was standing. Carol turned and looked at her with a broad smile. "I've been worried about what to do with all these clothes to wash – ", she gestured at three plastic laundry baskets filled to overflowing with garments she'd apparently collected from their fellow campers – "and just now I found this!"

"Cool," Allison responded, then, after a beat asked, "What is it?"

"It's an old-fashioned washing machine with a hand-agitator," Carol replied enthusiastically. "My grandmother had one very similar to this…I remember helping her wash clothes when I was a little girl…"

"I guess you turn the handle to move the agitator," Allison commented, inspecting the machine, "but how does the water get in there?"

Carol laughed. "My grandmother lived in a town that didn't get indoor plumbing until the early 1970s. I had to help her haul buckets full of water from the pump at the sink to the stove, where we'd boil it and then pour it into the washer. I bathed the same way when I stayed at her house – she had a big ol' bathtub in the kitchen, because it was close to the stove. Heat up water on the stove, pour it into the tub." Her face grew contemplative. "Looking back, it's hard to believe that someone could live like that in a so-called modern era, but I guess there were still some very rural areas in Georgia that didn't get plumbing and water heaters and such until….well, I remember Grandma complaining about this retroactive law in the early 1980s and when her house suddenly had to be brought 'up to code.'"

"Kinda funny," Allison mused, "that you had to learn something that you thought was so old-fashioned at the time, and now in the 21st century it's suddenly a valuable skill. I mean, truth be told, I wouldn't have known exactly what this machine was or how to use it until you explained it to me. I guess it's true what they say, everything old is new again."

"Or," Carol amended, "more precisely, God works in mysterious ways."

"True that," Allison replied before excusing herself to go upstairs to use an apartment's bathtub to scrub her bag of dirty laundry. As she rubbed a bar of soap against a pair of Daryl's boxer shorts it occurred to her that she could have easily shirked this drudgery by handing off the laundry to Carol, who seemed all too eager to be in charge of clean clothing. But she sighed, knowing Daryl's particular aversion to having anyone other than her seeing his undergarments, and continued to scrub away. She used the shower curtain rod as a clothesline and hung up their socks and lingerie to dry, then closed the door to that apartment as she left in an attempt to maintain some privacy.

‡‡‡ ‡‡‡ ‡‡‡

"How's your patient doing?" Hershel asked, looking up from his book. Allison had been surprised to find the old man sitting in an alcove next door to the area where she'd just given Lori a perfunctory exam.
"Seems to be OK, so far," Allison replied, sitting down on a chair opposite from the man. "She's had to scavenge larger shirts to fit her, so that's a good sign – the baby is still growing. Fetal heartbeat is still strong…"

"But something is bothering you," Hershel closed his book. The man definitely had the knack of reading people.

"Lori's first pregnancy – Carl…" Allison began hesitantly. "She suffered from placenta previa and he had to be delivered by C-section. She just recently told me that she'd been put on bed rest for the last three weeks before Carl was born…"

"Placenta previa isn't hereditary," Hershel tried to comfort her. "It doesn't necessarily mean that this baby will not be delivered naturally."

"I know," Allison sighed, "but I still worry…Lori's diet, heck all of our diets are far from optimal, and she's so narrow-hipped…"

"Have you ever performed a Caesarian?" Hershel asked her.

"Yes, several, but always in the ER, which meant that it was an emergency situation and the mother was given anesthesia and I had the time and tools to properly suture her afterward. What happens if, for some reason, at the last minute Lori can't deliver naturally? We don't have IV anesthetics, not to mention surgical staples." Allison rubbed her forehead with one hand. "That's part of why I specialized in ER medicine – I didn't have to counsel patients beforehand….I only saw them in extreme situations…" She looked up at the old man. "What do I tell Lori when she starts projecting about her baby's chances? About what might happen if, for some reason, she can't deliver naturally? We don't have IV anesthetics, not to mention surgical staples."

"That's all you can do," Hershel said in his comforting way, "is give her hope. That's all any of us have to cling to these days is hope. Reassure her that when her time comes, most likely we'll be holed up in some secure place…" He gestured around the room. "If not here, then someplace similar. A house or other building. Half of the battle in a problem pregnancy is keeping the mother optimistic. I'm a firm believer in a positive attitude as a healer."

"Thank you, Mr. Hershel," Allison said, using the more formal form of address for this particular moment. "What you said makes a great deal of sense, and I do appreciate your advice."

As the afternoon turned into evening, Allison started to worry ever so slightly. Why weren't Rick and Daryl back yet? She paced the aisles, looking for something to occupy her mind. She found, of all things, a box of picture postcards dating back to the 1960s (from the postmarks) priced for sale at 50 cents each. She chuckled to herself, noting that most of the cards were freebies offered like business cards at various motels across the country (someone would pay money for used postcards?!), and started browsing through the stack. One card featured a photo of some motel in picturesque Moab, Utah, and the address was simply "Main and Central." "The epicenter of all things Moabian," Allison thought to herself, as she continued to thumb through the cards. Another postcard from a motel in Laramie, Wyoming, boasted "steam heat" as one of its sales bullet points…. "Hey, let's spend the night here," Allison said aloud sarcastically, "they've got clanking radiators!"
She didn't know how long she'd been reading postcards, but it must've been a while because daylight was fading. When it became too dark to read without straining her eyes, Allison set the box back on a shelf. Moments later she heard the sounds of someone entering their sanctuary. She wound her way through the tangled aisles to get to the back door. She heaved a huge sigh of relief to see Daryl…and, oh yeah, Rick and Carl…entering the building. Carl was all but strutting – "Look what me and Daryl caught!" he proclaimed. Daryl took the line off of his shoulder that had two rabbits skewered on it and held it aloft. Allison took the kill from him and praised both the senior and junior hunters.

"We only encountered two walkers today," Rick said, "and no other humans. We did a pretty thorough search of the perimeter. I'm thinking that it will be okay to light the fireplace for a few hours to cook food and such. Besides," he sat down on a chair and continued, "Daryl pointed out that when humans are scouting out an area, they look at eye level, keeping a watch out for walkers. The chimney on this building is two stories high…if we only use the fireplace for a limited amount of time each day, we might be secure…for the time being."

"Here," Daryl retrieved the rabbits from Allison, "I'll go skin and clean these, if you'll…uh…take care of this. Kid, give her your backpack," he said to Carl.

"Got it," Allison smiled at him.

"We packed some cans of Cream of Mushroom soup when we left the house," T-Dog announced, getting up to look through the various bags, "I'll bet I can make up some sort of awesome rabbit stew with it, especially if we can use the fireplace now."

"I'll light it up," Maggie replied, box of matches in hand.

Carl scampered off excitedly and Allison took a moment to look through the backpack to see what Daryl had collected. She reached in and pulled out a large handful of individually wrapped Stayfree pads. She dug a bit further and found a couple of Tampax as well as some Light Days liners. She breathed a sigh of relief. "Hopefully enough to get us through a cycle or two," she thought to herself. As she headed off to find Maggie or Beth she smiled to herself, trying to picture Daryl's face when he had managed to find this treasure trove of hygiene products…she wondered if he'd just broken the machine open and shoved everything inside into the bag, or had he noticed the variety of items, rolled his eyes and mentally griped about women needing so many choices, and that's why they usually had a closet full of shoes….

Allison mentally shook herself out of her reverie when she found Beth, Glenn, Maggie and Carl sitting together in the living room. Carl was chatting animatedly, but only Beth seemed to be paying attention. Maggie was sitting very close to Glenn, one of her hands on his thigh, the other stroking his hair. He in turn had his arm around her and was massaging her shoulder.

"…and I spotted this second one just sitting there stock still in the distance and Daryl brought it down with one bolt, whoosh!" Carl made an arrow-shooting gesture along with the appropriate sound effects. "We're probably gonna go set up some snares in that field tomorrow 'cause it's all overgrown and Daryl says likely a lot of small game wanders through there."

"Sounds like you're turning into a good hunter," Beth praised the youngster. "I never thought I'd say that I missed having rabbit for dinner, but after all that canned tuna and Spam we've had lately even squirrel is starting to sound yummy!"

"Hey, Beth, got a sec?" Allison said as she stepped into the area. "I need your help with something." She gestured with her head as she spoke to indicate she wanted to talk to the girl privately.
"Sure, I'm comin'," Beth got up. "Scuse me for a bit," she said to Carl and the others.

"I'll go upstairs and see if dad needs help keepin' watch," Carl announced. "If he doesn't, then I'll help Daryl skin those rabbits so T-Dog can start cookin' 'em faster."

"Your dad took another watch duty?" Allison asked. "He was out all day, he should really get some rest."

Carl shrugged and walked off.

"I got some supplies," Allison told Beth as they walked together. She held the bag open and showed the younger girl what was inside. "Do you want to keep them in your sleeping area, or should I put it all in the downstairs bathroom?"

Beth thought for a moment. "Bathroom is probably best. Thanks so much for finding this stuff! I'll let Maggie know it's available, too."

Allison suppressed a chuckle. "I don't know how old she is, but some women don't go through menopause until their mid-50s. It's probably best to just casually mention to her that the stuff is there, just to give her the impression that we think she's…er, younger."

She hadn't checked the entire bag, so Allison was surprised when she began placing items in the cabinet under the sink to find an almost-new tube of toothpaste, a bottle of Midol, a box of Band-Aids, some Dr. Scholl's corn pads and a couple of disposable razors. "What kind of gas station did he find?" she wondered. She placed the Midol in the cabinet and kept the rest of the items in the bag to take back with her to their bedroom. If anyone needed a bandage or corn pad, it would probably be more convenient to have them handy. That rest room was quite a hike if you happened to be even in the middle of the store, especially the way the shelving was arranged.

On the way out of the bathroom she bumped into T-Dog and Carol, whose arms were full with a tray of cut-up rabbit and various pots and cans of soup. "Can I help?" she asked as they passed by.

"I think we've got it under control," Carol said. "Lori's behind us somewhere, bringing whatever spices were left behind in the car. We've got to find Glenn, he can stoke the fire while we prepare the food…" Her voice faded away as she continued on to the fireplace.

"He's in the living room, but he was busy, last I saw," Allison said, somewhat pointlessly since T-Dog and Carol had already disappeared.

"Busy doin' what?" Daryl's voice from behind startled her. She turned around to see him emerging from the men's room, still drying his hands and forearms. Apparently he'd just finish washing up after butchering their dinner. "He ain't on watch duty, Rick said he was goin' upstairs to take over."

"He and Maggie were busy grooming each other like a couple of spider monkeys," Allison said to him, rolling her eyes slightly.

"What?" he snickered, falling into step beside her.

"They were almost making out on the sofa right in front of Carl and Maggie, for cryin' out loud," Allison explained, shaking her head slightly in disapproval.

"Hmph," Daryl grunted. "They keep that up, the kid can learn a thing or two and won't have to ask so many danged questions."
They walked past the fireplace where Glenn was on his knees fanning the flames of the small blaze Maggie had started. Maggie was crumpling up some old newspapers and handing them to him to use as additional fuel. There was still some firewood left, but they'd probably have to cut some more soon if they were going to stay there much longer, now that Rick had deemed it safe to occasionally use the fireplace.

"Carl pestering you with embarrassing questions?" Allison continued their conversation.

"A little. I told him he should be askin' his ma or ol' man about stuff like that, but he said he doesn't want to bother them." They arrived at their bedroom area and each sat down on a chair. "Bother?" Daryl smirked. "I know Rick's got his hands full, but Lori ain't doin' much else ‘cept gestatin'."

"Well, to be honest, when it came to the facts of life and all that, I would've been embarrassed to talk to my mom about that stuff. And Granny's way of handling it was to hand me a little booklet and tell me to ask the school nurse if I had any questions. As it turned out, I learned most of my information from my friends, the ones with older sisters." She looked at Daryl. "Did either of your parents ever sit you down and have an actual birds-and-bees talk with you?"

"Heck, no!" Daryl shuddered at the thought. "I learned everything from the porno magazines Merle kept stashed under his mattress."

Allison giggled. "Oh, geez, that reminds me of the time…let's see, we must've been about 12 or 13…some friends and I were taking a shortcut home after school through Watkins Woods. We'd stayed late and missed the bus. Anyway, we happened to see two magazines fluttering on the ground. We picked them up because it seemed so weird for them to be there – I mean, it was deep in the woods, there was nothing there but trees and grass and leaves. And they turned out to be some kind of hard-core girly magazines, with pictures like none of us had ever seen before! We kept looking around to make sure no one saw us, flipping through the pages even though there was no one around for miles… That was an eye-opener, to say the least." She paused and then said, "I always wondered, though, how in the heck would a magazine find its way to the middle of nowhere like that? They weren't all torn up like the wind had blown them there…"

Daryl smiled at her naiveté. "Some guy dropped 'em there. A lot of men go out into a remote area to…" He searched for a tactful phrase to use. He finally settled for making a quick gesture, and then looked away in embarrassment.

"To self-gratify themselves?" she clarified. "Oh, I never thought of that. But geez…what a lot of work, going on such a long hike just for a few minutes of…pleasure. Go figure."

Daryl chuckled out loud. "You and your words."

"What?" She was confused.

"There are half a dozen phrases I thought of to describe what guys do while looking at dirty magazines, but none of them were 'self-gratify.'" He walked over to her and kissed the top of her head. "You're cute yourself, sometimes."

"So what did you and Rick find on your scouting mission today? And what kind of weird gas station has toothpaste?" She finished her question by pulling the tube in question out of the backpack.

"Wasn't no gas station," he told her. "Took a different route and found a farm house that was pretty isolated."
"Some place we might move to?" She asked hopefully.

He shook his head. "Not secure enough. The back door was broken in, no fencing or any protection around the property, and from the look of it inside some other scavengers have already been there. Unless the folks who lived there emptied out the kitchen cabinets before they ran off. That stuff there," he pointed at the bag, "was everything I found in a bathroom cabinet. That was about all that was left in the house."

"Oh," she responded, trying not to sound disappointed.

"Wasn't a complete waste of time," Daryl continued, "we got some gasoline from a couple of cars and there was a pretty big overgrown field not far from that house that looks like it might be good for hunting."

"That where you got the rabbits?"

"Yeah, I'd just bagged one and then Carl spotted another perched not too far away."

"He's been bragging about how the two of you caught the rabbits...I'm glad you took him with you, he's feeling pretty proud of himself. I think he needs to feel useful, he's so young and has all that excess energy to expend. Boys his age are usually on Little League teams or soccer teams or something."

"Or doin' chores," Daryl added. "But there ain't that much that needs doin' around here, 'cept for watch duty and finding food." He paused thoughtfully. "We'll need firewood soon, maybe he can help with that. Build him up some upper body strength."

"You mentioned before you killed two walkers...?"

"Yeah, by the side of the road when we were siphoning gas out of a pick-up truck. Saw 'em in plenty of time, they weren't a danger or nuthin'. Didn't see any others the rest of the day, and didn't see any other humans, either."

"So we might be safe staying here for a while?" Allison asked.

"Possibly. Right now it seems secure, as long as one day some other people don't roll into the area looking for a safehouse. The building itself is strong enough to protect us from walkers, but we're gonna need to go out more often to find food. That puts us at risk. There's no garden nearby like at the old house, and no place to plant one, really. The further afield we have to go to hunt and scavenge, the more gas we use up. Eventually we're gonna have to find a house or building that's either as secure as this one or fenced in and that has good hunting and fishing nearby as well as a place to grow food." He sighed at stretched backward in his chair, looking up at the ceiling. "If we didn't have to worry about walkers, or outsiders intent on takin' what we have, we could probably live comfortably enough if we just found the right place. The Amish have been doin' it for years. We could plant crops, raise horses, cattle and chickens and whatever, even spin our own yarn if we had sheep. It ain't life as we once knew it, but it would be living."

Allison looked at him and nodded. "You know, a life without electricity and TV and air conditioning doesn't sound all that bad as long as we had a secure place to live and a didn't have to constantly look over our shoulders in fear of being attacked. Eventually the world would be rebuilt...coal would be mined again, the power plants would resume operation some day...and in the meantime, well, I remember reading a bit about steampunk on the Internet back in the day. You and Glenn and Hershel and T are all very smart, you'd probably all eventually build some usable mechanical gadgets."
"It's something to look forward to, isn't it, Angel?" Daryl asked. "I know taking one day at a time is the only way to survive these days, but having something to look forward to gives you more…I dunno, incentive or something."

"Hope. It gives us hope, and that's always a reason to keep on keeping on, to do whatever we have to do," she replied.
Chapter 54

Days passed, and the group fell into a routine of rotating watch duty, going out in pairs in various directions on new, unmapped roads to scout out possible new safe houses, and bringing back salvageable supplies. Meantime for those left inside Mr. Charlie's place for hours on end, there was always laundry to be washed, and new nooks and crannies to explore. Carol had, by this time, assembled a full set of dinnerware to be used at mealtime, and had also set in place a sort of clothes-washing regimen. She seemed to truly enjoy washing the grime away in that hand-cranked tub she'd found, and had set out some containers that served as hampers for everyone to deposit their dirty duds in. Carol had even found a skein of nylon rope which she'd strung up on some hooks already nailed into the rafters to make a clothesline. Allison had stopped by one afternoon to offer her assistance, only to find the older woman actually humming contentedly as she ran wet clothes through the wringer atop the washing machine.

"Need any help?" Allison had asked.

"Nope, doin' fine here, but thanks for asking," Carol had smiled as she pinned a flannel shirt on the line, courtesy of a muslin sack full of "heirloom wooden clothespins" Mr. Charlie had had for sale.

Allison had turned to leave and then Carol added, "You know, you can get sick from wearing unwashed undergarments…infections and rashes and things."

Allison had turned and looked at the woman in confusion. "What?"

"I don't mean to pry, but I just never see any of Daryl's…or your…clothes in the hampers. I'd just hate to see either of you get some sort of infection…"

Allison had struggled to control her tongue. This group was living in such close quarters, it was important that they all get along as well as possible, she told herself. She took a few deep breaths and then replied, "I take care of our laundry myself, but thank you very much for asking."

‡‡‡ ‡‡‡ ‡‡‡

The day after her laundry chat with Carol, T-Dog sought out Allison, his face contorted in pain.

"Doc, I ain't feelin' so good," he groaned. "I ain't been bit, but I think I'm running a fever, and…" he lowered his eyes and voice, "I've had some serious stomach pain and diarrhea since this morning."

Allison placed the back of her hand on T's forehead and agreed, "Yes, you do have a fever. Come sit down over here," she gestured to one of the sofas in the living room area, "and let me see what's what."

Almost as soon as T-Dog had sat down, Glenn and Maggie walked into the area groaning. "We're sick," Maggie said succinctly.

"Have a seat," Allison instructed them, "I'll be back in a few, let me go get my bag…"

When Allison was en route back to the living room with her medical bag Lori stopped her and grasped her arm. "What's going on?" she asked in a low voice. "Do you think they've got the fever, the sickness, the whatever that's the cause of this whole thing?"

"Honestly, I don't know, but it doesn't seem likely if none of us have fallen ill after all this time and
then suddenly three people are sick. Maybe it's some sort of influenza...folks have been going out scavenging, maybe someone picked up a germ somewhere." She sighed and tried to keep the pregnant woman calm. "There's no need to panic right now, OK?"

When she returned to the living room Beth was on the sofa next to her sister, moaning in pain and grasping her lower abdomen. Carol had heard the hubbub and dashed over to the area to see what was going on. Upon seeing Allison whipping out a thermometer and blood pressure cuff she asked, "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Judging from their complexions and their fidgeting and their groans," Allison told her, "it would be a great help if you could find some buckets or basins or other sorts of containers..."

Carol dashed off and Allison began grilling the sick people on their symptoms...where exactly does it hurt? When did you first notice it? When was your last solid bowel movement? Do you have a headache, any blurry vision? As she continued her makeshift triage, Daryl suddenly appeared, apparently fresh out of the men's room.

"I've got bad things comin' out of every part of me," he moaned to her before sitting down hard on one of the couches.

"Oh, God, I gotta go again," T-Dog announced as he ran for the bathroom.

"What can we do?" Lori asked anxiously.

"For now," Allison decided, "I think we should move some more sofas or reclining chairs or whatever furniture like that we can find into this area. Anyone who gets this – whatever it is – is going to need to be close to the bathrooms. But," she added, "you really shouldn't be lifting heavy furniture."

"I can ask Carl and Rick to help," Lori said. Hershel was upstairs on watch duty and was otherwise occupied, but Carl and Rick were outside nearby, digging some holes which they now used to bury their trash.

Carol returned to the living room with several receptacles in hand just in time. Glenn got up off the couch and was headed to the bathroom before he doubled over in pain and began retching. Allison grabbed a pail from Carol and held it under Glenn's chin.

"I'm sorry, but this is making me sick," Lori said, backing away as Glenn vomited. "I'll go find Rick and Carl..." and she scurried off.

Daryl gamely got off the sofa and ran back to the bathroom when the nausea overcame him, but Maggie involuntarily started barfing when she attempted to stand up. Allison held a small basin for her, easing her back onto the couch. Carol handed Allison a shop rag she'd picked up while collecting buckets and bins and Allison used it to wipe Maggie's mouth.

"Can you please keep an eye on things while I go wash these out?" Allison asked Carol once most of the containers had been used.

"OK," Carol agreed, even though her own stomach was turning. She'd taken care of Sophia with no question whenever her precious daughter had been sick, but other people throwing up...that was a different matter.

+++ +++ +++

Hours later it became apparent that whatever was affecting half of their group was not some air-
borne influenza-type virus. No one else other than T-Dog, Glenn, Maggie, Beth and Daryl had fallen ill. After getting the "sick" group ensconced under blankets and bedclothes on the various sofas and La-Z-Boys (and one pricey Victorian fainting chaise) that Rick and Carl had added to the existing furniture in their living area, Allison took some time between rushing basins to consider the situation. Food poisoning was the first thing that sprang to mind, and she thought back...the previous afternoon T-Dog had made some sort of Tex-Mex dinner from canned tamales and home-canned salsa in a Mason jar and a Sweet Sue brand canned whole chicken. Stuff that had been scavenged from an abandoned house nearby. She now recalled that she'd had watch duty later that night and had elected to just munch on some cheese and crackers from the vending machine for supper. Besides, the glutinous mess that the chicken was canned in had not look at all appetizing to her.

"Lori? Carol?" she asked en route to the bathroom to empty another pail, "Did either of you have any of that Mexican chicken dinner T-Dog cooked yesterday?"

"I didn't," Lori replied. "The spicy smell made me sick."

"I didn't, either," Carol said. "Didn't look like there would be enough to go around, so I just heated up a can of soup for myself."

Allison returned to the "sick bay" and found Hershel tucking another blanket around Beth. She suddenly sat up and told him "Gang way!" and then made a bee-line for the bathroom.

"Poor baby," he commiserated in her wake. He spoke to the others as they lay in their misery. "I think for the time being both of the bathrooms down here should be considered 'unisex', since there are more men than women sick. No sense in anyone having to wait if one room is occupied."

"Ohh," T-Dog moaned as he struggled to his feet. "I think before this day is done you'd better install a revolving door on both of those bathrooms." He staggered off.

"Hershel," Allison asked the older man as she set down freshly cleaned pails and basins near the beds of all the patients, "did you have any of that Mexican food yesterday?"

"Nope, I tend to stay away from spicy foods ever since I had my gall bladder removed a few years ago."

"That must be it, then," Allison mused as Daryl groaned loudly and turned on his side. He grabbed his bucket and heaved mightily into it.

"Dammnm," he moaned in between stomach convulsions, "I can't have much more left in me."

Allison took the pail when he was done and handed him a moist towlette from a box of wipes that Carol had found. "I'm sorry you're feeling bad," she crooned, stroking his hair back from his forehead. "The good news is that I believe this isn't anything fatal, just a bout of food poisoning, and you should start feeling better in 24 hours or thereabouts. Hopefully."

"Might as well be forever, the way I feel," the normally rugged hunter complained. Allison smiled, remembering Patricia's words long ago, about men turning into babies when they were sick and there was a woman nearby to take care of them. It was sort of cute, she thought.

*** *** ***

"Allisonnnnn," Daryl called out in a whiny tone, "This blanket is too itchy! Can't I have a different one?!"
"Did I actually think he was cute before?" Allison thought to herself that night as she went to the pile of linens Carol had stacked up. She pulled out a duvet and took it over to Daryl. "How's this one?" She asked wearily. She'd barely sat down since the illness had first struck, and she was struggling to remain somewhat pleasant to her very demanding patients. She probably would have collapsed hours ago if Hershel hadn't been helping her, but she'd finally sent him off to get some rest, since he had to take over watch duty from Carl during the night.

Daryl fingered the material tentatively then grumpily decided, "I guess it's OK."

Lori was helping the best she could, bringing tea, water and juice to the "sickies" to keep them hydrated.

"Oh, God," Glenn commented to her once, gripping his abdomen while refusing the tea Lori was offering him, "you don't know how bad this hurts!"

"Try giving birth some time," Lori shot over her shoulder, taking the cup of tea over to Maggie.

"I hope her baby's head is bigger than T-Dog's," Glenn muttered when Lori was out of hearing range.

"Don't make me laugh, my gut hurts enough already," Maggie warned him.

Carol had been keeping busy as well, collecting and washing soiled linens and hanging them to dry. On one of her rounds she tried to lift Daryl's head to place an additional throw pillow underneath it. He jerked away from her touch.

"Don't like to be fussed over," he grumbled. "Give it to somebody else."

Somewhat wounded, Carol went over to Beth's sofa and asked the young girl if she wanted the pillow. Beth smiled weakly and lifted her head. As Carol placed the cushion she mentally consoled herself that Daryl was just being brusque with her because he wasn't feeling well. Ed had always been short-tempered, she recalled, and when he was ill, well, there was just no talking to him.

Allison shuffled by just then, bringing a clean basin to T-Dog's bedside. Daryl called over to her. "Can you please feel my forehead? I think my fever's gettin' worse."

Carol watched as Allison dutifully placed the back of her hand against his forehead for a few seconds. "Feels about the same," she told him. "How about if I give you a quick sponge bath, just your face and arms and chest," she added quickly before he could protest, "and when the water evaporates it will cool you off?" She didn't mention that just half an hour ago he'd complained that he had chills and needed an additional cover.

"OK, if you think that will help," Daryl said with pitiful puppy eyes.

Watching their interaction sent a dagger through Carol's heart at first. "I thought he didn't like anyone fussing over him."

"Hey, Doc, I wouldn't mind a quick rub down, too," T-Dog said to Allison as she got up to get the necessary equipment for Daryl's sponge bath.

"OK, so maybe this doesn't count as fussing," Carol silently rationalized, "it's necessary medical care."

"I'll be back in a few," Allison said as she headed toward the bathroom to fill a container with cool
water and fetch some towels.

She passed Rick on her way to the restroom. "How are you feeling?" she asked him.

"Right as rain," he replied. "What can I do to help?"

"You can go get some sleep. You've been on watch for how many hours straight now? Even if you didn't eat any of T-Dog's Mexican surprise, you'll get sick from pure exhaustion eventually."

"All right, if you're sure..." he hesitated. "How's Lori? Is she sick?"

Allison was about to tell him to go ask his wife himself, but she looked into his bloodshot eyes and decided against it. "She's fine, she's taking a quick nap...was busy helping care for our patients most of the day."

He nodded in response and then went on his way.

‡‡‡ ‡‡‡ ‡‡‡

Allison caught a few hours' sleep upright in a chair near the sick bay during the night. When she awoke it seemed as if the trips to the bathroom had decreased ever so slightly, and that everyone was now able to get out of bed and make it there when the urge to purge hit. It wasn't all sunshine and roses, though; they were still in pain and only sleeping in short bursts, which just helped to make them all more irritable.

"I found this in the stuff we packed away at the last house," Lori told her in the morning. She was holding several boxes of Jell-O. "I know they give it to sick people in the hospital, but we don't have any place to refrigerate it."

Allison stood up and stretched. "Doesn't matter, they can drink it in liquid form. It'll give them some calories that they can keep down. Hopefully."

"I'll go put a pot of water on the fire then," Lori replied.

Carl walked over, having caught a few hours of sleep after his watch duty. He started to approach Beth's sofa, but noticed that she was asleep. He walked over to Allison. "How is she?" he asked softly.

"She'll be fine in a day or so, but she needs some rest right now."

"Let me see what I can rustle up for your breakfast, young man," Carol said, gesturing for Carl to follow her to the kitchen area.

"Here, sip this," Allison told Maggie later that morning, handing her a coffee mug half-full with liquid orange Jell-O. "Careful, it's still hot."

Lori had just handed Beth a cup when Glenn complained in an annoying tone, "Eew, orange. I don't like orange Jell-O!"

"I swear to God if one more person whines at me I'm going to pour this Jell-O on their head!" Lori announced, her patience wearing thin.

"Listen up, y'all," Allison told the group. "We've only got so many boxes of gelatin, and right now it's the only nourishment you can hold down, so you're going to have to take whatever flavors we give you. Because you're not going to get better until you start getting your strength back." She
looked directly at Daryl during the last part of her statement. The minute he'd started to feel the least bit better he tried to get up and back to his daily routine, but he'd almost toppled over when lacing up his boots. He was weak and dehydrated and needed some time to recuperate, which aggravated the heck out of him.

"Man, I wish we had a TV or something," T-Dog sighed from his sofa. "When I was a kid and was home sick from school, watching game shows all afternoon used to make me feel better."

"I used to read comic books when I was sick in bed," Glenn commented after swallowing the last of the detested orange gelatin.

"I'll see if I can find some books or something for everyone," Carl said, dashing off, always eager to be of help.

"Won't be the same as TV," T-Dog muttered.

"Well perhaps Lori and I could re-enact some memorable scenes from The Price is Right for you in the meantime," Allison offered sarcastically.

"Just sayin'…" T defended himself sullenly.

Carl returned with a stack of Time magazines wrapped in individual plastic sleeves. "Here ya go," he said, passing a few to each patient. "Should be some interesting stuff in these," he mumbled as he distributed them.

"Wow, lookee here," Daryl said with exaggerated excitement, flipping through an issue. "President Johnson is sending ground troops into Vietnam!"

"So it's not exactly current news," Allison replied evenly. "Let's just say that you can either read it…or eat it."

"Yes, m'am," Glenn muttered, hiding his face behind his magazine.

Allison walked to the kitchen and grabbed herself a cup of Jell-O. "What I wouldn't give for a couple of Jell-O shots right about now," she thought as she downed the drink.
Chapter 55

It occurred to Allison that she hadn't really kept track of the passage of time since the days back when she was camping out in that office building in Atlanta. It had ceased to matter how many minutes, hours or days had passed as long as you were alive and woke up in the morning safe and unbitten. But now suddenly she was all too aware of time—the number of hours that had passed since T-Dog had first presented with the symptoms of food poisoning. At first she'd been mentally tracking the time lapses between bouts of vomiting and trips to the bathroom for each patient, and as the spaces in between grew longer she was able to determine when to start giving them the limited supplies of Jell-O, chicken bouillon and saltine crackers they had on hand in order to start rebuilding their strength. Those who were still barfing and pooping every hour were limited to fluids—water and tea. Even juice from the vending machine was in short supply. No use wasting precious food stocks on someone who was only going to throw it up 30 minutes later.

But as each patient slowly got better, Allison found that she was unconsciously tracking time for an entirely different reason...it had become a sort of mental game to see if she could predict who would be the next to complain about something or other, and how many minutes would it take. Suddenly she was counting down the hours until 72 of them had elapsed and surely some of the patients would be pretty much fully recovered. As she tended to each person's bedside need, she silently asked God to forgive her for any criticism she'd ever uttered about a nurse in her career. Anyone capable of putting up with an entire ward full of cranky people without swallowing a bottle of pills at the end of the day deserved to be canonized.

"Is it time for my pills yet?" Daryl's voice interrupted her daydreaming. For someone who just 24 hours ago was trying to get out of bed and get back to work, he suddenly seemed to actually be enjoying being infirm.

Allison checked the fancy pocket watch that Glenn had loaned her for the duration—a gift from Hershel, he'd told her—and then consulted the chart she'd been keeping. "Not quite yet, another hour to go," she told him.

"I'm all achy now, I don't see why I have to wait," Daryl grumbled, squirming and fussing on his chaise. "And if you had medicine all this time, why didn't you give it to us before? I'd be back to normal by now."

She bit back the many snide comments that immediately came to mind when he mentioned being "normal" and took a breath before patiently explaining, "It's ibuprofen and I didn't give it to y'all before because you would've just thrown it up. And right now I'm being careful to monitor everyone's dosage because NSAIDs can be very irritating to the stomach lining, especially when you can't take it with food and your tummies are already extremely empty."

"Incense?" T-Dog asked, misunderstanding her. "You're giving us incense?!!"

"NSAID, it stands for non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug," she explained. "Aspirin, for example, is an NSAID and it can irritate your stomach."

"Whatever," Glenn griped, "I just wish I could stand up for more than a minute at a time without getting so dizzy I feel like I'm going to faint."

"You're dehydrated," Allison replied. "You all are. It's going to take at least the rest of today for you to start feeling up to snuff, and that's only if you stay put and rest and continue to pump the fluids we're giving you."
"Speaking of..." Lori appeared from behind, carrying a tray filled with cups of liquid gelatin. She moved from one couch/love seat/recliner to the next, and the look on her face told the patients they'd best not complain that they didn't like lime-flavored Jell-O. As her belly grew she recalled the halcyon days of her pregnancy with Carl, when she was the pampered patient and not the caregiver who was on her feet for hours at a time when her back was aching and her ankles were swelling. After she'd distributed the morning's nutrition she very bluntly announced that she was going to help Carol carry some basins of water and wash clothes back to sick bay and that everyone was expected to cleanse themselves as much as possible because, as she put it, "Y'all are getting pretty ripe."

"They're looking pretty healthy to me," Lori mumbled to Allison as she walked past her. "Seems like they could be taking care of themselves."

"They are getting better," Allison agreed quietly as she took Lori aside, "but the only showers in the building are on the second floor, and I don't think any of them have the strength to haul themselves across the store and up the stairs right now. We don't want to wear them out before they've had a chance to completely recover." She was probably just as exhausted as Lori, maybe even more so, but she needed the woman's cooperation so she erred on the side of complicity. "I know this is wearing you down, but if any of them try to get up and about while they're still so dehydrated they could fall down the stairs and suffer a serious head injury. And we certainly don't need to add something like that to our troubles. It's a pain, but we sort of need to cater to them for the time being."

Lori seemed to consider Allison's words and then nodded in assent. "You're probably right. If they get up and active before they're physically ready then they'll just get sicker." She picked up some empty containers and headed off to the bathroom to fill them with water.

"What were you two gossipin' about?" Daryl asked suspiciously after Lori had left. "Are we sicker than you're lettin' on or something?"

"No, no, nothing like that," Allison strode over to his chaise and gently smoothed his hair from his forehead back onto his scalp. She made a show of looking left and right to make sure Lori was out of earshot and then told him quietly, "Lori is getting a little bit short-tempered about hauling water back here for y'all. I just explained to her that until y'all have had a bit more rest and rehydration, you weren't healthy enough to go upstairs for a proper shower."

"We've been this close to death and she's griping about something so petty?!" Daryl growled.

His illness was getting more and more serious in retrospect, Allison noticed. Soon he'd be trying to find a way to get in touch with Hugh Laurie to insist that he'd made a great two-part episode for House M.D. She kept a straight face as she explained to him, "You have to understand, she's pregnant, her body is undergoing changes that make her physically uncomfortable, and that's in addition to her hormones that have gone into overdrive." She gave him her best compassionate look. "Now finish your Jell-O so that by tonight maybe you'll feel strong enough sit up for a few hours."

"Hey, maybe we can all play a board game or something later, if we're up to it," Beth suggested. "I'm getting pretty bored of doing nothing but reading old magazines."

"Well, what about the scintillating conversations y'all have been having?" Allison asked, just slightly sarcastic. "Let's see...there was that 30 minute discourse on Mary Ann versus Ginger, then later a lively discussion on why it's called 'carpet' when it's neither a car nor a pet but a floor covering. Oh, and we can't forget the heated debate on whether or not y'all would have gone through a can of 2,000 Flushes by now."
"I suppose you'd prefer it if we discussed something like Valentina Tereshkova," Glenn replied.

"Who?" Carol asked as she and Lori returned with the portable bathing materials.

"The first woman to go into outer space," Maggie and Glenn replied in sing-song unison.

"Sure, you mock me but," Allison pointed an index finger in the air, "you remembered her name and her claim to fame. You learned something."

"Fat lot of good knowing about some Communist chick does when it comes to surviving walkers," T-Dog rolled his eyes.

"I'd elaborate on the long-term benefits of knowledge for its own sake, but somehow I have a feeling it won't interest y'all as much as 'If the cast of Friends was stranded in the Andes after a plane crash, who would they eat first?'"

"Joey. He's stupid and of no use," Glenn stated.

"No, he's too cute to kill. I think Phoebe, 'cause she won't kill any animals for food," Beth replied.

"I give up," Allison muttered.

"Look what I found," Carl suddenly appeared. Apparently he'd been exploring all the nooks and crannies of the store again. "What are these? Some sort of old game cartridges?"

Lori, Carol and Allison looked at his extended hands and burst into laughter together.

"Those are cassette tapes," his mother told him. "They're sort of like CDs but on tape."

"You are making me feel very old," Carol added. She took a few from his right hand and started looking through them. "Band on the Run, Greatest Hits of the 60s, Freedom Rock..." she read the titles. "Look at all these good old songs...."

"Maybe there's an old boom box for sale somewhere," Allison commented. "Carl, have you seen any batteries while making your rounds?"

"Yeah, there's a box of different ones over there," he pointed.

"Would you do me a favor and bring the box here? And I'll see if I can find something to play these in," Allison continued. "Maybe some music will keep these folks amused for a bit."

Seeing the direction Allison started off in, Lori called to her, "I'll start looking on the other side of the store and see if I find anything."

‡‡‡ ‡‡‡ ‡‡‡

Allison started her search at the end of the first aisle of the store, and after a few minutes she heard voices. She peeked around the corner to see Rick talking to Hershel. Rick wasn't far from the stairs, so she presumed he'd just finished watch duty and was briefing his replacement. But their concerned faces and lowered voices worried her.

"Hey guys," she said as casually as possible as she walked over to them. "How's everything?"

Rick paused a beat before replying. "Fine." He and Hershel exchanged glances.

"Is something wrong?" she asked.
"Not really," Rick said, "it's just that I saw two small groups of walkers out in the distance early this morning. They were far away enough that I couldn't really see them without binoculars, and they were not heading this way, so they're not an immediate threat."

"But something's bothering you," Allison prompted him.

"Maybe I'm just paranoid after the farm," Rick told them, "but this is the first time I've seen more than two walkers at a time since we moved in here. There were two groups of them, four in the first and then maybe 20 minutes later three more, heading in the same direction."

"But not in this direction," Hershel reconfirmed.

"No. They were some distance away and they were passin' us right by. Like I said, I think we're OK for now, but I want us to keep a vigilant eye out now, whoever's up there on watch. Report back if we see more groups like that, or larger groups. Could get dangerous if they're forming herds."

"I agree with you," Hershel told him, "but for right now I suggest that we don't mention anything to the others until they're a little bit better. You say something now and Daryl and Glenn are going to rush upstairs before their bodies are physically ready."

"We need them to be healthy," Rick agreed. "How are they doing?" he asked Allison.

"Much better. I think the worst of it is over and right now it's mainly a matter of replacing everything they lost in the last 48 hours. I'm thinking that by tonight they should be able to sit up for a couple of hours, and then maybe tomorrow they'll be strong enough to get back into the routine."

"OK, good. Hershel's taking watch for a while now while I grab something quick to eat and then some sleep. I'll let Carl know to relieve him in a few hours."

"I can take a shift, too," Allison said.

"Not until everyone is out of their sick beds," Rick replied. "Right now I need you to tend to them and get them all back on their feet."

"OK," she reluctantly agreed. She felt bad that Rick, Hershel and Carl had to cover for the rest of them. Although, in an odd way, having solo watch duty seemed to actually be good for Carl; the youngster was maturing beyond his years and developing a very serious sense of responsibility.

"Carol is over by sick bay," Allison told Rick, "please have her fix you something to eat. You need to keep up your strength, too."

Rick nodded curtly and departed. Hershel reminded Allison, "Remember, not a word for now."

"My lips are sealed," she replied. As he headed to the roof she started hearing the refrain from an old song in her head.... "Our lips are sealed..." She remembered that she was supposed to be looking for something to play those cassette tapes on. She resumed browsing up and down the aisles, now with the Go-Go's stuck in her head.

Mr. Charlie didn't believe much in organization, Allison noted as she wandered up one aisle and down the next. There was no rhyme or reason to the way things were stacked on the shelves... there were boxes of dusty Christmas ornaments next to old hairdryers with a selection of commemorative Kentucky Derby shot glasses just above them. Of course it couldn't be simple like just browsing through the electronics section for a tape player, she sighed. Since when had anything been simple lately?
She turned another corner, eyes sweeping up and down as she walked. Niagara Falls toothpick holder…couple of cast iron frying pans…the world's gaudiest necktie…a fairly nice set of embroidered handkerchiefs…a lampshade still wrapped in its original plastic…a Samsung portable stereo…bowling bag – a ViewMaster with a reel installed in it… She picked up the ViewMaster and peered into it. She was treated to a series of 3-D images of the 1962 World's Fair in Seattle. She set it back down and continued browsing when something nudging at her subconscious made her pause. She backed up a few steps, looked around and the Samsung combination radio/cassette player finally registered. Eureka! She double-timed it back to sick bay, hoping that Carl had found some batteries that fit the boom box and that still had some juice left in them.

When she got back with her prize, Carl was waiting for her with two boxes filled with a variety of Duracells and Evereadys, some still brand new in the original packaging.

"Is it time for my pills yet?" Daryl asked before she could open the back of the radio to see what type of batteries were required.

She glanced at the pocket watch. "Yeah, just about." She handed the stereo to Carl. "Can you figure out what size batteries this needs and get it set up?"

"Sure thing!" The youngster was always proud to be relied upon for an important task.

As she dispensed the ibuprofen she questioned each individual – how do you feel? When's the last time you had to go to the bathroom? Has the Jell-O or broth made you feel nauseated at all? Do you have any specific pains in your joints, or just an overall achiness?

"Good news," she announced after interviewing her last patient. "I think you're all well enough to have some actual soup now instead of just clear broth. Something that will actually fill you up a little and give you some of your strength back."

"I'll go see what we've got available," Carol said. She returned a few moments later with three cans. "Who wants what?" she asked the group. "Chicken with Rice, Beef Vegetable, or Old Fashioned Tomato Rice?"

"Are those all that are left?" Beth asked.

"No, these are what I picked up and brought over here." Even the ever-patient Carol seemed to be getting a little irritable with the sick people. "I thought these might be the gentlest on your stomachs right now."

"I'll put some water on to boil," Lori announced. "We'll heat them all up, but you guys are either going to have to fight it out to get your favorite or just take what you're served."

"Yes, m'am," Glenn muttered as she left.

"Whatever, as long as T-Dog's not doin' the cooking," Daryl grumbled.

"Oh, like I meant to make everyone sick," T sat up and turned to face Daryl. "If that had been my master plan, do you think I would've eaten that stuff, too?"

"Alright already," Maggie grasped her head with her hands. "It's no one's fault, it was an accident, let's just talk about something else. Please."

"Batteries are installed," Carl said to Allison in an official voice. "How does this thing work?"

"Give me one of those cassettes," she told the boy. He handed her Freedom Rock part one. "Watch
me," she instructed him. "This button pops the door open. You take the tape out of the case and put it in this way, so that this exposed part with the tape is pointing upward. Then you push the door closed and push this button, which is the 'play' button."

Carl did as instructed and when the opening guitar notes of "Layla" came through the speakers his face lit up like a kid on Christmas morning. "It works!" he gasped.

"I'm putting you in charge of the music," Allison told him. "This is the volume control, and don't listen to any of them," she nodded toward the patients, "if they don't like a song. Just let it play for now."

"OK," he replied dutifully as Allison went to arrange additional chairs around their communal dining room table.

"Everyone will sit at the table for lunch today," she announced to the patients once the various pots of soup were steaming hot. It was important for them to spend more time upright in order to get their hearts re-acclimated to pumping blood upward to the head after 48 hours in bed. That way they wouldn't feel so dizzy and weak every time they stood up. Carol set two sleeves of Ritz crackers on the table and began asking everyone which type of soup they wanted. Carl turned off the music to preserve the batteries and everyone settled into place.

"I didn't realize how hungry I was until I started eating this soup," Maggie remarked, scooping up some Beef Vegetable. She closed her eyes and sighed contentedly. "This is heavenly."

"That's a good sign," Allison commented, "that you're actually craving food now. The sickness is gone and your bodies are anxious to get better."

"Come to think of it," T-Dog murmured between bites of a cracker, "I haven't had to make that mad dash to the bathroom in…" he paused to calculate, "well, a long time now."

"Another good sign," Allison smiled.

Beth had a spoonful of Chicken Rice soup at her lips. She crinkled up her nose in disgust and said, "Can we please not talk about…y'know, the bathroom and stuff while we're eating?"

"Sorry," T-Dog shrugged, looking down at his bowl. "Just thinkin' out loud."

"Well, if everyone is on the road to recovery maybe we can disassemble this little hospital area today and folks can go back to resting in their own beds," Lori suggested.

"Oh, good, I can wash all the bed linens then," Carol chimed in. She paused and then added wistfully, looking at the cloudy sky through one of the windows, "I wish it was sunnier outside… and that we had a clothesline…it would be nice to hang those blankets up outdoors. I used to do that during the summer…made the bedding smell so nice…"

"I'll help you," Lori offered. "Wet blankets and sheets are heavy, you shouldn't have to do all that by yourself."

"Don't be ridiculous," Carol waved her off. "I don't mind a bit. Besides, hanging up blankets in your condition would absolutely kill your back. I can handle it."

Allison felt vaguely uncomfortable at their conversation, and when she glanced furtively around the table it appeared that the others were uneasy as well. They all felt guilty - they were making extra work and they hadn't been doing their fair share since they'd fallen ill. That was the message Carol and Lori seemed to be conveying, at least.
"I can help you wash stuff," Beth offered timidly, "maybe later this afternoon, after I rest a little bit."

"Nonsense," Carol told her. "Your job is to get completely better before you start doing chores. Can't have you relapsing, after all." She probably meant her words to be comforting, but Allison couldn't help but hear a shade of martyrdom in Carol's tone.

"Looks like it's going to rain soon," Glenn spoke up in an effort to change the topic. "Too bad, Allison. I bet you'd love to go outside today and get some exercise after being stuck inside doing nothing for almost three days in a row."

Allison almost choked on a spoonful of tomato soup. Doing nothing?! She'd personally held a basin under this man's chin while he was doubled over in pain and his stomach almost turned inside out and he accused her of doing nothing? Before she could collect her thoughts enough to make a pithy response, Maggie spoke up.

"Glenn, Allison hasn't been 'doing nothing', she's been very busy taking care of all of us. She's probably tired more than anything."

"Oh!" the young man got that deer-in-the-headlights look on his face that Allison had seen before when he'd spoken without thinking. "I didn't mean….I know that…I just meant that she's been cooped up inside for a long time and would probably like to get some fresh air…" his faltering voice trailed off.

"It's OK, I understand what you meant," Allison reassured him. "I think we're all suffering a bit from cabin fever by now."

"Hopefully by tomorrow we'll feel well enough to at least go upstairs for some guard duty," Maggie commented.

"And I can get out and do some huntin'," Daryl added.

"Hold up there, cowboy," Allison cautioned him, "just because you're feeling a little better doesn't mean you're up to going off on a five mile hike carrying your crossbow."

"Maybe we can check some of our snares?" Carl asked. "We set some not too far away, and that way if Daryl gets sick while we're out I can run back here for help."

Daryl looked ready to soundly chastise Carl for implying that he'd need any special care, but upon seeing the earnest look on the boy's face, he realized that the kid was only anxious to be useful somehow. He didn't mean any offense, Daryl decided, and wasn't implying that he was weak. Carl was simply eager to please, an emotion Daryl remembered all too well from his youth. In his case it had always been to avoid getting beaten by his father or smacked around and verbally taunted by Merle. Carl wasn't physically abused, but he was probably what those TV judges would call a victim of neglect. His parents had been arguing a lot before all this had happened, according to the few remarks Carl had made to him while they'd been out hunting together, and now they were barely speaking to one another. In Daryl's mind it was cut and dried, black and white – if you're married, you don't cheat on your spouse and if you have children you don't argue or disrespect your spouse right in front of them. Rick was being as good a daddy as he could, Daryl thought, but he also had to spread his time very thin, taking care of the rest of their group and all. He gave the man credit for not kicking his wife to the curb when he'd found out that she was carrying another man's child. That whole thing with her and Shane was just wrong, Daryl thought crossly. But whatever, he was sure that Carl was aware of the tension between his parents and he inwardly cringed as he remembered that sick feeling in the pit of his stomach he used to get when his own folks used to
"Yeah," he told the youngster, "if it ain't raining tomorrow you and I should go out and check those traps. Maybe we'll have us some fresh rabbit for dinner." He gave Carl a quick half-smile.

Carol sat down at the table with a sigh, dipping a teabag into her cup. The supper dishes, such as they were, had been cleared away and washed. Lori, Carl, Rick and Beth had gone off to bed. Hershel was up on the roof keeping watch. The rest of the group was seated around the table, not quite ready to call it a night even though they'd just played several rounds of Uno. Perhaps they all sensed the need for a group discussion.

"How long do you suppose we'll be able to stay here?" Carol asked no one in particular.

"The building is pretty secure," T-Dog replied, "and we've got running water, but the food supply is limited. That could be a problem."

"At least at the farm we were able to grow vegetables and raise chickens," Maggie mused. "And that last house we were at had a garden, too."

"That house had good huntin' nearby, too," Daryl added. "Here we've got to go a ways afield." He paused. "But that ain't necessarily bad, I guess. We've got to consider both sides…are we better off stayin' in a solid brick building like this, even if we have to go further and further out for food?"

"And what if eventually the walkers head this way, like they did at the farm?" Glenn asked. "We're safe inside this building – I think – but what if they keep coming and coming and there are too many for us to take on and we can't go outside for supplies?"

"That scenario would apply to any place we were holed up in, though," Allison remarked.

"If we were to go someplace else…where would we go?" Carol asked timidly. "I mean, does it make sense to go north, where it's colder, or to the coast where there's water for fishing and at least one side where walkers can't approach…?"

"Makes you wonder," T-Dog said, "what's going on in the rest of the country. I mean, is the president all tucked away safely in the White House? Seems to me that during 9/11 they said in the press that there's an underground bunker at the White House or something…"

"Even if he is, or he and his staff are in a 'safe room',' Maggie commented, "their supplies are just as limited as ours or anyone else's."

"Those guys we met…" Glenn spoke up. "…the ones with Randall's group. They said that they'd tried to go to Washington D.C. because they'd heard that there was a refugee center there. But they couldn't get near the city because of all the panic and congestion."

"That makes sense," Allison acknowledged. "Places like D.C. and New York and Chicago with huge populations were probably overrun from the get-go. Who knows what kind of anarchy took place when so many people were trying to get help and supplies were limited."

"Those guys mentioned Nebraska," Glenn added. "Low population, lots of guns…"

"Same would probably apply to Montana or Wyoming or North Dakota," T-Dog said. "Also lots of room for growing crops, maybe more game to hunt…" He paused as if considering the prospect. "Yeah, that kinda makes sense…but how to get there from here?"
"Heck, that's a couple of hours travel by jet from Georgia," Allison remarked. "I can't imagine driving there, especially with gasoline being in such short supply…"

"But it's a thought, a possibility," Daryl replied. "Even if it's a long journey, might be a good goal to aim at." He thought for a moment. "What we need is an atlas or an almanac with population numbers and other kinds of statistics. Maybe we don't need to go as far as Nebraska…maybe we can find an isolated place like that in – I dunno, Texas or even right here in Georgia. The Great Plains ain't the only states with a lot of undeveloped land."

"That's a good point," Glenn agreed. "Our best bet for a long-term home is some place even more rural than Maggie's dad's farm – some place where there wasn't a lot of people nearby in the first place so there'd be less walkers to start with."

"And a place like that would have plenty of land nearby for planting and hunting," T-Dog was getting caught up in the enthusiasm. "It's just a matter of finding a place and getting there…" he slumped back in his chair, realizing the enormity of the task at hand.

Allison stood up and stretched. "I don't know about y'all, but it's getting past my bedtime. Maybe tomorrow at breakfast we can discuss some of these ideas with Rick and Hershel and get their opinions."

Everyone nodded their assent and the group slowly headed off to their respective sleeping areas (rather than "sick bay") for the first time in three days. Allison smiled as she walked with Daryl to their bedroom, looking forward to having a warm body to warm her cold feet on again…
"Never thought oatmeal would actually taste good to me," T-Dog commented the next morning at breakfast. "Used to have trouble swallowin' the stuff on a good day."

"I guess anything would taste good after three days of chicken broth and liquid Jell-O," Maggie said, blowing on a spoonful of the hot cereal to cool it down a bit.

"Mornin' everyone," Rick addressed the group quickly as he came to the table with a large paper scrolled up. Carol rushed to fill a bowl with oatmeal and set it in front of the sheriff. "Thanks," he glanced up at her slightly. He partially unrolled the large sheet on the table. "I found this in Mr. Charlie's office," he explained. "It's a surveyor's map of the county. Hershel and I were studying it yesterday and found this," he pointed to a spot on the map.

"A hospital," Allison was the first to say out loud as several heads stretched over to peer where Rick's finger indicated. There was no identifying name, just an indication that the structure on that plot of land was a hospital.

"Any idea what hospital it might be?" Rick asked her. "How big it is or anything like that?"

"Not offhand, not without a name," Allison admitted. "Is there a date on that map?"

Rick looked down at the legend. "Looks like it's a couple years old," he said wryly, "1968."

"Who knows if the place is even still there, though?" Lori asked.

"We don't know, but I think it's worth checking out. It might be a secure place to stay. Or at least it might have some medical supplies we can scavenge. Bandages, medicine…"

"Sutures, antiseptics, IV fluids, even," Allison continued his thought.

"Stuff we'll need when the baby comes," Beth spoke up.

"Right," Rick agreed without a glance at his wife. "I think it's worth a road trip to check it out."

"No problem, Maggie and I are in," Glenn said.

"I don't know if you two are strong enough yet for a run like that," Rick replied. "You've only been on your feet for a little less than a day."

"We're fine," Maggie protested, "and we could sure use some fresh air."

"Then I suggest you take turns handling guard duty and give your dad a chance to catch up on his rest. He's been pulling double and triple shifts for a few days now." He saw that Glenn was about to speak up and he hastily added, "There's plenty of fresh air to be had up on the roof."

"You're not thinking of going, are you?" Lori asked her husband fearfully. "You've been working just as hard as Hershel...you need some sleep...." Her voice trailed off. She seemed almost afraid to speak to Rick lately, Allison noticed.

"Don't you worry 'bout me," Rick told her curtly.

"I can go," Daryl said. "Give me a chance to hunt us up some fresh food."
"I don't know if you should be out on foot tracking for miles so soon," Allison remarked. "You're still recovering too, you know."

"I can at least check the snares," he replied. "Don't have to do a lot of walkin', can drive the truck right up to 'em."

"I'd like you to go with him," Rick told Allison. "And Carl, too."

"How come she gets to go?" Maggie sputtered like a jealous child.

"Allison and Carl haven't been sick, so if Daryl starts feeling poorly they can help him. Also she's the best person to send to a hospital – she knows the equipment and the medicines and what all would be of use to us. And," he smiled at his son who was positively puffed up with pride that his father had chosen him specifically for a mission, "Carl helped Daryl to set up the snares, he knows where they're located." He glanced around the table. "Any other questions?"

The group fell silent. It was obvious, though, that Lori was biting back words of protest – she didn't want her son going out into unknown territory. But she felt helpless; not only was Rick doing his best to ignore her these days, her own son now treated her as if she was a constant irritant, a thorn in his side. As if reading her mind T-Dog spoke up to suggest something of a compromise. "Chief, what do you say you take some time off today while those three are out and get some sleep? I could use some air as well, so I'll rotate with Glenn and Maggie." He looked at Lori and then turned back to Rick. "It won't do any of us any good if you get sick, you know." Lori gave T-Dog a grateful smile.

Rick seemed to be hesitating so Lori added quietly, "I'll be busy here most of the afternoon with some housekeeping chores, so you'll have peace and quiet if you want to nap." It was her pitiful way of letting her husband know that he could safely sleep without worrying about her trying to cuddle next to him.

"I'll get ready and meet you by the truck in 15 minutes," Allison told Daryl. The palpable tension between the Grimes was making her uncomfortable. "Speaking of minutes," she said suddenly, "I'd better give this back to you." She handed Glenn the pocket watch. "Thanks for letting me borrow it, it came in handy."

"OK, it looks like we need to head north on 70, so turn left at the junction up ahead," Allison told Daryl. She was sitting in the passenger seat of the pickup truck referring back and forth from a road map to the surveyor's drawing doing her best to navigate. Carl was sitting between them, occasionally giggling when Daryl complained about Allison's directions and his constant double-checking. "What do you mean 'looks like'? Either we have to go that way or we don't!"

"Well excuse me for not being Mrs. Rand McNally," she retorted. "I'm doing my best here. It's not like we can pull into a Chevron station and ask for directions." She paused and then added, "Like you or any man would actually ask for directions..."

"Only directions anyone would get from a gas station attendant last time I checked would be the best route to Pakistan or Iraq. That is if the guy could even speak English," Daryl spat.

"Whoa, Middle Eastern Embassy calling on Line One!" Allison said. "Way to stereotype an entire profession." She nodded toward Carl. "You're going to pre-judge an innocent child's mind."

"I'm not a child!" Carl protested.
"Darned straight he's not," Daryl agreed. "And he ain't so innocent, either. He knows the score."

"Yep," Carl nodded his head definitely.

Allison suppressed a chuckle. It was obvious that Carl not only did not know the "score," he didn't even understand the game in progress. But this was apparently some sort of male bonding moment, so she kept quiet. "Aha!" she announced some minutes later. "We're on the right track." She pointed at the blue-and-white "H" road sign that indicated there was a hospital nearby. A few minutes later they all saw the building looming in the distance, and Daryl found the side street that led to the driveway.

"North Coweta County General," Daryl read the faded sign out loud as he pulled the truck in front of the building. "Bet they didn't treat anything specific here," he added with a sidelong glance at Allison.

"Oy," she groaned at his pun.

"Don't blame me, I learned that stuff from you," he remarked as he climbed out of the cab. The three of them cautiously approached the boarded-up front doors, keeping an eye and ear out for walkers as they did. Daryl had a Buck knife on his hip and his crossbow over his shoulder. Allison had her machete and a handgun, and Carl had a pistol as well.

They paused at the front door and noted that several windows on the first floor were also boarded up.

"There must have been survivors inside at one time if they bothered to board up the place," Daryl commented. "Maybe there still are." He glanced around from side to side once again. "Weird thing is, though, there ain't no cars in the parking lot. You'd think that if it was staff inside, their vehicles would still be here."

Allison closed her eyes in concentration. North Coweta County General….she'd never been here before but for some reason the name rang a bell. Suddenly she remembered.

"This place was abandoned and boarded up long before the walkers came," she announced. "I remember now…this was called Northville Hospital at one time and it went bankrupt and closed, then these three doctors formed a company and bought it and re-opened it as North Coweta County General."

"Thanks for the history lesson," Daryl muttered. "But what does that have to do with — "

"Perhaps if you'd let me finish, you'd understand," she replied a bit imperiously. "The reason I remember the name of this middle-of-nowhere hospital is because the three doctors ran it for several years but then they ran out of money, too, and went belly-up. They closed the place and shuttered it, but scrappers invaded…"

"Scrapers?" Carl asked.

"Thieves lookin' to steal copper wire and other metal stuff to sell," Daryl told him.

"…and in the months after the place closed, people who lived nearby found confidential patient files on their front lawns and blowing around in the wind. This was used as a case study in my HIPAA compliance class."

"Hippo – what class?" Carl asked as they slowly walked alongside the building looking for an entry point.
"HIPAA. It's an abbreviation for Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act. It's a law that guarantees, among other things, patient privacy. When a hospital closes permanently, the patient records are – by law – supposed to be shredded or burned or otherwise disposed of so that they cannot be read. The doctors that owned that hospital got their licenses revoked and all sorts of expensive fines attached to them for not properly disposing of those patient records. Long story short, the case was presented to us as an example of why we should comply with HIPAA, and that's why I remember this place."

"Ain't no such thing as a long story short when it comes to your stories, Angel," Daryl remarked with a half-grin. "But that's good to know….this place had no patients or staff when the outbreak started. Might not be anyone inside." He stopped and tugged at every board as they passed by the windows. Suddenly he stopped. This board was loose on one side. He pulled it outward and stuck his head underneath to look inside. "No glass here," he reported. "Hold on…" he wrenched the plywood from the frame and tossed it aside. They all stood stock still for several seconds to see if the noise had alerted any walkers that might be inside. After hearing no sounds Daryl climbed in first then turned around to help Carl inside. Allison followed the young boy.

"Geez," Daryl muttered, surveying the room. Most of the ceiling tiles were missing and insulation hung down in damp clumps. The examination table was mostly intact, but the stirrups had been ripped from their moorings. The head of the overhead exam light was missing and the adjustable neck was hanging at an odd, twisted angle with wires protruding from the end. There were large holes punched in the walls and trash strewn on the floor.

They slowly made their way down a corridor, peeking into rooms as they walked. Every room was in the same state of disarray, having been picked clean by scavengers. As they approached the end of the hall they heard a raspy, groaning vocal sound. The three immediately got into "formation" as Rick had drilled them for so many weeks. Back-to-back in a small circle, they had their weapons drawn and looked around to see what threat was approaching. But the noise didn't seem to get any closer; it was still slightly muffled and remained at the same decibel level. Daryl gestured for them to stay put and remain quiet and with his trained ear followed the sound. It was coming from the elevator only a few steps away. There was about an inch of space between the almost-closed doors, and Daryl peeked inside. Then, with a quick motion, he pulled them open. He looked down into the shaft and Allison and Carl walked over to join him. There, a floor below them, was a walker pacing in the tiny space and clawing at the walls.

"Sorry bastard probably fell down there while he was stealing cable," Daryl commented.

"Should we shoot him?" Carl asked.

"Nah, he can't get out of there and hurt anyone."

"I definitely don't think that this is a safe hideaway," Allison commented. "With all that exposed insulation, there's probably black mold in there. Or maybe even asbestos."

"Yeah, we sure don't want to stay here long enough to develop lung cancer," Daryl replied, just a tad sarcastically. "But there might be some supplies we can use, let's keep looking."

They continued to cautiously explore the premises. They found a door marked "Kitchen" and ventured inside. It, too, had been thorough picked over it appeared. But when they walked into an adjacent room that apparently served as a pantry they found some food service-sized canned goods. They stuffed canned peaches, peas, and creamed corn into Carl's backpack. They filled a tote bag with two 12-packs of Ensure that were on the shelf. The kitchen supplies exhausted, they wandered on, peering inside every closed door since many of the name plates had long been removed.
"Bingo!" Allison said quietly when they opened one door that led to a room with shelves filled with dispenser-type boxes. Daryl trained his flashlight on one box after another as Allison read with glee, "Polysorb, Plain Gut, Chromic Gut, Silk…" Daryl shrugged the knapsack off his back and started stuffing boxes into it, as did Allison with her own. Once they were loaded with all they could carry, Daryl announced that they should probably head back since it they were losing daylight.

They found a broken window a few rooms down and climbed outside through it. They stood a moment to get their bearings; they were apparently at the back of the building. Daryl motioned for them to follow him and he led them around the structure toward the front where their truck was parked. Allison caught a glimpse of the edge of a decorative pond on one end of the building when Daryl suddenly motioned for them to stop. They crouched down and waited while he silently skulked forward. Moments later they heard honking or squawking sounds and Daryl returned triumphantly holding a Canadian goose in one hand. He set it on the ground, removed the arrow from it and returned it to his quiver.

"Guess someone is going to cook our goose tonight, huh?" Carl asked as they climbed back into the truck. He then laughed out loud at his own joke as Daryl started the engine and threw the vehicle into "drive."
Chapter 57

Carol noticed the concerned look on Lori's face as the two were cleaning up the lunch dishes. "You feeling OK?" she asked.

"What? Oh, yeah, I'm fine," Lori replied distractedly.

"Is it…the baby? Is something wrong?"

"No, no," Lori shook her head and smiled very slightly to reassure Carol. "Nothing like that. I'm just worried about Carl being out there…" Her voice drifted off as she glanced to a window. "It's going to start getting dark soon. Shouldn't they be back by now?"

"It's still early, and it looked on the map like that hospital was quite a distance from here. It might have taken them an hour or more just to get there. Besides," she patted Lori's arm reassuringly, "Daryl will keep them safe."

"I know you're right," Lori sniffed, tears involuntarily forming in her eyes, "but I can't help but worry about…well, everything. Carl barely speaks to me these days. It seems like he confides in you and Allison and asks you questions that he has but me…he treats me like I'm the dumbest human on Earth. He just dismisses me."

Carol smiled knowingly. "That's just typical of kids his age. I remember when Sophia was around 11 or so…" She paused and closed her eyes for a moment. She swallowed hard and continued. "I'd try to sit her down and talk to her about…things, you know, like how her body was going to be changing soon and such. She didn't want to hear about it. In fact, around that time she questioned anything I said. She could ask me 'What day is today?' and I'd say 'Tuesday. Yesterday was Monday and tomorrow is Wednesday so today is definitely Tuesday.' And she'd cock her head and ask me suspiciously 'Are you sure?'"

Lori chuckled and wiped away a tear. Carol continued. "Yet I heard from some of her friends' mamas that she would sit down and open right up, asking them all sorts of questions. And that made me realize that sure enough, a couple of Sophia's friends used to come over during the day when I was hanging up laundry and ask me those same kinds of questions." She squeezed Lori's hand. "For some reason, at a certain age kids feel more comfortable talking to some adult other than their parents."

"Now that you mention it," Lori conceded, "when I was in middle school I remember asking my best friend's mom what French kissing meant. I would never have discussed such a thing with my own mother." She sighed. "But I guess I always thought it would be different when I had kids, that I would be the 'cool' mom who could talk about anything with my children."

"I'm sure mothers throughout the ages have had the same thought," Carol replied. Sadly, she had some additional thoughts on why Carl was shunning his mother, but at the moment she just wanted to comfort Lori. But she'd seen the signs before…unfortunately in her own daughter. A child who withdrew emotionally and sometimes acted out belligerently because his or her parents were obviously not getting along, to put it mildly.

"They'll be back safely soon, yeah?" Lori said aloud as if to reassure herself.

"Yeah," Carol replied as they stacked the freshly dried dishes on the counter.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡
"We might as well take a quick detour through these neighborhoods while we're here," Daryl said as he turned the truck off of the main street and into a subdivision. "Might be a house we can hole up in..." His voice trailed off as they slowly cruised up Forest Avenue. Despite the optimistically leafy name, the street was filled with cheaply built houses crushed together on tiny plots of land. Some of the homes still had Armor Guard grilles left on the windows, while many of the others were partially boarded up and missing front doors. They continued on to Hastings Street, where the houses were in even further disrepair. Some were burned out and there were empty fields in between some of the dwellings where the buildings had been razed. This was obviously a low-income area that had seen better days and that was probably why the hospital had gone bankrupt... Medicaid only pays so much, and despite any doctor's good intentions he couldn't continue to pay for expensive tests and treatments out of pocket.

"Don't expect we'd find much in any of these places," Daryl commented as he rolled slowly down the street. "They were probably picked clean a long time ago." He paused the truck and Allison turned to see what he was looking at. There were two cars parked at the curb. The driver's side window had been smashed on both of them. "Wait here," he said, putting the truck in neutral and sliding out the door. He walked over and peered inside the first car. The stereo had been ripped out of the dashboard and the glove box was gaping open. And empty.

Allison absently glanced into the rear-view mirror and then whipped her head around to look out the back window. Her eyes hadn't been deceiving her, there were two walkers about a block away inching their way toward the truck. She leaned her head out the open driver's side door and gave a soft whistle. When Daryl turned in her direction she pointed behind them. In one quick motion he jumped back into the cab and threw the gearshift into "drive." He drove to the corner then stopped and then stuck his head out the window and looked back into the distance.

"Looks like only the two," he commented when he sat back down. He made a left turn and went back to the road they'd originally taken to get to the hospital. "I was hopin' to siphon some gas outta those cars...if there was any left... We're gonna need plenty if we keep staying at Mr. Charlie's. We have to keep driving further and further out to find supplies and get to some decent hunting ground, and that takes fuel."

"The shelves are filled with stuff at the store," Carl said, a look of concern crossing his face. "You don't think that's enough supplies to last us a while?"

"The food we've got won't last forever," Daryl told him. He paused and then added, "At least at the last house there was hunting and fishing right on the grounds nearby. But heck, I ain't even seen many squirrels running through the parking lot of ol' Charlie's place, much less a rabbit or deer."

"There must be another house that would suit us some place near here," Allison sighed. "I mean, this last neighborhood was a bust, but maybe out to the east, or further south in the county..."

"The problem is finding a place," Daryl told her. "We have to go street by street, house to house, and that uses up fuel, too. But it's something that we're going to have to do eventually."

"You think so?" She asked him.

"I think we're too exposed at Charlie's. It's on a main street, small as it is, and the vehicles are pretty easy to see even though they're parked in the back. Yeah, it's pretty secure when it comes to walkers, but if some live people happen to come to town scavenging, that's a whole 'nother story. Fact is we're just safer if we're in a more isolated area, far off of the road."

"So we're going to have to move soon?" Carl asked, leaning forward and looking at Daryl. It was obvious that the conversation was making the boy uneasy, so Daryl tried to reassure him.
"Probably not right away, I think we'll be good for a while. I'm just sayin' that this might not be a permanent home, that we should keep looking around for a better place to stay."

"Oh, OK," Carl seemed somewhat reassured.

They continued to head back to Mr. Charlie's, although at a much slower speed than they'd used on the trip up to the hospital. Dusk was quickly settling in, and Daryl was driving slower and more cautiously as it became darker and visibility was restricted. He didn't want to use the headlights until absolutely necessary lest they attracted walkers….or alerted any surviving humans that might be lurking in the impending darkness.

"So what was all that stuff you took from the hospital?" Daryl asked Allison after they'd driven in silence for some time. "Some of the boxes said 'gut' – that's stitches, right?"

"Yeah," she replied quietly, guessing that Carl was asleep from the sound of his steady breathing. "It will come in handy if anyone gets a severe deep cut, but to be honest I was thinking of Lori…"

"What about her?"

"She had Carl by C-section, and sometimes that means….well, that's not to say….a lot of women who've had C-sections – "

"Cripes, just spit it out, will you?"

"OK…there used to be a school of thought that said once a woman had one Caesarian then all her subsequent babies would have to be delivered the same way. That's no longer necessarily true, many women deliver babies naturally after a C-section, but Lori told me not too long ago that she'd suffered from preeclampsia when she had Carl, and I'm somewhat concerned that she might need a Caesarian this time around, too…"

"What's a C-section?" Carl's voice piped up suddenly.

"I thought you were asleep," Allison said accusingly.

"Nope. What's a C-section?" he repeated.

Allison remained silent, frantically trying to think of a response, when Daryl said, "Let's put it this way – have you ever felt the urge to leave a room through the window instead of the door?"

Allison burst into laughter and gently nudged Daryl in his side. She composed herself and then asked Carl, "Do you know anything about how babies are born? I mean, how they actually come into the world?"

"I saw my friend's dog have puppies once," he told her.

"Well, humans have babies a lot like that, only one at a time."

"You mean the baby comes out of the mother's – "

"Yes, more or less," Allison cut him off, not wanting to know where he was going with his analogy. "But sometimes there are complications, and the mother needs help. A C-section is a procedure that means the doctor makes a small cut in the mother's tummy and removes the baby that way."

"Oh." Carl seemed to consider this explanation, and then he chuckled. "I get Daryl's window joke
"While we're talking about the baby, that's another thing we should be keeping an eye out for – diapers and wipes and bottles and things like that. We don't want to wait until Lori's water breaks before we have some infant lingerie on hand."

"Her water breaks?" Daryl asked in a concerned tone. "What is that? Something serious?"

"Yeah," Allison replied sarcastically, "it means that she has to go through one of those painful 'dry' births." Out the corner of her eye she noticed Daryl's face – he wasn't joking around.

"Um, don't you know about…well, how babies are born?" she asked quietly.

"Well, yeah, of course…but I've never heard about things breaking."

Allison suppressed a smile. "I'm sorry, I just thought perhaps you might've seen all the gory details on The Learning Channel or something at one time…"

"Eeww," he visibly shuddered. "No, who the heck wants to see that??"

She was dying to point out to him the strange contradiction of him being able to gut rabbits and squirrels with his bare hands but the thought of a woman giving birth grossed him out. Instead she simply explained to him, "It's a figure of speech, the water breaking. It happens during labor…it refers to the amniotic fluid surrounding the baby in the uterus. Once he's ready to be born, the fluid leaks out." Allison glanced to her left and secretly enjoyed seeing Daryl's obvious discomfort.

"So that's another thing to add to our 'must find' list," he finally remarked. "Diapers and baby stuff."

+++ +++ +++

It was dark by the time they finally arrived back at Mr. Charlie's place. Lori rushed to hug Carl, overwhelmed with relief that he'd returned safely, but he shrugged her off, embarrassed by her attention.

"Got us a goose for tomorrow's dinner," Daryl announced, holding the bird in one hand and an overstuffed bag in the other. T-Dog, Beth and Maggie went out to the truck to carry the other bags inside.

"These have some canned goods and stuff," Allison directed, as she hoisted a knapsack over her shoulder, "and these two have medical stuff in them. I guess for now we should stash them behind the front desk so they're handy and everyone knows where they are."

"Allison got stuff for when your water heater breaks," Carl informed his mother as he wiped her kiss off of his cheek. "I'm hungry, is there any dinner left?"

Lori stepped back, momentarily confused. "Carol has some soup simmering. Why don't you go on over to the dining area?"

"My water heater?" She looked at Allison for an explanation.

"He means when your water breaks….when you go into labor," Allison hastily explained. "We were talking about…things…in the truck on the ride back – "

"I would appreciate it," Lori drew her shoulders up imperiously, "if you'd let me explain the details of childbirth to my son."
"Sorry," Allison murmured, her head bowed as Lori stalked off.

When the woman was out of earshot Allison muttered, "I hope she explains the details to her son at least a couple of minutes before she screams 'here comes the head'…"
Chapter 58

Dinner was long done, the dishes had been washed and put away and Allison sat alone at the gaming table, as they called it, idly playing solitaire with a deck of cards Carl had found. She was tired but not sleepy, and Daryl was up on the roof talking to Rick. He'd been gone a while, she thought to herself. He'd said he was just going to chat with Rick a bit, didn't mention staying up there on watch duty. Maybe he was discussing the possibility of moving on soon, finding a farmhouse or some more suitable place to stay for the winter. Or perhaps Rick was unburdening his Lori problems to Daryl. Did men discuss things like that with one another? She then smiled slightly. If only Daryl could read her thoughts...she could just picture him shaking his head and telling her for the umpteenth time, "Dang, but you're nosy!"

"You can put the eight of diamonds on that nine of clubs," a voice interrupted her train of thought.

"Mr. Hershel, I didn't hear you come over."

"You didn't seem like you were concentrating on your game, your face looked a hundred miles away. Mind if I join you?"

"Please do," she smiled and gestured at an empty chair.

"If you're not invested in that game, how about some gin rummy?" he suggested.

Allison scooped up the cards from the table and handed them to the older man to shuffle and deal. As he passed out the cards he said, "I wanted to get your thoughts on something."

"Sure. What's up?"

"Lori's getting along in her pregnancy, and we don't know where we'll be when her time comes. Ideally, if we're still here or set up in a safe house someplace, there should be no problem. You and I can work together and handle things as they happen."

Allison drew a card and nodded for him to continue.

"But if we're on the run, or in some temporary place without a lot of time or supplies...it would be best if we had some help. Or she could go into labor while you're out on a supply run or...I'm busy keeping walkers at bay or something... What I'm saying is that it might be wise to train one of the other women in some basic nursing skills so that we'll have another set of hands that knows a bit about what to do."

"Solid suggestion," Allison agreed. "Wouldn't hurt for some of the others to learn some first aid, too, just in case."

"I spoke to Carol earlier and she said she'd be willing to help with the birth if necessary." Allison's facial expression must have changed involuntarily at the mention of Carol's name because Hershel hastened to explain, "I figured she'd be the best candidate since she's been through labor and delivery herself."

"Yeah, sure, that sounds like a good idea," she replied with as much enthusiasm as she could muster.

"Would you be willing to work with her when you have spare time in the next few weeks, then?" Hershel asked. "I can teach her some basics as well, of course, but you've certainly had more
experience in delivering human babies than I have." He grinned at her. "Gin." He placed his cards on the table.

"Yes, of course. We can start tomorrow. One thing that concerns me a bit, though," Allison commented, "is that Lori had preeclampsia with Carl. There's a possibility that she might need a C-section."

"All the more reason to have some assistance," Hershel said. He paused and then asked somewhat hesitantly, "I heard you mention earlier that you'd picked up some medical supplies at that hospital. Did you get anything that we can use...I mean, she'll need sutures...."

"Yes, there was plenty of gut, thank goodness, and even a couple of pre-packaged spinal kits."

"I'm surprised – I'd think that the scavengers would've surely taken any anesthetics they could find."

"It looked like they got all the oxy and other pain pills, but I'm guessing your average scrapper doesn't know what's inside a spinal kit. For that matter, I'm very nervous about giving a spinal block myself...there's a reason anesthesiologists make the big bucks, you know."

"You'll do just fine, doctor," the vet smiled reassuringly and patted her hand. "And hopefully our worry will be wasted and Lori will deliver naturally and there will be no complications."

"...and there will be rainbows and sparkly unicorns in the back yard," Allison thought to herself sarcastically. She knew Hershel was just trying to be encouraging and hope for the best, but seriously – how many times had Good Fortune smiled on their little group in recent months?

"Thanks for the game," Hershel said, getting up from his chair and stretching slightly. "I think I'm going to turn in early for a change and enjoy the luxury of not having watch until tomorrow and sleeping an entire night."

"Good night," Allison told him. She began shuffling the cards absent-mindedly, mainly just to occupy her hands while she decided whether or not to turn in herself. Just moments after Hershel's departure, however, Carl trotted up to the table.

"What are you doing up so late?" Allison asked him.

"It's not that late," the boy protested. "It just seems like it 'cause it gets dark earlier these days." He extended his left arm and showed her an elaborate gold Omega watch that he'd apparently taken from the jewelry counter and that was a little too large for his wrist. "See? It's barely nine o'clock."

"Well, when I was your age, I had to be in bed by..."

"Oh, you did not!" he waved his hand dismissively at her before she could specify a time. "That's just something adults always say." He pulled out a chair and sat down. "Wanna play something?"

He asked her.

"Like what?" Allison asked with a slight smile. "Poker? You got any money to lose?"

"I don't know how to play poker...how about Go Fish?"

"Why not?" she shrugged. "Here, you deal."

"Where's Daryl?" Carl asked as he dealt the cards.
"He's right here," a gruff voice said. Allison whirled around in her chair.

"Geez, quick sneaking around like that, you startled me!"

"You need to pay attention to your surroundings, always be alert," he chastised her, pulling up a chair. "Thought you'd learned that by now."

"Figured I was safe from sneak attacks in here," she replied. "Besides, Carl is here to protect me."

"Cept that your protector didn't see me approaching, either."

"I was busy looking at my cards," Carl defended himself. "You wanna play?" he asked Daryl.

"Might as well," Daryl sighed, "seein' as I'm wasting my breath tryin' to talk to you two about keeping your guard up."

"We get it, you're right," Allison apologized while Carl re-dealt the cards. "We can't afford to get too complacent."

"I ain't tryin' to be all hard-nosed, I ain't sayin' that you can't relax once in a while, but when you do you still have to keep your eyes and ears open." He picked up the cards from the table in front of him and then thought to ask, "What are we playing, anyway?"

"Go Fish," Allison told him. "Got any threes?"

"None of your business," Daryl retorted.

"You have to give them to her if you have 'em, that's the rules," Carl explained.

"He knows that, he just figures if he looks mean enough we won't ask him for any of his cards. Now, hand 'em over."

Daryl gave her a mock scowl as he slid the three of clubs over to her.

"OK, Squirt, gimme all of your threes."

"Ha-ha, go fish!" Carl grinned.

They continued playing and then a few minutes later Carl looked up from his cards and asked suddenly, "Do you think Beth is pretty?"

"Huh?" Allison was caught off guard.

"Beth. I was just wondering if…well, if you thought she was pretty."

"I dunno, I never really noticed," Daryl said. "But give me your Jacks."

Allison turned and looked at him as if she hadn't heard him correctly. All these months and Daryl had never noticed the beautiful fresh-faced prom queen? "You what?!" she asked in disbelief as Daryl collected two cards from Carl.

Daryl eyed her evenly and repeated, "I said I never noticed." He waited a beat and then added with a roll of his eyes, "What, do you think I'm stupid?!"

"He means he can't say in front of you 'cause you'd get mad," Carl explained to Allison earnestly.
"Smart kid," Daryl gave Carl a half-smile. Then, to Allison, "Jacks, please."

"Aha," Allison was impressed with the youngster's insight. "Well, anyway, to answer your question, yes Beth is a very pretty girl. Don't you think so?"

"Well, yeah," he said, "I just…I dunno…I never met a really beautiful girl before…"

"I think what you mean is that you never noticed a girl in that way before. I'm guessing that not too long ago you thought all girls had cooties. If kids use that term anymore," Allison remarked. She looked down at her cards and then grumbled, "I've been out of the loop for a while since I climbed down from the bell tower and had my hump removed…"

"Huh?" Carl asked.

Daryl snickered. He knew that Carl's remark about Beth being the only attractive girl in their little world had pinched at Allison's ego ever so slightly.

"Never mind," Allison said. "Go on with what you were saying."

"I dunno exactly what I'm saying," Carl said slowly, handing a Queen to Allison. "It's just…we're friends, right? But sometimes when she talks to me I get real nervous and say dumb things. Or things that I think sound dumb, anyway. And I don't know why I feel like that. I mean, Sophia was a girl and she was my friend, and I never felt nervous with her."

"You're older now," Allison told him. "You know how you're always saying that you're not a kid anymore? Well, these kinds of feelings are proof that you're right. You're not only growing up physically, you're also maturing emotionally."

"But doesn't 'mature' mean adult? Like I shouldn't be scared like a little kid?"

"Mature means that you're going to notice your feelings more, and have consideration for other people's feelings as well. When you're very young, you tend to be selfish. You only think about what you want, you only share your toys or your food when your parents tell you to. But when you start to mature you consider what other people want or need. You care about whether they're happy or sad."

"Like when we were all sick, and you brought us magazines to keep us occupied. Or you brought Beth magazines, anyway, and she shared them with us," Daryl said. "A couple months ago you were too busy either getting in everyone's way or sneaking off to where you weren't s'posed to be to bother helping anyone who was sick. Speaking of sick, cough up your nines."

"Whereas,'" Daryl repeated with a chuckle. To Carl he said, "And while some women will try to impress you with their clothes and their looks, others do it with their fancy words."

"Those of us who apparently have nothing else going for them," Allison muttered. "Got any fives?"

"Go fish," Daryl told her, barely concealing a smile. He enjoyed riling her up now and then.
"Bottom line is," Allison said to Carl, "it's perfectly normal to feel awkward or uncomfortable with someone you find attractive. It happens to much older people all the time. All you can try to do is try to not worry about it…girls feel that way as much as boys do." She didn't want to break Carl's heart and give any hint that perhaps Beth didn't see him in the same romantic light.

"OK," Carl seemed somewhat reassured as he handed Daryl a requested Jack.

"And I win!" Daryl said, laying his last four cards on the table. "See what I mean about paying attention? Gotta focus on the task at hand, people."

"Well," Allison said with a yawn, "now it is getting late, and apparently I desperately need my beauty sleep." She stood up and stretched.

"You should be hitting the hay, too, kid," Daryl told Carl. "There are chores to be done tomorrow. With the weather gettin' colder like this we won't be able to keep those upstairs windows open much longer for ventilation. So the kerosene heater will be out and we'll have to rely on the fireplace for heat. And that means chopping wood. We also need to go out and check our snares. So think on what you'd rather do, and – "

"Snares!" Carl piped up immediately. He always enjoyed spending time hunting with Daryl, especially when the alternative was chopping wood.

"OK, but that means getting up and out very early in the morning."

"I'll be ready," Carl said earnestly. "Good night!" He scurried off to his bedroom area.

Back in their own bedroom, Daryl was seated on a chair removing his boots. Allison folded back the quilt on their mattress before kicking off her own shoes.

"So what did you and Rick discuss for so long up on the roof?" She asked him as she stripped off her sweatshirt.

"Just talked about what needs to be done…about lookin' around for a more suitable safe house. We're gonna start plotting out some search grids and investigate some of the roads we haven't gone down yet."

"So he was on board with what you said? That we're not completely secure here?"

"Yeah. We're too exposed here and he'd also like to find a place where we can grow some crops, be self-sustaining." He pulled off his socks and stretched his legs out in front of him as he sat back. He turned at looked at Allison in the dim light of the oil lamp and then reached out his arm. "Git over here, woman," he said in his best hillbilly drawl.

"What?" she replied a bit petulantly, although she did saunter up into his extended embrace.

He responded by pulling her down onto his lap and wrapping his arms around her. He pulled her head underneath his chin and nuzzled her.

"Mmmm," she murmured. "Should I turn the lamp down more so you don't have to be exposed to my hideousness?" She couldn’t help but remember in the back of her mind that he hadn’t contradicted her when she’d mentioned needing beauty sleep.

He gently placed a hand under her chin and tilted her head upward slightly. "You know you're
beautiful and that I'd never look at any other woman…" He closed his eyes and kissed her lips first
gently, then with more force.

She reached her right hand up and caressed his cheek. "I don't know any such thing, but it sure is
nice to hear it." She kissed him and then, with a growl, he lowered his mouth to her neck and
alternately kissed and sucked it. She sighed contentedly at the feel of his chin stubble as it rubbed
against her flesh. Underneath where she was sitting she felt his excitement grow.

"Are you sure you're up for…this?" she whispered. "You've been pretty sick for a few days and
you might not have all your strength back yet…mmmmmm…" She stretched upward as his hand
reached under her tank top and cupped her breast.

He moved his lips to her ear and jutted his tongue into it. Then he whispered, "There's only one
way to find out…."
Daryl's breath was hot against Allison's neck as he first moved upward to nip just below her jawbone and then nuzzled his way down to the base of her neck. She closed her eyes and sighed deeply, quickly becoming swept away in wave of sensations. While his one hand still alternately cupped, caressed and kneaded her breast, he reached up with the other and gently embraced the side of her head, pulling her closer to him. She silently marveled that although the flesh on his hands was rough and calloused, his touch was nevertheless ever so gentle. "Mmmm," she finally managed to find her vocal cords, "are you sure you're up to this?" Somewhere in the back of one functioning part of her brain she remembered that he'd been very ill recently and probably shouldn't be exerting himself. He responded to her question by grasping her by her hips and pulling her down harder on his lap. She could feel how "up" he was through her sweat pants. She giggled quietly and said, with a demure dip of her eyes, "Mr. Dixon, you make me blush."

He lifted her up onto her feet and stood next to her and then pulled her close into a tight embrace. "One day," he growled into her ear, "if we're ever able to get some privacy, I'd like to make you scream instead."

Allison tilted her head back slightly and looked into his eyes. "Believe me, you make me want to scream every time." She reached one hand down to his bulging trousers and began massaging him. "I've probably got scars on my tongue from biting them back."

He placed his hand on top of hers and began guiding its motion. "Doctor," he said in between ragged breaths, "those big innocent blue eyes don't fool me none, deep down you are a very naughty girl. And right now you are driving me crazy."

She giggled yet again and let go of him long enough to grasp the hem of his shirt and pull it upward. He obliged by lifting his arms overhead and she pulled the garment off and tossed it aside. He simultaneously slowly pushed her backward toward their bed as he kissed her and pulled her top off. A fine example of multi-tasking, she would have complimented him out loud had her tongue not been entangled with his. When their feet bumped against the edge of the mattress they stopped shuffling and Allison reached down and fumbled with Daryl's belt. After a moment they parted slightly and each quickly squiggled out of their slacks and underwear. "There probably is no real graceful or sexy way to de-pants," Allison thought to herself. She stepped over to the tall dresser and was about to extinguish the oil lamp when Daryl's husky voice stopped her. "Leave it be," he said. "I want to see you."

She crawled under the quilt beside him and snuggled against his side. He pulled her close, kissed her deeply and then rolled onto his back, pulling her on top of him. She straddled him and sat up slightly, looking down at his beautiful face. He smiled at her and reached a hand up to push her hair back. "You're so beautiful," he whispered.

Allison bent down to kiss him in reply. He wrapped one hand around her head and the other arm around her lower back and ground his hips against hers as he embraced her. A moan escaped her lips as she felt his hardness press against her. No longer able to resist the feelings that were now pulsating through every cell of her body, she sat upright, lifted up slightly and guided him inside her. She settled down firmly against his groin and just enjoyed the feeling of his engorged member
as it strained against her walls. He felt so strong, so powerful, so…blissfully wonderful. She closed her eyes in order to concentrate on the marvelous feeling radiating in the lower half of her body when he started rhythmically thrusting upward. She began rocking with his motion and then pressed down harder against him.

"Ohhh, Daryl," she moaned, riding him like a rocking horse. "I wish you knew just how gooood you feel…"

"Baby," he replied haltingly, "you…feel fan…tastic."

After a few minutes Allison needed to be even closer to him, so she leaned down, placing her hands on either side of Daryl's head and ground herself against his bucking pelvis. He opened his eyes and caught her left nipple in his mouth. He teased it with his tongue at first, but then she grasped her breast with her left hand and forced more of it into his mouth. He moaned with pleasure and began sucking in time with his thrusts. Allison couldn't take more than a minute of that before sitting up and literally bouncing up and down against Daryl, while simultaneously cupping her breasts and manipulating them herself. She was reaching her peak and began to make tiny squeals, stifling her exclamations of pleasure as best she could.

"Yeah, baby," Daryl gasped, watching her play with herself. "Do that. That is sooo….hot…ungh…." He stopped speaking suddenly and grunted loudly as he exploded inside of her. "Ohh…." He struggled to catch his breath. Allison slumped forward since her spine had suddenly turned to spaghetti. "Wow." Then she limply flopped over onto the mattress. It took several seconds before she had the strength to move again. She scooted close to Daryl and lifted her head to kiss him.

"Wow," she repeated. "That was…just…wow."

Daryl limply reached his hand over to stroke her head and entwined his fingers in her hair. "You wear me out, woman," he said lazily. He kissed her gently. "But that's the best way to get exhausted."

Allison lay down next to him, stretching one arm across his chest. "You best get some rest now," she whispered. "I know I'll have sweet dreams tonight," she added, closing her eyes with a sigh.

"I love you, Angel," his voice was barely audible as he drifted off to sleep.

‡‡‡ ‡‡‡ ‡‡‡

"Don't pull the baby out," Allison was instructing Carol and Maggie much later the next day during the first of their training sessions, "just cradle the head and let it fall into your hands." She was trying to prepare them for what to expect if Lori's baby presented if she didn't happen to be nearby. "The head will naturally rotate to one side and that's when you should be ready – the rest of the body will follow very shortly afterward." She gestured to the crude drawing she'd made on the sheet of loose leaf paper. Unfortunately she had no textbooks or charts to assist with her lecture. "If the umbilical cord is looped around the baby's neck you'll have to loosen it so that the baby can slip through without getting choked."

"Choked?" Maggie asked with trepidation. She had never shown much interest in her father's profession, and she sure as heck had never had any desire to become a nurse. Patricia and Otis had always been on hand for that sort of thing since she was a wee young kid. But these days everyone had to pitch in where necessary, she realized. Although somehow stabbing a walker through the skull seemed so much easier than delivering an actual baby. This was a tiny live human they were talking about.
"The umbilical cord is stretchy, you just need to keep an eye out and move it if it is wrapped around the baby's neck before he comes out too far," Allison explained. "Really, it's not that big of a deal as long as you're paying attention. It will be almost automatic for you to pull the cord off the baby's neck, just like untangling anything else that's wrapped up too tightly. And that's only if the cord happens to be wrapped that way. That's an exception rather than a rule."

"What about cutting the cord?" Carol asked. "How soon should that be done?"

"Well, in a hospital setting the doctor usually clamps it right away just because...well, they're more or less trying to crank the mothers through the delivery room as quickly as possible. They've got X amount of rooms available and who knows how many women in active labor." She shrugged. "It's not ideal, but it's not harmful, either. Ideally you should wait for the cord to stop pulsating before cutting it. That's usually about three to five minutes. Again, I've got all the tools in my bag and also some stashed behind the front desk, but if Lori starts pushing when I'm not here, then you'll need something to tie the cord off with...a couple of shoelaces, some lengths of string — I saw some rolls of kite string on a shelf somewhere in this place...."

"A couple? You tie it off in more than one place?" Maggie asked.

"Yes. The first place is about three inches away from where it's attached to the baby, then the second about four or five inches away from that. Then you cut in between the two clamps or ties. Don't be surprised if it takes a bit of sawing – the cord is kind of tough."

Maggie looked as if she was going to gag. "Don't worry," Allison caught her look, "It doesn't hurt the mother or the baby. But hopefully once Lori goes into active labor there will be plenty of time to fetch me from wherever I might be," Allison told her. "But on the other hand, keep in mind that childbirth is beautiful and natural." She couldn't manage a straight face despite herself. "Okay, childbirth is pretty disgusting and fluid-intensive, and if it gets to be overwhelming I'll understand if you need to step away."

"No," Maggie shook her head, "I'll be fine. This is something we all need to know, just in case. I'm just worried about hurting the baby...they're so fragile...and apparently slippery at first..."

"Luckily Mother Nature does most of the work during delivery, and newborn infants are actually quite resilient. You'd be surprised. I don't know if you remember the 1985 earthquake in Mexico City...we studied it in med school...some dozen newborns were found alive underneath the rubble of a collapsed hospital two days after the place collapsed. Their bones are flexible and they have an extra layer of body fat to live off of because as a rule mother's milk is kind of scarce and not very nutritious when it first comes in."

"You've had a baby, so you know most of this stuff already, right?" Maggie turned to Carol. "About crowning and the head turning and all that...?"

"I wasn't on the receiving end," Carol told her. "And I was out of my mind with pain at the time, so I wasn't watching in the mirror or anything."

"You didn't ask for any pain medication?" Allison inquired.

Carol seemed to stare ahead with a vacant look for a moment before replying. "Ed wouldn't let me," she finally said. "He thought it would cause brain damage to the baby."

"Pfft," Allison scoffed. "Any man who believes such nonsense should be forced to pass a kidney stone without medication."
Carol laughed and Maggie asked, "Is that something that's really painful? I've never had one, and I've never known anyone who has… ."

"I'll never forget," Allison recalled, "this huge, muscular, beefy guy that came to the ER with a kidney stone. His neck was as big around as my waist. I don't know much about sports, but I found out from another doctor who recognized him that he played football for the Falcons. Anyway, this big ol' burly manly man was crying like a little girl and screaming for his mama in this high-pitched whiny voice, and that was after we'd given him morphine."

"I guess when you think about it, a stone passing through such a narrow tube…" Maggie was obviously mentally picturing a good-sized pebble traveling through a male urethra. She shuddered. "…but of course that's nothing like squeezing a baby's head through…" Carol said sarcastically, gesturing vaguely toward her crotch. The three of them burst into a fit of giggles.

"What about…" Carol began hesitantly after their laughter had subsided. "Um, Lori told me that Carl was a C-section. What if that's the case this time? I mean, how will we know it's necessary and what do we do?"

"I've got some supplies… anesthetic and sutures… but that's too much to go into now. That will be the subject of our next lesson. Class dismissed."

"Thank God," Maggie sighed.

Daryl and Carl had returned from their hunting excursion with two good-sized rabbits, which Allison had accepted from them with lavish praise. Carl beamed and explained the type of snares they'd devised days earlier that had caught the hares. He then bounded off to tell his dad about the bounty they'd brought home, and to see if he was needed for guard duty.

"Here, I can clean these," Daryl said, reaching for the game.

"No, you've been out all day, I'll take care of this. You go wash up and rest. T-Dog has that goose roasting for dinner, should be ready in about an hour."

"Ain't tired," he protested mildly. "I'll go find Rick, then, and see if he has time to look over the map some more and plan a search area for tomorrow." He gave Allison a quick peck on her lips and strode off.

An hour later, Allison placed the cleaned and cut-up rabbit sections in a Rubbermaid container and carried it upstairs with her. She needed to rinse herself off in the shower, as unappealing as a blast of cold water sounded, and with the windows open upstairs it was the closest thing they had to a refrigerator. She'd leave the container up there until Chef T-Dog was ready for it the next day.

"So how did nursing school go today?" Hershel asked later that evening when most of the group was seated at the dinner table enjoying roast goose and cream-style corn.

"Can we talk about something else while we're eating?" Maggie asked with a slight shake of her head.

"You'd think growing up on a farm, with a dad who's a veterinarian, you'd be used to animals giving birth," Glenn commented. Suddenly realizing what he'd said he turned to Lori and back-
"Not that you're an animal, or anything…"

"It's OK," Lori smiled at him. "Glenn's right," she said to Maggie. "I thought you would certainly have assisted your dad over the years when the cattle gave birth, though."

"No," Maggie said very definitely, "I never had any interest in that. That was Otis' job."

"Strange, isn't it?" Hershel asked the assemblage. "I mean, what child wouldn't want to follow in their father's footsteps?"

"Maybe little Skippy Hitler," Allison remarked.

"Good point," Hershel choked out, joining in the general laughter.

"Anyway," Allison added, "class went very well and Maggie and Carol are great students. When Lori's time comes there will be plenty of trained hands at the ready."

"That's good to know," Lori said with an uneasy smile. She was apparently unconvinced about giving birth outside of a hospital setting.

"Keep in mind that babies have been born throughout the centuries long before we had neo-natal units," Allison sought to reassure the woman. "Look at Laura Ingalls….she was born in a flimsy wooden shack and lived to write 'Little House on the Prairie'."

"That's right," Beth piped up enthusiastically. "And her parents were born even earlier than that, in more primitive conditions, and they were just fine."

"Look how many slaves were born out in the fields before the Civil War," T-Dog commented. "They had no medical care and they survived…"

"Thanks, everyone," Lori gave a weak smile. "That is reassuring, once I think about it."

But there was a definite sadness in the woman's eyes, Allison noted. She wondered if part of Lori's despair was the distance her husband seemed to keep from her. He hadn't sat down to dinner with them yet again; instead he'd chosen to keep watch on the roof and had Carl bring him a plate. That was one big difference, Allison thought….Charles Ingalls was always right there at Caroline's side when she was birthin' all those Prairie babies…
"If a Caesarian is necessary, I'll need a couple of pairs of hands standing by," Allison instructed Carol and Maggie, again using crudely drawn diagrams on sheets of paper as her presentation materials. A week had passed since their roast goose dinner, and there was some sort of unspoken tension within Mr. Charlie's building. The food rations were being thinned out and the Men of the group (Allison had begun mentally categorizing Rick, Daryl and Hershel as "The Men" in capital letters simply because they'd been the ones who were always keeping an eye on things and were constantly strategizing and planning ahead) had seemed restless and wary in recent days.

Allison paused and looked at the uneasy faces of her students. "OK, here's the thing," she began slowly. "Lori's previous C-section was the traditional transverse incision; that is, along the bikini line. Doctors began going that route mainly for cosmetic reasons, to make the scar less visible. And, as it turned out, there was less post-operative pain and a faster recovery time with that type of incision. But in an emergency situation, and in terms of what is best for a fetus in distress, a vertical midline incision is the preferred method of delivery."

Both Maggie and Carol looked confused and Carol finally spoke up. "So...what are you saying, exactly?"

"I'm saying that if a C-section is our only option, don't be shocked if I cut down the front of Lori's belly, rather than down along her bikini line. Cutting down the center actually causes less bleeding and less nerve injury for the mother than the bikini cut, and it also allows more immediate access to the fetus. I guess what I'm saying is that I don't want you two to be shocked if it looks like I'm slicing Lori down her middle...that outside of a hospital setting, that type of cut is ultimately better for mother and baby."

"But what about Lori's recovery time?" Carol asked. "That seems like major abdominal surgery to me."

"Well, it is, technically," Allison admitted. "Again, that's part of why surgeons started using the bikini cut...it provided for a shorter recovery time for the mother. A vertical cut down the abdomen would definitely mean that Lori would require more bed rest after birth to allow her stomach muscles to repair themselves."

"I think that you should not just automatically assume that this...this major stem-to-stern cut through her belly is necessary and teach us what to do in case of a ...whatever you call the bikini cut delivery. We have to consider what Lori would want, after all," Carol huffed.

"I will certainly instruct you both in what to expect in each scenario," Allison told the woman. "I just wanted to prepare you for what may happen and didn't want you to be caught by surprise if I suddenly...well, cut Lori's belly right down the middle."

"Whichever way you cut," Maggie interjected, "what do we need to do?"

"I'll need one of you to swab the blood away from the incision and keep the field clear, and one of you will need to receive the baby when I remove it and begin to stitch Lori up. While I'm sewing, the baby's nose and mouth will need to be cleared... Now, if for some reason you don't have time to grab one of the medicine dropper-type suction devices in my bag...well, you'll have to suction the baby's nose and mouth manually..."

"What?!" Maggie scrunched up her face and shuddered.
"You'll have to use your own mouth to suck out the mucous and other fluids from the baby's nose and mouth and nose and then spit it out," Allison explained in more pointed detail. "The goal is to clear all the airways so that the baby can begin breathing on its own." Carol and Maggie both tried to control their nausea, but the looks on their faces spoke volumes. "Again, hopefully I'll have time to suction the baby properly, and all you'll need to do is hold him or her while I do it. And then once the cord is cut you'll gently bathe it and then wrap it in blankets or whatever we have on hand to keep it warm."

"So we'll need to have a basin of water nearby when Lori goes into labor," Maggie said out loud, as if she was trying to erase the suction part of the discussion from her mind.

"Yes," Allison agreed. She tried to lighten the mood a bit. "Have you ever seen an old movie or sitcom when someone yelled 'boil water!' when a woman was about to give birth? Well, that became a stereotype for a reason...in the days before indoor plumbing, it took a while to heat up water, and warm water was necessary to clean both the newborn baby and the mother. As I mentioned before..." she smiled at her students, "child birth can be very fluid-intensive."

"Is class dismissed yet?" Carol asked weakly. She didn't envy anyone having to give birth under such primitive conditions. She silently prayed that Lori's baby would cooperate and enter the world the way Nature intended.

Allison was just about to go upstairs to check on some laundry she'd washed two days previously and hung up to dry. She hoped it hadn't frozen; the nights were getting awfully brisk these days. She heard feet on the stairs and looked up to see Rick and Daryl descending, deep in conversation as they walked.

"What's up?" she asked them cheerily. They'd been so involved in whatever they were talking about that her voice visibly startled both of them. She was about to tease Daryl about staying aware at all times, but he didn't look to be in a joking mood. "You guys look unusually serious. Is something wrong?"

"Not really 'wrong'..." Rick hedged. He and Daryl exchanged a glance. Daryl gave a slight shrug. "It's OK," he said to Rick, "I tell her everything anyway." To Allison he said, "Thing is, it looks like it's not going to be safe for us to stay here much longer. A pretty big herd just passed us by. They were far enough away that we still needed binoculars to see 'em clearly, but the fact is the herds are getting bigger and they're moving in closer. That's the third one we've seen in the past week."

"This information is not for broadcast right now, by the way," Rick interrupted. "We don't want to panic or worry anyone until we devise a more definite plan."

"I won't say anything," Allison assured him. She wasn't completely surprised by the news; she'd sensed that The Men had been concerned about something lately. "We always knew that this wasn't a 'forever' place for us to stay, anyway."

"That's what I would like to find, soon, before winter really sets in," Rick told her. "Even a semi-forever place where we could stay for five or six months, so we don't have to move the baby around until it's a few months old and less fragile."

"One thing in our favor," Daryl commented, "is that the walkers we've seen seem to be moving slower. Dunno if the cold weather is affecting them, or if it's because there's no food nearby
motivatin' 'em. Either way, if they're sluggish they'll be easier to outrun. Or pick off hand-to-hand so we can save our ammo."

"You don't think this building is structurally sound enough to withstand a herd if it tries to get in?" Allison asked.

"That's not the problem," Rick answered. "The problem is we're running low on food and pretty soon it won't be safe to go out and hunt or even make scavenging runs. The ground is getting harder as the weather gets colder; pretty soon we won't be able to bury our garbage anymore and piling it or burning it outside will attract walkers. We'll eventually run out of firewood, too."

"I s'pose in a pinch we could bust up some of the furniture and burn that," Daryl mused.

"I don't know if that's safe," Allison said. "These pieces are so old, who knows what's in the varnish or paint or even the upholstery. Could release toxic fumes, and since we can't keep the windows open…"

"Daryl and I have discussed the situation with Hershel as well," Rick told Allison, "and he agrees that if we stay here much longer we'll essentially be trapped."

"So what is the immediate plan, then?" Allison asked.

"We'll make limited runs in the next few days down any local streets that we haven't covered yet to look for vehicles. We need to collect as much gasoline as we can," Daryl explained.

"We also need to study the maps we have and put our heads together to figure out which direction will be the best to head to. What will give us the most options to explore while using the least amount of fuel," Rick added.

"I was told there would be no math when the apocalypse began," Allison sighed. "And story problems are the worst."

Daryl reached over and gave her a quick noogie on top of her head. Even when their immediate future was hanging by a thread, her jokes always made him feel a little bit better…it was somehow reassuring, took the pressure off so to speak, to hear a smart-ass remark in times of extreme stress. "Tell you what," he said to her with a half-smile, "leave the math to us men and you can just relax and correct our grammar." She chuckled and mock-swatted at his shoulder and even Rick smiled at their exchange. Sometimes a little laughter was the best medicine.

Laundry forgotten, Allison fell in step with the two men as they slowly made their way back to the main living area. They were batting ideas back and forth as to which direction they should strike off in…one that looked very rural on the map? Or maybe a campground or park of some sort? Hershel's farm and that last house they'd been at had both been ideal save for the lack of secure fencing. They needed a place with enough land around it so that they could hunt and, if they were able to stay long enough, grow some crops. Running water was a definite plus, of course. And maybe even some pasture land to eventually keep a few goats or cows or…horses, if they were able to find some. Gasoline wouldn't last forever, and authentic horsepower might eventually become a necessity.

"There has to be some kind of place somewhere, besides a military base, that is safely behind gates or walls of some sort," Allison mused. "I remember when I was a kid and we were visiting my uncle in Michigan, he took us on a tour of the General Motors Technical Center. I was bored silly, but my folks got a kick out of it. What I do remember, though, is that the grounds were huge. We had to go through a big metal gate that had barbed wire on the top of it…the whole place was
fenced in like that. There were a bunch of different brick buildings, and in between them all there were small lakes with ducks on them and lots of grass and hills...even some deer grazing. It looked to me like a big huge state park with office buildings plopped in the middle." She paused and thought for a few seconds before continuing. "That can't be the only company in the U.S. that was built that way. There must be other places that have both buildings and lots of land and that are protected."

"I dunno," Daryl replied, "Seems like any place that big would already be occupied. "But maybe we can find one of those gated communities – a condo association or apartment building or something."

"Or a rich person's mansion...some celebrity that was paranoid about security," Allison suggested.

"Anyone know where Ted Turner's house is?" Daryl asked sarcastically.

Rick stopped the trio with a quick motion of his arm before they were in the living room proper. "This brainstorming is a good thing," he said. "Tomorrow afternoon when Maggie and Carl are on watch duty, let's sit down with Hershel and Glenn and think on this some more. We just may come up with some solid search ideas. Again, though," he eyed the other two seriously, "this stays between us three until then." Daryl and Allison nodded in agreement and then Rick asked aloud as they approached the rest of the group, "Something smells good, what's for lunch T?"

"Sort of a rabbit stew," T-Dog replied while stirring a large, steaming pot. "Just took it off the fire a minute ago, needs to cool for a few to thicken up. Used up the rest of the leftover rabbit meat along with some canned peas and condensed milk and some noodles..." he stopped speaking as he lifted a ladle full of the mixture to examine it. "Should be ready in about five minutes," he predicted. "Best get everyone to the table who wants some."

‡‡‡ ‡‡‡ ‡‡‡ ‡‡‡

"This is pretty tasty," Carol complimented T-Dog during lunch. "You have a talent for making a meal out of the most unlikely ingredients."

"I learned that from my mama," their chef replied, embarrassed slightly by the praise. "Even before my daddy died, back he was still bringing home a nice weekly paycheck she hated to see anything go to waste. So she kept using up leftovers in all manner of casseroles and stews." He paused and chuckled. "I remember more than once when I was a little boy my daddy griping at the dinner table. 'I break my back to make a decent living and for what?! Spam parmesan, or whatever the hell – er, heck, sorry – this is supposed to be?"

"Your mother probably grew up hearing her mother talk about the Great Depression," Hershel remarked. "And how scarce food was at the time..."

"...and how grateful we should be for what we have," Allison finished his sentence. "Yep, sounds familiar. My granny used to give me the same spiel if I ever dared to complain about having leftovers. By golly, when she was growing up, it would have been a treat to have had meat of any kind, no matter how leftover it was!"

"So you didn't have to hear about all the starving children in Ethiopia when you didn't want to eat something gross like liver?" Beth asked.

"All the starving kids of the world lived in China when I was a boy," Rick replied and everyone at the table laughed. They'd all heard their share of parental clichés.
"Any time that I was being…well, I guess 'difficult,'" Carol stated, "my mother would say to me 'Just wait until you have children of your own. Never mind while I'm smiling, just you wait!'"

"My mom used to tell me," Lori related, "'You want to date at 14?! I'll take you down to the delivery room at Emory Hospital during rush hour, then you'll see what happens to 14-year-old girls who go out with boys!"

"So I guess you didn't go out with Rick until you were older, huh?" Beth asked.

"A little older, yeah," Rick said quietly, looking down at his stew. An uncomfortable silence fell over the table, so T-Dog sought to change the subject.

"I guess the hunting hasn't been so good lately, since we're running low on meat," he said, unaware that he was opening up yet a different can of worms.

Another long silence followed, during which time Daryl, Rick and Allison seemed to exchange glances. Finally Daryl grunted, "Colder weather's making the critters hibernate."

"Hey," Allison blurted, unable to think of an intelligent distraction, "I found a Scrabble game on the shelf today, anyone interested in playing later tonight?"

"Yeah, you'll get tons of takers, Miss 'I Have No Friends, But I Have My Words'," Daryl said in a mocking tone.

"I don't know about that," Hershel commented, understanding that the sudden change in topic was necessary. "I've been known to crack open a dictionary or two in my time."

"Can't be as bad as Trivial Pursuit was," Maggie shrugged. "I'll play."

"Fine, game on, then," Allison smiled. "Anyone interested in a thorough butt-kicking can join me at the gaming table after the dinner dishes are done."
"Are we ready to rumble?" Allison asked as she shook up the small muslin pouch filled with letter tiles. Glenn, Maggie and Daryl were seated in the other chairs around their gaming table, and Beth and Carl were sitting just off to the side. Beth held a steno pad and pen in her hand as their official scorekeeper, and Carl was there because Beth was. Rick was sleeping and T-Dog was upstairs keeping watch.

"This is going to be a nice, friendly game, right?" Daryl asked, casting a skeptical eye at Allison. She was somewhat surprised that he had joined them, since as a rule he wasn't particularly sociable in group situations. She had a feeling that because they'd be moving on soon he was doing it for her benefit…he knew she loved board games and that it might be quite some time before they'd have another opportunity to just sit and be carefree.

"Of course," Allison replied passing the bag around so the others could choose their letters. "That's the only way I ever play – friendly."

Daryl rolled his eyes. "Yeah, right. And I used to buy Playboy for the articles."

Lori strolled by while Maggie was pulling tiles from the bag. "Would you like to join us?" Maggie invited. "We could do teams or something."

"Oh, no thanks," Lori replied. She arched backward slightly with both hands on her lower waistline. "My back is a little sore, I don't feel like sitting right now."

"Everything OK?" Allison asked with concern. Even though Lori was several months along, it was too early for Braxton-Hicks contractions.

"Yes, fine, I think I was just on my feet too much today," Lori assured her. "It's not cramping or anything, just some muscle soreness. I'll do some stretching exercises before I go to bed; I'm sure that will help." She turned to leave and then said, "Carl, don't be up too late."

Predictably the boy sighed heavily, "I won't," he told her with exaggerated emphasis on each word. "I'm not even tired yet, though."

"You think she's OK?" Maggie asked Allison once Lori had left.

"Yeah, she's just getting further along and carrying more weight in front. Puts more strain on the lower back."

"Geez," Beth shook her head slightly, "I always thought I wanted kids of my own, but between morning sickness and everything hurting all the time…"

"Just keep all that in mind until you're a lot older," Maggie advised her sister. "You'll make dad very happy by not becoming a mom while you're still high school-age." She reached over and placed four tiles down. "CATCH. Cool, two Cs, three points each and a double word score, too." To Beth she said, "Put me down for 24 points!" As she drew her replacement letters she mused, "That's kinda funny, how I still think of you as being in high school…specially since neither of us have been to school in I don't know how long."

The others were silently studying the board as Beth mused, "Y'know, I never thought I'd say it, but I kinda miss school. I mean, back when I had to go I hated having to do homework, and so many of my classes were boring… But I do miss my friends, and things like annual staff and cheerleading."
"Told ya," Allison muttered to Daryl as he placed tiles on the board to spell out VACUUM using one of Maggie's Cs.

"Thought I was screwed before when I drew two Us," he remarked, surveying his word with satisfaction. "I'll take those 17 points, though."

"What does that mean, 'told ya'?" Beth asked as she jotted down Daryl's points.

"Oh, nothing, it's just that I told Daryl once that you were probably a cheerleader…" Allison admitted. She couldn't tell if Beth was hurt or confused so she added, "It's just that you're, y'know, all pretty and perky. You seemed to be the type."

Beth still wasn't sure if that was a compliment or a sarcastic jab. "Well," she replied, "you're pretty, too, and…kinda perky…sometimes… Weren't you a cheerleader?"

Allison snorted. Even though she was certainly not homely, she still had never thought of herself as being traditionally "pretty." "Well, I maybe could have been one had I tried out…the only time I got As in gym class was when we had gymnastics. I could do back handsprings and the splits and all that. But I always had to work after school, either at home or tutoring kids for extra money. Didn't have the time to stay after school for clubs or activities. I was in the National Honor Society and the newspaper staff, that was about it." She grimaced and placed three tiles on the board. "IOTA. Big deal. I'm drawing nothing but crappy letters," she complained.

"Hey, kid," Daryl said to Carl. "What time you got on that watch of yours?"

"Ten to nine," the boy answered him. "Why?"

"Twenty minutes," Daryl said out loud. He turned slightly toward Allison. "Took longer than I thought for you to start griping about everyone having more points than you."

"I never said anything about anyone else's points," Allison defended herself, "I was merely commenting on how this game relies on the luck of the draw more than actual skill…"

"…which is your way of whining that everyone else has made better words than you," Daryl interrupted her with half a grin and then a sideways lean in his chair just in case she reached out to smack him one. But she kept her hands to herself and instead just gritted her teeth.

"Oh, you just think you know everything, like you can read my mind," she growled, reaching into the bag to replenish her tiles.

"Well, actually, he just did," Glenn remarked with a knowing smile. "Tell us honestly that that's not exactly what you were thinking."

"Oh, just take your turn and quit distracting me," she told Glenn.

"You're just sore because Daryl knew what you were thinking!" Carl suddenly piped up, as if he'd just caught on.

"I don't remember asking your opinion, Squirt," Allison said. "Didn't your mom say something about not staying up too late?"

"It's not even nine o'clock," the young boy taunted her, feeling emboldened by the laughter he'd caused with his remark.

"Whatever. Are we playing or are we talking?" She eyed Glenn.
Beth, ever the diplomat, looked at Daryl and asked, "Were you on any sports teams in high school? You're so good with that crossbow, I'll bet you were on the archery team."

"Pfft," he grunted. "Dunno where you went to school, but we didn't have no archery team. I learned to shoot so that we could eat." He watched Glenn put some letters on the board and then added, "Wasn't on any teams or anything…I started working part-time after school when I was 15."

"What about you, Glenn?" Beth asked.

"Chess club," Allison said before he could reply.

"Well, yeah, but how did you know?" Like Beth, he wasn't sure if this was a compliment or an insult.

"It just stands to reason. You've talked about playing those puzzle-type video games before, and you're very analytical and strategic. I remember back in Atlanta, when we had to figure a way out of that office building, you were drawing diagrams on the floor with a marker and plotting things out." She shrugged. "You seem like the type who would be good at chess."

"He lettered in swimming, too," Maggie said proudly, as if to defend her boyfriend's manhood.

Allison felt Daryl nudge her ankle under the table with his foot while he simultaneously gave her a "Please, don't say it" look. He knew that she was dying to blurt out, "Wow, chess and swimming… that's were all the really cool kids hung out."

"FESCUE," Daryl spelled out on his next turn. "Cool, I used up five letters." He reached for the pouch which was now almost empty.

"What?" Allison asked, cocking her head to examine the board. "I think you meant RESCUE, which is spelled with an R."

"Fescue, it's a type of grass," a new voice spoke. Everyone looked up to see Hershel walking past them, a magazine in his hand. Allison hoped that he was looking for some light reading before bedtime, but she had a sneaking suspicion that he was on his way to the bathroom.

"I know what I meant," Daryl told Allison before counting up his points.

The game continued, and even though Allison managed to use the Q and the X she'd drawn to make QUIXOTIC thanks to some other letters already on the board – she still ended up in third place when all was said and done.

"Good game," she said with a forced smile to Daryl, who'd beat Maggie by only a dozen points. Glenn, the swimming chess player, had come in fourth.

They all cleaned the table, put the game pieces away, and bade one another good night.

"Quixotic was a really good word," Daryl told Allison encouragingly as they walked to their sleeping area.

"I don't need your pity," she replied, and this time she did give him a playful swat on his posterior.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

The next morning, after breakfast, Rick, Glenn, Daryl, Hershel and Allison gathered in Mr. Charlie's office and pored over a map.
"It's getting worse out there," Rick told the group. "T-Dog told me that yesterday evening he saw a fairly big group of walkers passing by maybe about half a mile west of this building. They were close enough that he could notice them in the distance without binoculars."

"So what are you saying?" Glenn asked. He hadn't been privy to the conversation the others had had the previous day.

"I'm saying that it probably won't be safe for us to stay here much longer," Rick told him. "We need to find a new place, ideally some place where we can hole up for at least a month or two… hopefully more…ride out the winter."

"Some place where there's land nearby for hunting, and that's away from roads," Daryl added. "Where we can build a fire without attracting attention."

"We need to think of what kind of place would be safe, fenced in," Hershel said. "If a herd comes through, a regular barbed-wire fence or even a cyclone fence won't be enough to keep them away."

"If we could find a big house on a nice piece of land," Daryl was thinking out loud, "even if it wasn't really securely fenced in, we could maybe fortify it somehow. If we find it before too long, before the ground truly freezes, we could…I dunno…dig some traps around it."

"Like a moat?" Allison asked, not quite understanding him.

"Right now we don't have the time or the manpower to dig a moat," he replied. "But maybe if we dug a few really deep pits…and maybe put some pointed spikes in the bottom to spear anything that fell inside and hold them in place or kill them…"

"Like the punji sticks the Viet Cong used during the Vietnam War," Hershel said, catching on to the idea.

"If we could rig up some sort of lure, to make sure the walkers would head toward the traps…" Daryl paused and shook his head. "I dunno, it seems like it could work if we had more time, more people, more…everything."

"What attracts walkers?" Glenn asked. "Noise, and flesh. Any dead animals we set out would have to be replaced every day, but maybe we could rig up wind chimes of some sort over these pits, you know, string up empty cans or hang up empty bottles…something like that."

"That's a thought," Rick agreed. "Certainly something to consider until we eventually find some sort of gated community…some building that has land around it but also some solid, secure fencing."

"How soon do you want to leave?" Hershel asked Rick.

"I think in the next couple of days small groups of us should go out and scrounge up as much gasoline as they can. There are a bunch of empty gas cans here that we can use; we'll need the fuel when we hit the road. Those of you who aren't out siphoning gas are responsible for collecting whatever weapons we'll be able to use. Obviously, guns and ammunition, but also knives, hatchets, fireplace pokers…anything like that. We won't say anything to anyone in the meantime until we're just about ready to leave. Maybe…" he paused to concentrate, as if mentally calculating everything they'd discussed, "…three days from today we'll call a meeting and tell the others that we'll be leaving. Explain why, and then have everyone gather up necessities that we can use on the road. That means things like batteries, flashlights, warm clothing, canned food and containers of water."

"OK," everyone nodded and muttered in agreement.
"We don't want to panic or alarm the others," Rick admonished the group. "When it comes to explaining why we have to leave, we'll talk in terms of supplies for the winter. That it's become impossible to hunt for food and firewood here, and that we need to move to some place more sustainable. We won't mention the increasing groups of walkers." He paused and looked pensive. "They'll notice that for themselves soon enough once we hit the road."
Chapter 62

"Could you please talk to your girlfriend and tell her to take a pill?" Maggie said to Daryl when she cornered him alone shortly after the post-breakfast meeting.

"What?" He asked, completely confused by both her question and her overall attitude of frustration.

"She must have something in that doctor bag of hers," Maggie continued.

"Something for what?"

"You didn't notice last night? How she was during the Scrabble game?" She noticed the blank expression on his face. "Didn't she seem unusually…cranky?"

"Um, well…not really…I thought it was just because she wasn't winning the game. She's very competitive…"

"OK, maybe I'm wrong, but to me she seemed totally out of sorts and very PMS." She saw Daryl's expression and began to explain, "It stands for Pre-…"

"I know what it means," he held up a hand to stop her. "But, um, she seemed fine to me…"

"Fine?! When's the last time we played a board game and she didn't give us a lecture on the first woman in space, or how the word 'dibs' entered the English language? No, instead all she did was rag on Glenn. He's too polite to say anything, but I didn't appreciate her picking on him."

Even though he had other more pressing matters on his mind, such as getting things in order to leave Mr. Charlie's store within the week, he reflected for a few moments and recalled that day back at Hershel's farm…when he and Allison were outside Dale's RV and had overheard Glenn wondering about whether all the women in camp were on their periods. And he remembered Allison's reaction at the time… Did he really want to open up this particular can of worms when he needed Allison to focus on preparing for their imminent departure?

"Um, I guess I can ask her if she's feeling OK…and see if she has any pills she could take…I mean, that is, if she really needs them," he offered lamely.

Good God, he's whipped, Maggie thought to herself. Of course, she didn't take the time to realize that he was being as protective of his woman as she was of her man. Instead she told him, "Never mind. I'll have a word with her."

"OK," he said with an obvious sigh of relief.

+++ +++ +++

Maggie found Allison wandering around the aisles, plucking items off of shelves and stuffing them into a duffle bag.

"Hey, got a minute?"

"Yeah, what's up?" Allison replied.

"I just wondered if you had any medicine for… well, don't take this the wrong way, but you seemed a little irritable last night and I was wondering if you were suffering from a little PMS and maybe you wanted to borrow some Pamprin or something…"
"What?" Allison was stunned by Maggie's statement. "I've never had PMS in all my life."

"How can you be so sure about that?"

"Well, for one thing, if you must know my periods have been extremely sporadic for many years. And secondly I don't recall ever craving chocolate or having weird mood swings or any other stereotypical symptoms."

"As I recall, you'd mentioned once that you lived alone before all this happened…maybe you did have some moodiness but no one was around to notice and comment on it…?" Maggie postulated. She paused and looked at Allison critically. "And right now you're walking around dressed in nothing more than a tank top."

"So what?" Allison shrugged.

"So it's about 40 degrees inside this building and everyone else is bundled up in warm clothing."

"Are you kidding? It's roasting in here. Isn't it?" Allison replied questioningly.

Maggie studied Allison's face and decided that perhaps the woman was truly clueless. "I'm not a doctor, but I did live in a dorm for a while with a lot of other girls, and we talked a lot…and I've done some reading…and, well, it seems that if you start sleeping with a regular partner that your hormones kind of react…" She saw that Allison seemed to be vaguely embarrassed when Maggie mentioned a sleeping partner, but she did seem to be considering her words, so the dark-haired woman added, "Anyway, I guess I'm saying be prepared supply-wise, then, if we're going to be in the car for the next few days. Your monthly friend might finally be planning a visit."

"Thanks for the warning," Allison said, apparently not entirely convinced. "I guess Glenn told you that we'll be leaving?" Allison's question was more of a statement.

"Of course. You should know by now that that man cannot keep a secret. Besides, I've seen some herds in the distance while on watch duty in the last two weeks. I had a feeling that this area was becoming less secure. We talked about it after the game last night. Glenn thought you were angry with him and wondered if he had upset you somehow."

"He did? Why would I be upset with him?" Allison's eyes widened in surprise and then her brows knit in concern. "Oh, gee, I certainly didn't mean to hurt his feelings, whatever I said…" her voice trailed off.

Maggie interjected lest Allison suddenly burst into tears. "No, it's OK. I told him that you probably were over-tired or something, plus everyone else was getting all the good Scrabble letters." She smiled in an attempt to reassure Allison, who was all but wringing her hands. No obvious mood swings, my ass, Maggie thought to herself.

"Rick thinks it best if we don't say anything to the others yet about leaving here," Allison told her. "Although if you've seen herds, T-Dog and Carl probably have, too."

"And it's getting more obvious that we're running low on food," Maggie added. "I don't think anyone will be too shocked when the official announcement is made, no."

+++ +++ +++ +++

Maggie's prediction turned out to be correct – when Rick called the group together that afternoon and announced the plan to leave in two days no one was particularly surprised. Disappointed, perhaps; even though they were running low on firewood and food, they still had a roof over their
heads, running water and a soft place to sleep. But all things considered it made sense for them to
move on and seek out a more long-term place to set up housekeeping…someplace off the road, that
could be secured and that had a sustainable food source nearby.

"We'll start packing up the vehicles with necessities today," Rick told them. "No one goes outside
alone, though, even if it's just to put stuff in a car. Walkers have been wandering too close lately.
Someone needs to stand guard while you've got your head stuck in the trunk or back seat." He went
on to list some items they should all definitely bring with them, and opened the floor to
suggestions of what was "necessary" and what was not. Space was at a premium, as always.

"I found a bunch of bungee cords over yonder," T-Dog commented. "We can use 'em to strap stuff
to the roofs and in the truck beds. Should be more secure than rope."

"Any idea as to where we'll be heading?" Lori asked hesitantly. She always seemed to walk on
eggshells around her husband these days, the others noticed.

"We've been studying the maps and we've decided to head north or northeast, toward the foothills
around White County. There are some small lakes out that way, and rivers…we're thinking that the
mountains on one side and water on another might provide some natural protection from walkers,"
Hershel said.

"Should be some good hunting and fishing around there," Daryl mused, warming up to the plan.

"As I recall, a lot of that area is touristy," Carol remarked, "people only stayed there during the
warm weather months. Not a lot of permanent residents, so…." Her voice trailed off.

"...so when the sickness hit, maybe there weren't as many people there to get infected," T-Dog
finished her thought. "Maybe less walkers 'round there."

"It will take us some time to get there," Rick warned. "I want us to stay off the main highways and
take secondary roads. And I'm not saying that if we find a suitable place en route that we can't stay
there. I just think it's a good idea to have some sort of ultimate destination in mind as a goal. A
specific direction to aim toward."

There was some more discussion about what to pack and who would be riding in what vehicle, but
overall the mood was more upbeat than when the group had first assembled. The plan sounded
logical, and Allison figured that she wasn't the only person imagining them eventually living in a
serene cabin or house beside a secluded mountain stream. "OK, then," Rick finally dismissed the
meeting, "I'm going back up on watch for a while. Y'all know what has to be done; let's plan to
leave at first light day after tomorrow." Hershel went off with Rick, carrying a couple of maps in
his hand. Carol, Lori and Beth decided to start going through the kitchen area to begin packing
their most portable food and beverage items.

"T, wanna grab some of those bungee cords and help me stow my bike in the pick-up?" Daryl
asked. Carl trailed behind the two men – he was going to stand guard like his dad had said while
they packed up Daryl's motorcycle.

Maggie and Glenn wandered off to pack, presumably, and Allison walked to the front counter to
collect the various medical supplies they'd collected from the hospital. She made a mental note to
also grab the toiletry items from the bathrooms, as well as the clothes she'd left hanging upstairs. It
felt like she was running in a million directions at once and she had to pause momentarily to sort
out her thoughts. This was ridiculous, she'd never had trouble multi-tasking before; in fact, she was
usually the master of juggling many balls at the same time. She took a deep breath and then stalked
off to tackle task number one on her unwritten "to do" list.
"…you wanna use Browning oil for cleaning and lubricating that BDA 380," Daryl was saying to Carl as he walked into the bedroom area. "I've got some in my…" he stopped abruptly as he entered. Allison had most of his clothes spread out on the mattress and was meticulously folding a pair of his underwear.

"Um, what are you doing?" he asked.

"Packing your clothes," she replied.

"But I had all my stuff packed already," he said.

"If you call throwing things willy-nilly into a bag 'packing,'" she shook her head with a sigh.

"Are you arranging my drawers by…color?" Daryl asked in confusion as he stepped closer.

"Of course," she answered. "How else? God, you're such a man…" she sighed in exasperation.

His earlier conversation with Maggie suddenly came back to him. He wondered if mere hormones could actually make a usually logical and intelligent woman act so weird and completely out of character, but he quickly decided that it was probably best if he didn't ask Allison about that right now. Instead he gave her a quick peck on the cheek, slid behind her and grabbed his motorcycle saddlebags and told her, "I'm gonna go show Carl how to clean the handguns. I'll, um, see you later." He placed a hand on the back of Carl's shoulders and ushered him quickly out of the area.

As the two walked away Carl asked Daryl, "What did Allison mean when she said 'you're such a man' that way? What's wrong with being a man?"

"Sometimes everything, I guess," Daryl told the boy.

Dinner that night consisted of the last couple of large food service-size cans of vegetables they had left from the hospital cafeteria. They'd packed the smaller cans of soups and such that were left, but these huge cans were deemed too unwieldy to take with them.

"We should all probably turn in as early as possible and rest up for tomorrow," Rick suggested. "There will be a lot of lifting and toting necessary to get all the vehicles packed up and ready. You all will need to be bright-eyed and bushy-tailed." He gave them a rare smile.

Allison helped Lori and Carol clean up after the meal and then adjourned to her bedroom. Daryl was already there, peeking inside one of the tote bags to try and figure out where Allison had stashed his long tube brush. He turned around as she entered.

"There you are, you handsome man," she purred.

"Huh?" he muttered, confused by her amorous look. Normally, as a man, he was always "in the mood," but this evening happened to be an exception to that rule. His mind was racing with details of what needed to be done the next day, and he was pretty physically exhausted, to boot. She sidled over to him and placed her hands behind his neck, looking deeply into his eyes. He stood still, caught by surprise and unsure of how to react.

"What's wrong? Don't you find me attractive?"
"Huh?" he repeated. "I mean, yeah, of course I do. I just, um… I'm just kinda tired and I thought you'd be, too….and…" He noticed her crestfallen expression. "I mean, you go ahead and get ready. I just gotta run this brush over to Glenn and I'll be right back." He stroked her cheek gently, gave her a quick kiss and strode out. Glenn had mentioned earlier that he'd neglected to clean his and Maggie's rifles earlier and wanted to borrow Daryl's brush. When Daryl returned to the bedroom five minutes later, Allison was curled up on her side underneath the quilt, sound asleep.

"It figures," he sighed quietly.

‡‡‡ ‡‡‡ ‡‡‡ ‡‡‡

"Don't forget," Rick turned and addressed the group that was lined up behind him at Mr. Charlie's back door at dawn the morning of their departure, "if you run into some sort of trouble, one short blast of the horn. Anytime we hear a horn, we all stop. Got it?" Everyone nodded. "OK, on my count we file out and get into our designated vehicles. Keep an eye out the entire time, though, even though it's only a few steps out, OK?" He paused and gave everyone a moment to prepare for their dash to the cars. "One, two, three, GO!"

They filed out and then dispersed to the various cars, trucks and vans with military precision. Rick, Lori and Carl were in the lead vehicle, and the others waited with idling engines waiting to pull out of the lot behind them. The conga line slowly pulled out of Mr. Charlie's parking lot for the last time and turned left onto Main Street as the sun peeked over the horizon.
The caravan of vehicles slowed down and then came to stop. Daryl and Allison were in a truck right behind Rick and his family, who were in the lead. They watched as Rick opened his driver's side door, stepped out and then gazed at something through his binoculars. They both turned to see what he was looking at and saw a two-story clapboard house sitting alone some 50 feet off of the small road they were traveling. There was a set of railroad tracks between the road and the wooden fence with peeling white paint that surrounded the home. Rick lowered his binoculars and shook his head at Daryl before sliding back behind the wheel. The line of cars continued onward.

"He must've seen something," Daryl commented to Allison as they drove. "Maybe railroad tracks are too easy for groups of walkers to walk along or something. And that old wooden fence probably wouldn't stand up against a herd."

He was more or less thinking out loud. Allison had been uncharacteristically quiet for the past few hours, but Daryl didn't know it was because, as Maggie had predicted, her long-absent menstrual cycle had reared its painful head with a vengeance that morning. Allison had all but forgotten how painful and uncomfortable cramps could be; luckily she'd found some Naprosyn in her "magic bag of tricks" and the medication was finally kicking in and making her feel better. Hmph, she thought to herself, Maggie must be psychic or something. Allison certainly hadn't noticed any symptoms or signs of impending Monthly-hood herself. Go figure. In response to Daryl's comment she said, "It does seem like he saw something that didn't sit right." After a pause she added, "I remember when I was a kid, and we'd be on the road, driving through the country somewhere…Granny would always spot one lone house near a railroad crossing with the lights on inside and she'd say 'I wonder what those folks are doing right now…' And Granddad would tell her 'They're probably sitting there wondering why they bought a house so close to the railroad tracks.'"

Daryl gave his traditional brief snort of laughter and then remarked, "So you inherited your nosiness from your mom's side of the family, huh?"

"I've told you before, I'm not nosy…I'm…inquisitive. Curious, perhaps."

"Inquiring, intrigued, thirsty for knowledge," he interjected in a mocking tone. "Call it what you want to convince yourself, Miss Thesaurus, but we both know the truth." He gave her a sly sideways glance.

"What I know right now is that you should be paying attention to the road," Allison nodded in the direction of the windshield. "Looks like Rick is stopping."

Daryl applied the brakes, as did everyone behind him. He exited the truck to consult with Rick. While the two men spoke Allison saw Lori quickly dart out of the passenger door and then disappear down in the ditch beside the road.

When Daryl got back into the truck Allison wasn't surprised when he reported that Rick had stopped because Lori needed a bathroom break. "Not surprising. As the fetus gets bigger it tends to put pressure on the bladder," she explained to Daryl, knowing it would embarrass him slightly. He'd earned it after that 'nosiness' remark, she decided.

"He said that he saw two people walking around upstairs in that last house," Daryl replied, purposely changing the subject. "They didn't look like walkers, they looked to be live people."

"Good thing he spotted them before we tried to go inside, then," she remarked. "Sometimes we
tend to forget that walkers aren't the only danger these days. That we can't automatically assume that every house we find is abandoned. We can't afford to become complacent...even if we don't hear or smell walkers, we have to always keep in mind the possibility of other humans in the vicinity."

Daryl was pleased that Allison seemed to be more her old chatty self. "Seems like you're feeling better," he unwisely ventured.

"Feeling better than what?" she asked, confused.

"Um, you know..." he tried to concentrate on his driving as daylight quickly turned to dusk and Rick made a turn onto a small dirt road. "Better than...well, how you were sort of in a mood...before..." The facial expression he caught out the corner of his eye told him that somehow, some way, he'd said the wrong thing.

"No, I don't know...what sort of mood was I in?" Allison said challengingly.

"Uh," his mind raced, searching for an escape. "So, that fetus is pressed right up against the ol' bladder, you say? Is that painful?"

Before Allison could reply the line of vehicles pulled to a stop. Rick exited his car and motioned for T-Dog, Glenn and Daryl to join him for a quick conference. In short order the men proceeded to investigate a small house that wasn't fenced in, but was a far distance from any neighboring buildings. They came back to report the structure was walker-free and that everyone should just bring in the bare necessities for one night's stay. It was getting dark out, and they'd been on the road for many hours. They would continue their trek at sunrise the next day.

‡‡‡ ‡‡‡ ‡‡‡
‡‡‡ ‡‡‡ ‡‡‡
‡‡‡ ‡‡‡ ‡‡‡

Weeks later, the group slowed down when they encountered a local sheriff's department car abandoned on the shoulder of the road. Rick and Daryl cautiously approached it – by now everyone in their group had learned to understand a variety of hand signals, whistles and briefly shouted syllables – with weapons drawn. T-Dog stood down while Rick jimmied the lock on the trunk. Nothing leaped out at them and T-Dog reached in and removed a gear bag and boxes of rifle cartridges and stowed them in his truck. Rick opened the driver's side door and the decaying officer that had been slumped across the seats sat up and started snarling. Daryl plunged his hunting knife through an eye socket and then wiped the blade clean on the walker's pant leg. He stepped back and Rick leaned inside to retrieve the duly deputized walker's sidearm, handcuffs, MagLite and baton. Everyone returned to their respective vehicles and the caravan once again set in motion.

‡‡‡ ‡‡‡ ‡‡‡
‡‡‡ ‡‡‡ ‡‡‡
‡‡‡ ‡‡‡ ‡‡‡

Rick gestured for the group to remain silent and to crouch low. He tried the knob of the front door and the door swung open. He cautiously stepped inside, gun drawn, with Glenn, T-Dog and Daryl close behind. All seemed quiet on the lower floor of the isolated two-story farmhouse they'd found. Glenn poked his head out the door and gestured for the rest of the group to enter. As Allison crossed the threshold her nose was assaulted by a revolting stench – not that of rotting walker flesh, but more like human waste or raw sewage. Before she could remark on the smell she heard a raspy voice screech: "Who the hell are y'all?! Get the fuck outta my house!"
Everyone glanced upward and saw a grizzled man with wild grey hair and whiskers that almost obscured his face standing at the top of the stairs pointing a shotgun at them.

Rick slowly placed his Colt back into its holster and then held up his hands to show he was unarmed. "It's OK," he told the man. "We don't mean any harm. We just –"

"Are y'all deaf?!" The man's voice sounded so much like Yosemite Sam that Allison would have laughed if she hadn't thought that any slightest movement might make him pull the trigger as he stepped closer to the railing and leaned over it menacingly. Rick subtly gestured for everyone to go back outside. As he himself retreated he kept muttering reassurances to Prospector Pete (as the group would later refer to the man whenever they discussed the encounter) that everything was OK, they were leaving, they wouldn't bother him any more….

The group returned to their vehicles and pressed on yet again.

T-Dog used bolt cutters to cut the padlock off of the large garage-type door and Hershel rolled it up while Rick and Daryl stood poised with weapons drawn. They were in the center of a U-Store-It complex seemingly in the middle of nowhere. The group had spent too many nights sleeping in their vehicles to keep track of lately, and this structural oasis was the first possible roof over their heads – however temporary – they'd seen in days. It was far from ideal and even further from any sort of permanence, but for the moment it was the closest thing to "home" that they'd had in almost two months.

"Clear!" Rick called a few minutes later. He and the other men repeated the process when opening two more adjacent storage units. The others followed behind, intent on inspecting the premises to determine what supplies needed to be brought in from the cars. U-Store-It did have a standard chain-link fence around the property, but what had actually lured Rick in was the isolated location of the place…there weren't any other buildings in the immediate area, and they'd had to follow a long narrow road off of a secondary road off of the main highway to get to it.

"Geez," Allison remarked as her eyes adjusted to the dim light, "it's amazing what folks will pay money for to store." The unit she was surveying had some furniture, a giant stuffed moose head, an engine of some sort, stacks of boxes filled with comic books (each issue carefully encased in a plastic sleeve she discovered when she peeked inside one box…and NO, I am NOT nosy, she mentally reassured herself as she poked around)…, a canoe, photo albums, gourds with faces painted on them and plastic garbage bags filled with Tupperware.

"You think that's bad?" Beth commented over dinner later that night when Allison was describing her finds. T-Dog had fired up a small camp stove they'd brought with them from Mr. Charlie's and they were dining on some fried Spam and vegetable soup they'd liberated from a house a day or two before. Or maybe it was a week or two. Time seemed to alternately drag and race by, Allison thought to herself when she couldn't recall exactly how long ago it was that they'd found these latest canned goods. "There are these weird, spooky department store mannequins in our unit! When it gets dark it looks like people creeping up on you."

"Maybe Michael Jackson stored his excess friends here," T-Dog commented, and everyone laughed.

"Rick and I did some looking around," Hershel announced, "and the office is two aisles over to the south. He inclined his head to indicate the direction. "There's a bathroom in there, and the water is
still running…." He paused before adding, "But no one is to go there alone, whether during the day or night. All is quiet for now, but we can't afford to take chances. Any of you – if you want to use that bathroom, you take someone with you to stand guard."

Rick looked around at the group. "This place isn't secure enough for us to stay long-term, but let's think of it in terms of staying maybe two or three days. Recharge our batteries, get our bearings, prepare for more road time. That sort of thing." He spoke tersely.

Everyone nodded their understanding. "I'll go out early tomorrow and see if there's any huntin' to be found nearby," Daryl said.

"I'll go with you," Carl volunteered. Daryl glanced at Rick who nodded almost imperceptibly.

"OK," Daryl told the boy. "But best get to bed early, then, I'll have you up before the stars have set."

"Speaking of stars, Carl Sagan," Allison said to Daryl, "you know constellations and such…can you tell approximately what month or even day it is?" She noticed everyone looking at her with curiosity so she hastened to explain. "We celebrated Thanksgiving back at that big house…remember? But I can't recall exactly how long ago that was. I was just wondering if it was Christmas yet, or if maybe we're already into the new year by now."

"There's been frost on the windshields in the early morning lately and the ground has been frozen," Glenn added, "so I'm thinking we're past December 20th or 21st or whenever winter starts by now."

"I'm no Carl Sagan," Daryl replied with a sidelong glance at Allison, "but from the position of the Big Dipper and the North Star, and the time the Sun has been rising lately, I'd guess that we are into late December."

"So it might be near Christmas, yeah?" Lori asked.

"It can be our Christmas," Beth declared, "no matter the actual date."

"I think that's a nice idea," Carol piped up. "While we're here for a day or two inside a building, we can have a Christmas celebration of some sort." She paused and then sighed, "Who knows when the next time is that we're all settled like this."

"All the more reason to get an early start on huntin'," Daryl reiterated as he looked pointedly at Carl. "If we're gonna have Christmas tomorrow, we need something for dinner."

T-Dog extinguished the flame on the camp stove and everyone gradually dispersed and headed to their various makeshift beds in the storage units.

+++ +++ +++

The entire group dined outdoors around the camp stove on fresh-caught opossum courtesy of Daryl and Carl's hunting expedition the next night. Once upon a time some of them may have been squeamish at the thought of eating "vermin", but no one complained now. This was the first fresh meat of any type they'd had in a while. After they'd finished their meal they adjourned to the storage locker with the mannequins. Beth had found two boxes filled with votive candles, so they used a dozen of those to form a makeshift fireplace to gather around for their Christmas celebration. Even better, Maggie had found a bottle of authentic Mexican tequila, gift-wrapped with a card attached. "To Dante from the Gang, Congratulations on 3 years of Sobriety," Allison read aloud. "Sheesh, with friends like those…" she shook her head.
Glenn opened the bottle and held it up in a toast. "Merry Christmas, everyone!" As the group passed the bottle around to sip, they began to reminisce.

"I remember one Christmas, I must've been about six or seven," Allison recalled, "when all I wanted was an Easy Bake Oven. Instead I got a sweater and underwear and socks, and Granny told me 'you wanna bake stuff, there's an oven in the kitchen.'" She took a sip of tequila before passing the bottle to her right and continued, looking at the candlelight, "It's not like she'd let me bake cakes or cupcakes whenever I wanted to like you could with an Easy Bake Oven. No, sir, if I was gonna waste electricity heating up the oven I'd have to bake something stupid, something like a meatloaf for dinner that we all could eat…"

"I left home when I was 15," Hershel spoke up, looking at the "fire." "I spent my first Christmas after that at a Greyhound depot in Abilene, Texas."

"What were you doing in Texas?" Beth asked.

"I was just wanderin', working on ranches whenever I could to make some money. Originally planned to head out west, but I only went as far as El Paso. After a year and a half I came back to Georgia, finished school and went to college. I'd loved working with horses and cattle, so I decided to see if I could make it through veterinary school." He chuckled. "Come to think of it, once I graduated, I ended up working almost every Christmas. Cows don't care about holidays when they get the frothy bloat."

"Rick worked most holidays, too," Lori murmured.

"You knew I was a civil servant when you married me," her husband retorted. It seemed as though the only words those two exchanged any more were angry ones. "Criminals don't take holidays off, either." The bottle came his way and he took a healthy pull off of it.

"I understood why you had to work," she said without emotion. "Didn't mean I had to like it."

"I worked most holidays, too," Allison commented. "Doctors, nurses, fire fighters, telephone operators, radio DJs…it's just a fact of life that some jobs require staffing 365 days a year."

"Remember that year Delta Dawn knocked over the Christmas tree?" Maggie asked, changing the subject. Hershel and Beth laughed at Maggie's reference. "Delta Dawn was our Irish Setter," Maggie explained to the rest of the group. "She was a sweetheart, but she was big and clumsy. Two days before Christmas she heard a noise or saw a mouse or who knows why she started running around like a maniac in the living room. She tried to skid to a stop, but she slid right into the tree and it toppled right over and smashed most of the ornaments. Mom was so mad that she just hauled the tree outside to the garbage and put some lights on a potted plant instead."

"I got a G.I. Joe with lifelike hair one year," Glenn was beginning to slur his words ever so slightly. "My sister shaved it."

"Pffftgggh!" Allison snorted tequila out her nose and began coughing and choking.

"Heimlich!" Daryl called out and patted her on the back, laughing all the while.

"Here, take a sip of this," Lori passed her bottle of water over.

"Why…." Allison struggled to compose herself enough to speak, "why did your sister shave your doll?"

Glenn shrugged. "I dunno. Why do girls do the goofy stuff they do? Maybe my mom told her she..."
was too young to shave her legs and she got mad or something. I just remember she had one of those pink plastic razors and a can of Barbasol and she ruined my doll.” He hiccupped. "I mean, action figure."

"I ruined my Skipper doll by accident," Carol commented. The holiday spirit, such as it was, was making even the usually reserved Carol was sip from the bottle when it came her way. "I don't know what they made doll's hair out of back then, but Prell shampoo turned it into broom straw."

"Was Skipper the doll where you moved her arm and she grew breasts?" Daryl asked.

"Why would you know about Growing Up Skipper?" Allison was genuinely surprised. "Did you play with dolls as a kid?"

"No, but I sure remember that TV commercial where her bosom magically developed."

"Cool!" Carl said, his eyes wide with interest at the mention of breasts.

"Yeah, well, not so cool when I cranked Linda Fay Lawson's arm at school and nothing happened 'cept I had to go to the principal's office," Daryl remarked, accepting the bottle as it was passed to him.

"What about you, T?" Maggie asked the man who had been silent the entire time he'd been drinking and had a solemn look on his face. "You look like you're lost deep in thought."

"Oh, it's nothing…just that all these stories remind me of one Christmas morning…” He leaned forward and rested his chin on his hand, and eyes grew even more distant. He briefly covered his face with both hands as he began mumbling quietly, as if he was thinking aloud, and Allison had to strain to hear him. "…and then I ran upstairs yelling 'Mama, Daddy, come quick! Something's wrong! The puppy Santa brought me won't wake up…." He swiped at his eye with the back of his hand.

Glenn drained what was left in the bottom of the bottle and set it down. It was silent in the room for a few minutes and then Beth began singing in a lovely, clear soprano:

And so this is Christmas, and what have we done? Another year older, and a new one just begun.

The entire group, except for Carl who didn't know the words, joined in the chorus:

A very merry Christmas, and a happy New Year…let's hope it's a good one, without any fear.

When the song ended, there were smiles all around, and everyone stood and embraced one another, with even Daryl giving some very tentative hugs. A true Christmas miracle, Allison thought as she watched him wrap one arm halfway around Lori's shoulder and then remove it that quickly.

"God bless us, everyone," Hershel said, and they adjourned for the night.

‡‡‡ ‡‡‡ ‡‡‡

‡‡‡ ‡‡‡ ‡‡‡

By the time Spring was in the air, the ragtag group was running on "automatic." They knew the drill. Rick would choose a house or dwelling, The Men would go in to determine its safety, and if there were only a few walkers inside they along with Maggie and Allison would dispatch them using knives and blunt weapons. Then the others carried some bedding and basic supplies inside and they'd spend a night or two before having to evacuate to avoid an impending herd. They weren't able to make a lot of progress in their trek north, because the herds were growing bigger and were blocking many of the roads. It seemed like the group had spent all winter going in a large circle from camp to camp.
But even if they hadn't yet found a permanent home, they were still together and were still alive, and they had become a very tight fighting unit. Carol now knew her way around firearms and Carl had become a crack shot. They'd learned how to make noise to attract or distract walkers to either kill them or allow time to escape them. They knew what type of knives, hatchets or crowbars were lightweight enough to hack through a small herd in combat formation without exhausting themselves. Even Lori, who was heavily gravid, fell into formation at Rick's signal and wielded a weapon expertly.

It was a warm day and they'd already been stymied after clearing a ramshackle house. They were stopped on a highway and Rick was poring over a map with Hershel, Daryl and Glenn.

"I think we should head this way, back toward Newnan," he pointed out a route.

"Hey Rick, I'm gonna go fetch some water from that creek over there while y'all decide our next move. We can boil it later," T-Dog said as he walked off with a large container.

"While the others are washing their panties," Daryl said just loud enough to elicit a look from Allison – he knew that she hated that particular word, but laughs were few and far between these days, and he was doing his best to keep morale up – "Let's you and I go hunt."

When Rick and Daryl returned to the highway they both looked smug. Rick was almost smiling. "We've found a place," he announced. "A place we can make into a home," he added.

"Where? What type of place?" a jumble of voices asked.

"Prison, just up the road a piece," Daryl replied, heading back to his truck.

"A prison?" Allison asked skeptically. "Do you think that's really safe?"

"Why wouldn't it be?" Rick replied. "It's a solid brick building with several layers of protective fencing around it. There's land around it, too…. It's perfect. We just need to clear out some walkers on the property."

"But what if there are still prisoners inside?" Allison asked, somewhat impatiently. They didn't seem to understand her concern.

"What are you saying?" Rick asked her.

"I'm saying it's a prison," she emphasized the last word. "The folks inside are probably not there just because they wanted free jumpsuits and some male bonding."

"I think we should take our chances and cross that bridge if and when we come to it," Hershel said. "Lori can't take much more of this running around."

The decision apparently made, everyone returned to their vehicles and followed Rick to the Western Georgia Correctional Facility.
"Carol, you've become a pretty good shot, you go with Daryl and Allison. Carl and Hershel will take that tower," Rick pointed to one of the tall look-out structures that reminded Allison of the guard towers on the old sitcom *F-Troop*.

"Goodness, I did watch too much TV," she thought for a fleeting moment before re-focusing on Rick's instructions. The others were in charge of making noise and stabbing as many walkers as possible through the fence. On Rick's count Lori slid open the gate and everyone ran to their designated spot.

Thanks to the cover laid down by the folks in the tower, plus the efforts of those who lured walkers to the fence, Rick was able to make his way to the guard tower occupied by Carl and Hershel and he took care of the last of the walkers with his high-powered rifle. When the snipers descended from the towers, they congratulated one another and smiled real smiles for the first time in a long time. Likewise, the rest of the group was jubilant as they carried some belongings into the large, gated, grassy area.

"Woo-hoo!" T-Dog cried in exhilaration.

"This is the most space we've had since the farm!" Carol exclaimed happily.

They set to work laying out bedrolls, collecting firewood, hauling water and hunting (in Daryl's case), working together like the well-oiled machine they'd become over the winter, but the overall mood was upbeat, and even the grunt work didn't feel like drudgery for a change.

‡‡‡ ‡‡‡ ‡‡‡

Allison used a pail of water that T-Dog had brought up from the nearby canal to wash her hands and forearms after she'd skinned and cleaned the three somewhat scrawny squirrels Daryl had caught for dinner. She couldn't complain, though; squirrel meat was better than no meat, and to be honest he hadn't been able to venture far afield to look for game. He'd had to catch whatever wandered into their safe area. Dinner was a simple affair that night; Beth dug out a couple of plates which they used to pass around and share the squirrel, which they ate with their hands.

"Just like mom used to make," Glenn commented wryly, tossing aside a tiny bone. But he wasn't really complaining. It felt good to be able to relax and hopefully get a good night's sleep under the stars.

Allison twirled a stick in the campfire. She'd fashioned a sort of skewer out of it and was carefully roasting the hearts, livers and kidneys of the squirrels. She pulled it out of the fire and examined the tiny shish kabob and decided it was thoroughly cooked.

"Pass this to your mom," she said, handing it to Carl. "And make sure she eats it," she said louder so that Lori heard her. She knew from experience that Lori usually crinkled her nose in distaste at organ meat, but it was rich in Vitamins A and D, which Lori needed for her baby.

Carl handed the stick to his mother wordlessly. He always seemed to be distant around her these days, which upset Lori. She'd confided to both Allison and Carol that she thought her son hated her. Allison tried to comfort her, saying that his behavior was just typical of boys that age – that they rebel against their mothers and prefer to hang around with their dads and other men. If Carl wasn't following his dad around he was busy shadowing Daryl. These days he was interested in
guns and hunting and protecting the group, not taking regular naps or washing behind his ears.

"That's the third time he's been around," Hershel said, nodding toward the barely visible figure of Rick in the distance. "Seems like if there was a break in the fence some place he would've found it by now."

"He's probably just being extra-diligent," Allison replied. "It's been a while since we've had a leisurely evening like this. He feels personally responsible for our security, I guess."

"It does feel funny, just sitting around like this," Maggie agreed. "Not being constantly on guard."

"Looks like Daryl can't relax, either," T-Dog commented. Allison turned to look at the overturned bus where Daryl was pacing back and forth, keeping watch. "If neither he or Rick sees any walkers soon, hopefully they can get some sack time tonight, too."

"Bethy," Hershel spoke up suddenly, "sing 'Paddy Reilly' for me. I haven't heard that, I think, since your mother was alive."

"Daddy, not that one, please?" Maggie said, leaning against Glenn and looking wistfully at the fire.

"How about…'The Partin' Glass'" the elder man suggested.

"No, no one wants to hear…" Beth demurred.

Allison rose to her feet with the remainder of the squirrel on her plate. "If you'll excuse me, I'm going to take this over to Daryl. He hasn't eaten yet."

"Why not?" she heard Glenn reply to Beth as she departed, and a moment later Beth's lovely voice warmed the night air with the old Irish folk song.

As Allison got closer to the bus she noticed that there were two figures on top of it. As her eyes adjusted to the dimness after leaving the bright light of the fire, she realized it was Carol. She'd seen Carol get up during dinner, but she'd presumed that the older woman had gone off to find a place to relieve herself. She approached the bus and scrambled to the top slowly so as not to spill the contents of the plate she held.

"I have to admit, Rick's gotten us a lot further than I ever thought he would," she heard Carol speaking.

"Hey there," Allison said in greeting, almost feeling as if she was intruding. Carol had her back to Daryl and he had both of his hands on her shoulder.

"Hey," he replied looking up at Allison. He then followed Allison's gaze to his hands and hastened to explain, "Carol's shoulder's sore. Kickback from her rifle. She ain't used to it."

"Oh." Allison waited a moment while he quickly finished Carol's massage.

"Um, is that better?" he asked.

"Mmm, feels fine now," Carol turned and smiled sweetly at him.

"It should," Allison remarked tersely, "since you're right-handed and the butt of your gun was against the other shoulder."

To his credit, Allison noted, Daryl look nonplussed by the situation. He didn't have the irritating cat-that-swallowed-the-canary grin that Carol was displaying. "What?" he asked.
"Never mind," Allison shook her head. "I brought you some dinner. It's not much, but you have to eat something."

"Thanks," he accepted the plate. He picked up a piece of meat with his fingers and was about to put it in his mouth, but then he paused. "Did you eat? Did you have enough?" he asked her anxiously.

"Yeah, I'm fine. That's why your portion is so skimpy." She smiled at him.

He shoved a piece of food in his mouth and chewed quickly. "It's little Shane over there that has the appetite," he told her after he swallowed. They were all getting leaner, but he worried about Allison losing too much weight. He wasn't stupid; he knew that she wasn't really full whenever she gave him the rest of her food. But he also knew that she could be as stubborn as he, and in her mind he needed more nutrition…because he was a man, because he spent a lot of energy hunting, whatever reason she'd concocted in her head.

"Don't be mean," Carol giggled and nudged him at his snide remark.

"Well, I think I'm going to turn in. Are you going to keep watch all night?" Allison asked him. "Will you need someone to relieve you later?"

"Nah, everything looks clear. I'm comin' now," he said as he followed her down.

"You are? Just from that little shoulder rub?" Carol teased him with a lascivious grin. "I'm better than I thought I was."

"Huh?" he looked up at her in confusion.

Bless his naiveté, Allison thought to herself.

Rick joined the group around the fire as they began preparing for bed. The look on his face told them, though, that he had more to say to them than simply "sweet dreams."

"We need to go inside, take the prison itself," he said earnestly, looking at each person in turn as he spoke. "There'll be food…medicine…shelter…"

"An arsenal?" Daryl was beginning to look at the Big Picture that Rick was painting.

"Probably not in the main building, but definitely locked up somewhere nearby."

"We're running dangerously low on ammunition," Hershel pointed out.

"I know," Rick said slowly. "That's why we'll have to go in….hand-to-hand." He waited while the group digested this. "We can do this," he encouraged them. "These assholes don't stand a chance."

"We've come this far," Glenn agreed.

"Let's all get a good night's sleep, then," Rick told them. "We've got a busy day ahead of us tomorrow."

The next morning Rick considered the group carefully before making his decision.

"Daryl, T-Dog, Glenn, Maggie and Allison will come with me. The rest of you wait out here but keep an eagle eye out for when we signal you that it's time to come inside."
The Chosen Ones got their knives, pokers and machetes at the ready and then followed Rick inside the second gate to the prison yard. As walkers approached them, they formed their traditional "fighting circle" – backs to the center – and eliminated the undead in a flurry as they slowly made their way to the building.

"Don't break rank!" Rick called to T-Dog as the bald man dashed several steps away from the group to pick up a discarded riot shield. T rejoined the phalanx and used his new device to advantage, pushing walkers back safely with one hand while piercing their heads with the other.

Five minutes, a tense lifetime later, it appeared that all the walkers had been dispatched. The group stood still for a moment, collecting both their breath and their thoughts.

"Some of them are civilians," Daryl finally spoke, gesturing to the few bodies not wearing prison blues or guard uniforms.

"Visitors, maybe? Got trapped when the sickness hit?" Allison ventured a guess.

"Or they could be - - " Rick's guess was interrupted by a loud, low growl and the sound of multiple feet shuffling on the concrete. The group look up to see a herd of walkers dressed in full riot gear coming their way.

"Positions, everyone!" Rick ordered.

The group took their combat stance, but this horde was trickier than any other they had encountered; their helmets went down almost to their shoulders, and their faces were protected by masks. The one bolt Daryl shot bounced easily off the walker's facemask and fell to the ground. They bought time by shoving the walkers away and hacking at their necks when suddenly Maggie managed to get close enough to one to lift his mask up. She thrust her knife up through the walker's lower jaw and up into its brain.

"See that?!" she said with a huge grin that was a combination of surprise and triumph.

The others followed suit, aiming their weapons so that they could penetrate the soft palate of the lower mandible…or else they just used the rip-the-helmet-off-and-stab-through-the-eye technique. It was a tense fight, and everyone was panting as if they'd run a 26k marathon after the last helmeted walker was eliminated.

"Why do you suppose they were dressed that way…the guards…" Glenn asked of no one in particular.

"I'm thinking that once prisoners started turning, the guards that were able to put on their riot gear for protection," Rick mused. "Anyway, let's make our way inside. Be prepared for…for anything."

The group slowly crept up a metal staircase, across a short catwalk and stopped at a metal door. They backed away at Rick's silent signal, and he then quickly pulled the door open with Daryl crouched in position, ready to take down anyone or anything that was on the other side. Everything was quiet, though, and Daryl and Rick ventured slowly inside. After a moment, Daryl gestured for the others to follow them.

The rest of the group trailed behind them, walking cautiously and quietly, looking right and left, taking in their surroundings. It was eerily silent, and their every footstep echoed around the metal and concrete room. Rick walked up a staircase to some sort of office or crow's nest and came back downstairs with a huge ring of keys. He peered around in the dim light and then decided upon a direction. The rest followed him to Cell Block C. The few walkers in that segment of the prison
were all behind bars, and Glenn, Daryl, T-Dog and Rick went to work luring them to the doors of their cells and killing them. T started tossing bodies from the upper level over the railing to the floor and Rick leaned over the barrier and called down to Maggie and Allison, "Go ahead and bring the others inside. Make sure everyone sticks close together….just …in case…” He returned to piling dead walkers on the lower floor.

‡‡‡ ‡‡‡ ‡‡‡

"Home sweet home," Glenn said wryly as he led the troupe inside.

"Is it secure here?" Hershel asked, glancing around.

"This cell block is," Rick replied. "Tomorrow we'll secure the rest of the prison…see what we can find in the canteen and the infirmary."

"We sleep in the cells?" Beth was trying to understand the plan.

"Yeah, I found two sets of keys on a guard," Rick told the group. "I have one and Daryl has the other."

"Thank you," Lori said with a smile. She placed her hand on Rick's arm. He walked away without speaking to her. Her face fell as her eyes followed him.

"Everybody best choose a cell," Hershel announced and, following his own advice, placed his bundle of belongings on the cot in a cell near the beginning of the row. Beth entered the one next door, Carl close at her heels. A few minutes later Allison noticed Hershel poking his head in Beth's room and Carl making a quick retreat.

As the others began settling in Allison stood in place, surveying the row of cells. This place gave her the creeps for some reason. It was odd, because she had always enjoyed reading about prisons and jails in crime books, but actually living in one was another story. And this place was obviously very old. The toilets and sinks were separate and made of porcelain, rather than the stainless steel combination units most prisons had today. Metal commodes weren't as easy for inmates to tear apart and use as a weapon.

"I ain't sleepin' in a cage," a familiar voice said behind her. She turned and looked at Daryl. "We'll take the perch, 'K?" She nodded with relief and he took one of her bags and carried it with his own up the stairway to the landing. "I'll bring us up a couple of mattresses, should be comfortable enough," he told her when she joined him and set the rest of her things down.

"Yeah, it'll be fine," she assured him. Not much privacy, she thought to herself, but no one else's quarters could be described as romantic, either. No doubt if anyone decided to get frisky they'd have to go off and find some other place to do it.

‡‡‡ ‡‡‡ ‡‡‡

"Not bad…flash bangs… CS triple chasers… not sure how they work on Walkers but we'll take em..." Rick spoke aloud as he rummaged through the weapons and gear that were laid on on the table. They had been searching the prison for the cafeteria and had found instead this small room that might have been the armory at one time. Or maybe a place where the guards had been regrouping when the storm began, since most of the guns were already loaded.

Daryl picked up a riot helmet and turned it over. Some sort of slime oozed out of it disgustingly, and he set it back down, stating "I ain't wearin' this shit."
T-Dog was examining a Kevlar glove that was similarly dripping with fluid. "Maybe we could boil 'em," he suggested.

"Not enough firewood in the whole forest!" Daryl scoffed. "'Sides, we got this far without 'em." He picked up a baton and took a few practice swings with it.

"Allison?" Carol's voice came from the doorway.

"Yeah?" she stopped playing with the laser sight on the gun she was holding and turned to look at the woman.

"Everything all right?" Rick asked her.

Carol smiled and nodded. "Nothing to concern yourself with."

Allison left the group and followed Carol back to C Block, where Lori was sitting in her cell looking miserable.

"I think I've lost the baby," she said in a voice barely above a whisper.

Allison pulled up one of the chairs in the cell and sat down.

"What makes you think that?" she asked gently.

"I haven't felt it move in a while…"

"You're undernourished and overstressed. The baby is developed enough now to have its own sleep cycles. It could be that he's sleeping during the day and you're sleeping so soundly at night now that we're in a safe place that you don't feel it when he moves at night. Plus there's a lot less room for him to move around now – "

"But Carl was kicking me in the ribs right up until I went into labor, and – "

"There's no comparison, really," Allison tried to comfort Lori. "No two pregnancies are ever the same. I bet even that woman in Arkansas with the 19 kids and the clown-car uterus would tell you the same thing."

Lori managed a small smile at Allison's attempted joke.

"I guess intellectually I know you're right," she told the young doctor, "but I still can't help worrying about…" She paused and seemed to be holding back a sob. "What if this baby is already infected like the rest of us, and bites me from inside, or while it's being born…?"

"I'd guess that you're safe from that scenario, since not many infants are born with a full set of teeth," Allison tried to reassure her.

"But what if I turn during the birth for some reason…" She grasped Allison's hand and pressed her face close to her. "If…if that happens, I don't want to be that way…and Rick can't be the one…"

Allison clutched Lori's other hand and squeezed both of them. "We all made a pact long ago, remember? We'd take care of anyone who turned." She paused as Lori closed her eyes and subtly nodded her head. "Odds are everything will be A-OK when you have the baby, alright? But, and I'm emphasizing 'but', if the worst happens, most likely it will be me and Carol at your side, not Rick. We'll…take care of things."

"Because my husband can't bear to be near me," Lori had fastened onto the "not Rick" portion of
Allison's statement.

"No, because husbands are pretty much useless in a delivery scenario under the best of circumstances," Allison explained. "I'm just saying that when your time comes, Rick may well be out on guard duty and not have the time to stand by your side through six or 10 or 20 hours of labor." Lori's facial expression seemed to soften somewhat, so Allison continued. "I'm not an OB/GYN, but I've attended my share of regular childbirths during my internship and emergency ones when I was a resident. In my limited experience, the father has always been somewhat jumpy and impatient during the labor process under the best of circumstances. I can't tell you how many daddies have badgered me every 30 minutes asking 'Is this normal? Is something wrong? Why is it taking so long?' If that's the norm, can you imagine how antsy Rick would make you if he was standing by your side urging you to give birth as quickly as possible because there are walkers outside the gate?"

Lori mustered up a chuckle at that remark. "Now that you mention it, he couldn't keep still while I was in labor with Carl, and then when the doctor said I needed a C-section…well," she actually chuckled, "I thought he'd pass out when they sliced me open. Rick, who saw blood and gore regularly on the job, turned absolutely green and needed to be supported so that he wouldn't topple over….

"This is what I'm saying," Allison encouraged Lori with a grin, as she'd been taught to do. Always keep the patient's spirits up, as best you could. "I'll go grab my bag and see if I can hear the baby's heartbeat…I can also do a quick pelvic, if you want, to see if you're dilated or effaced yet."

"I'll get your bag," Carol, who'd apparently been hovering in the doorway the entire time, offered. "It's up on the 'perch', right?"

"Yeah, the black leather – well, you know which one. Thanks."

A few minutes later Lori was laying back on her bunk and Allison was moving her stethoscope slowly around her belly. She smiled at the woman and announced, "I'm getting a nice strong heartbeat."

Carol moved in closer, and noting that Lori's expression hadn't changed at Allison's news, commented, "You must be worried sick about giving birth in this place."

Lori struggled up to a sitting position. "I'm more worried about what will happen after it's born." She sighed and looked from Carol to Allison. "Rick hates me. He's too good of a man to admit it, but he hates me. What is he going to feel about this baby? Sometimes I think I can't go on another day with him looking at me with that revulsion in his eyes…"

"Rick is too good of a man to hate anyone, I think," Allison replied, tucking her stethoscope back into her bag. "He's just had a lot on his mind the past several months, worried about keeping all of us safe. I gather that that's been something of a sore spot with you for a long time – him always putting his work or his sense of duty first. And I'm guessing that at least before all this he could sometimes leave his work behind once he got home. But now with all of us living together like this, he's on duty twenty-four seven, or at least he feels that way." She reached over and gently placed her hand on top of Lori's. "And, frankly, it's that sense of responsibility that's kept us all alive thus far. I'm sorry that it takes time and attention away from you, but in a selfish way I'm also glad that he's the type of man that has that sort of commitment to the whole group." Unlike Shane, she thought to herself.

"Rick will come around soon enough," Carol said, sitting down next to Lori. "As soon as he and the others have the prison secured, he can relax and not have to worry so much about our safety.
"You'll see, everything will get better."

"Carol's right," Allison managed to say with a smile. "Yeah, it's a prison, but it's a solid building with a room and beds, such as they are. There's a nice tall fence around the property to keep walkers out. We've got cold running water and the toilets work, thanks to that water tower outside. This could very well turn out to be a place we can eventually call 'home'."

"Hershel was talking about planting some crops outside, said that the soil was real good," Carol joined in.

"Yeah, I heard him saying something about growing tomatoes, cucumbers, soybeans..." Allison recalled. "What are soybeans good for, anyway? I mean, I know they're useful for grinding up into other stuff, but I don't recall ever having a restaurant server ask me 'do you want corn, broccoli or soybeans with that'."

The other two women laughed and then Carol grasped Lori's right hand with both of hers and said sincerely, "Whatever happens with Rick, this baby will be loved and cared for. By all of us. You needn't worry. You're not alone in this."

Lori's mouth trembled a bit and she blinked back tears. "Thank you," she finally whispered, and she first pulled Carol close in a hug, and then Allison.

Allison sat back and asked Lori, "Do you want me to do a quick exam to see if you're dilating yet?"

Lori thought for a moment and then shook her head. "No, there's really no point in knowing when labor might start, is there? I mean, it's not like I have to pack a bag and have Rick drive me to the hospital. When it happens, it happens."

Suddenly they heard a jumble of male voices outside their cell. All three women walked out to see what was going on.

"But I want to help clear the prison," Carl was saying adamantly to his father. Allison noted that Rick, Daryl and the others were all holding an assortment of weapons they'd brought back from the "armory" room.

"We need you to stay here with the women," Rick leaned over and spoke to the boy. He placed a hand on Carl's shoulder. "If something should happen, you'll be the last man standing."

At the mention of the word "man" Carl nodded and squared his shoulders. "OK," he agreed.

"Where's my rifle?" Allison asked as she walked to the group. She saw that Maggie was clutching an automatic weapon, as were Glenn, Hershel and T-Dog. "And why didn't you come get me if you were ready to go?"

"'Cause you're not goin'," Daryl replied. "You need to stay here."

"But Maggie's going?" the words slipped out before she could stop them.

"What are you, five years old?" Daryl asked in a mocking tone. "'How come Maggie gets to go and I don't'?"

"And who are you, Ricky Ricardo?" Allison retorted. "'No, Lucy, you can't be in the show,',' she said in a sing-song voice.

"Look," Rick interrupted, "it's no reflection on anyone's shooting skills or anything else, we just
need some people to stay back here and take care of…things."

"So you go on now and behave yourself," Daryl told her with a lopsided half-grin, knowing his words would irk her. He ruffled his knuckles across the top of her head quickly as he spoke.

"Yes, sir," she replied evenly, trying to give him an evil look. But she couldn't manage one, because she was secretly so pleased that he'd touched her in front of everyone like that. An actual Public Display of Affection, and Carol was there to see it, doggone it.

"Y'all be safe," Allison added, as the group scooted through the huge metal grate and Carl closed and locked it behind them.
"That's sort of odd that they took Hershel with them," Allison commented after the group had left to clear the rest of the prison.

"Daddy has probably been itching to do something useful for a long time," Beth said. "Back on the farm, he was always doing something, from sunup to sundown, whether it was tending to the fields or repairing a fence or caring for the cattle. He liked to keep busy."

"I hope I have that kind of energy when I'm your dad's age," Allison told the young girl. She didn't mention that her own idea of Heaven had always been being able to sit around and either read books or watch TV to her heart's content without having to worry about going out and earning a living. It suddenly sounded very lazy to her. Of course Hershel, like her granddaddy, had grown up in a different era…the Great Depression and all. Maybe that had something to do with it. Of course, Daryl wasn't all that much older than her, and he always got restless if he wasn’t up and about and doing something… Sure, being a doctor required many hours of working on your feet every day (and don't get me started about those 16-hour shifts during my residency, she thought with a shudder)…and deep down she enjoyed that work, but nevertheless she couldn't deny that in Allison's Ideal World she would never be upset if she wasn't required to perform physical labor. "My goodness," it suddenly occurred to her, "If I had my druthers, I'd turn into one of those potato-y blob people in Wall-E."

"This place could be nice," Beth's voice interrupted Allison's reverie. "It's safe, and we can make it like a home, I bet."

"Better than that storage garage place, remember that?" Carl chimed in.

The Unsinkable Molly Brown and her loyal sidekick, Allison thought to herself. Nevertheless, a large dose of enthusiasm wouldn't hurt their current situation any.

"At least it smells better than Prospector Pete's house," she said.

"Eeew," Beth scrunched up her nose at the thought of that foul house. "That was so gross!"

"I wonder what ol' Pete is doing now?" Carl wondered aloud. "If he's still alive."

"Probably counting his body lice for amusement," Allison replied.

There was a chorus of "eews" and "icks" and then Carol strolled around the area, looking it up and down.

"Beth may be right," she commented, "about making this place into a home. I saw The Shawshank Redemption…that prison had a library, a pharmacy, a laundry room, and all sorts of things like that. I know it was only a movie, but I wonder if this prison might have some similar things…"

"It might," Lori ventured, "depending upon how much was left behind once the sickness hit."

"That's what Dad and the others are doing right now… finding out what all is in this place," Beth replied brightly.

"I could've gone with 'em," Carl grumbled. "I want to help. I'm a good shot."

"Your dad knows you're a good shot, that's why he wanted you to stay here to protect us," Beth told
him. Her approbation made him crimson with pleasure. It was obvious that Beth's respect and approval were important to the youngster.

"We should probably be doing something," Lori commented, "something to get this place…you know, ready. But we can't do much without more linens or the food and other things we left out in the cars…" She seemed to be talking to herself.

"I don't think we should go anywhere, either inside or out, until the others get back," Carol advised.

It was good advice, Allison thought to herself, although she felt a bit antsy because all they'd brought in with them was the bare necessities that they could carry. Most of her clothes and Daryl's were still out in the truck, along with the bags stuffed with the sutures and gauze packing and whatever else remained from their hospital haul many months ago. Sooner rather than later she'd have to retrieve at the very least the bag with the pre-packaged C-section kits, since Lori seemed to be close to her due date. A loud commotion coming from the corridor interrupted her thoughts.

"Carl! Open the door! It's us!" Rick's voice sounded frantic.

The boy thrust the key into the lock and swung the door open. Rick, T-Dog, and the others pushed a metal cafeteria cart inside the enclosure and the women gasped in horror when they saw Hershel laying atop of it, unconscious, with blood pouring from one of his legs. Or what was left of his leg.

"He got bit," Glenn explained anxiously as they rolled Hershel into a cell. "Rick, he…"

He didn't finish his sentence, as it was obvious what Rick had done. Allison stepped in and her medical training took over. As if in automatic mode she started barking out orders, all the while struggling to maintain a straight face – one of the basic rules in medicine, don't panic the family members, don't display any emotion, be it yay or nay.

"Let's move him onto this bunk on my count," she told the men standing around the cart. "One, two, three!" They deftly transferred the man onto the bed. "I need pillows to elevate the leg, and whatever sheets or linens we can gather to use as bandages. Lori, please fetch my bag." She'd left it in Lori's cell after examining her. The pregnant woman dashed off, horror written across her face.

"We need to cauterize the wound," Glenn said with a hint of panic in his voice. "I'll get some wood and start a fire – "

"No," Allison told him, propping up Hershel's injured leg on a pillow and examining it as she spoke. "We need to stop the bleeding naturally. We want a nice, clean stump so that he can eventually be fitted with a prosthetic leg. However, we'll need hot water for scrubbing up and cleaning my sponges."

"You've got it," Glenn said.

Lori handed Allison her call bag, and Allison directed Lori to open it. "Grab that box of gloves, please, and put a pair on Carol and then on yourself." Carol held up her hands in front of her to be gloved when she heard her name.

"Carol, I need pulse and pressure – Lori hand her the pressure cuff and stethoscope…you'll have to put the tips in her ears for her…"

Allison stepped to the sink to wash the blood off her hands the best she could with cold water.

"I – I can't get his sleeve rolled up," Carol said with a hysterical edge to her voice.
"Step back," Daryl ordered. He produced the Swiss army knife that Allison had given him for his birthday and cut the sleeve off of Hershel's shirt. He then left the cell along with Rick and Lori. Allison was vaguely aware of them discussing something about prisoners…

Something, perhaps it was Daryl's presence, seemed to suddenly galvanize Carol into action. She lost the deer-in-the-headlights look and wrapped the cuff around Hershel's arm. She placed the diaphragm of the stethoscope over the proper pulse point as Allison had taught her so many months ago at Mr. Charlie's store and then she called out authoritatively, "I need a watch with a second hand!"

"I'll go get Glenn's pocket watch!" Beth said before running off.

Allison dug through her bag and found a drill swage and a small packet of surgical gut. "We need more sheets," she called out to no one in particular. The prison linens apparently had a low cotton content, because they weren't very absorbent and the ones they'd had immediately available were already soaked with blood and dripping onto the floor. She continued to rummage through her bag and found the other item she'd hoped would be in there – a pair of surgical scissors. She spread the items out on the bunk and then donned gloves. "I'll need a basin of water handy in order to keep irrigating the field," she said out loud. She glanced around the cell. "Maggie? Can you get a bowl or something and fill it with water from the sink?"

Maggie, the woman who was one of the fiercest warriors in the group when it came to walkers, was now standing almost catatonic while staring wide-eyed at her injured father.

"Maggie! Please?" Allison's voice seemed to spur her to action, and she went off to find a a receptacle.

Beth came back with the pocket watch and after a minute or two Carol announced, "BP 100 over 60, pulse is 100 beats per minute and thready."

"He's in shock," Allison murmured. "Right now, that might not be such a bad thing, his body is compensating for the pain, shutting down parts of his brain...." She pulled on a pair of gloves and asked Lori, "Are you up to assisting? If not, be honest with me, I don't have time to deal with someone who might faint."

"No, I'm good, just tell me what to do," the pregnant woman assured her.

Allison handed her the scissors and instructed her "When I say 'snip', you take these scissors and cut as close to the knot I've made with the thread as you can. OK?"

At that moment Maggie returned with a bowl of water.

"OK, now you've got one extra job," Allison said with half a smile, "When I say 'wipe' you'll take this pillow case," she nodded toward the last clean piece of linen they had left, "and dip it in the water then swipe it across the entire area. What we're going for is to wipe away the flowing blood so I can get a clear view of what I'm suturing. Got it?"

"Got it."

While Allison carefully sutured the femoral artery and surrounding veins, Carol periodically called out Hershel's blood pressure and pulse rate, which remained static for the most part.

"Snip," Allison instructed Lori as she made one last stitch. The bleeding had slowed down considerably, but what the wound really needed was fresh bandages, and they were out of clean sheets.
"Look what I've got!" Carl's excited voice caused every head to turn.

He stepped into the cell and spilled out a bag of gauze, bandages, rubbing alcohol and all sorts of medical necessities.

"All right, good going, Carl!" Allison exclaimed, quickly unwrapping rolls of gauze and binding Hershel's leg.

"Are you insane?!" Lori stood up and confronted her son. "What were you thinking, running off alone like that?"

"Mom, I found the hospital room, I found stuff we need."

"Do you see what happened," she gestured toward Hershel, "when the others went out looking for stuff? You could have gotten yourself killed..."

"Mom, it was no big deal, I killed two walkers, I'm OK."

"Carl, it is not OK for you to just run off like that – "

"Hey!" the boy shouted defiantly. "I'm not a baby, OK? I can take care of myself!"

"Carl!" Beth spoke up from her dad's bedside. "Don't talk to your mother like that."

The youngster looked from his mother to Beth and his cheeks crimsoned in humiliation. He ran away from the cell.

‡‡‡ ‡‡‡ ‡‡‡

Allison was so intent on monitoring Hershel that she'd barely noticed Rick returning to the cell some time later to ask how things were going. Carol was still diligently monitoring his blood pressure, heart rate and temperature and she silently looked up at Rick and nodded slightly as he handcuffed Hershel's wrist to the metal frame of the bunk. "Just a precaution," he said quietly.

"The bleeding has almost stopped, and he has no fever," Lori told him as she followed him outside of the cell. The two continued their conversation outside in the corridor, but Allison couldn't make out what they were saying.

"Can I talk to my dad for a minute? Alone?" Maggie walked in and asked.

"I think that would do him good," Allison said, standing up. "Hearing your voice might stimulate his subconscious. I could stand to stretch my legs for a few, anyway."

"Um, Rick told me not to leave," Glenn, who'd been hovering in the background for the past few hours, said hesitantly.

"Please," Maggie asked him, placing her hand on his forearm. "Just for a minute."

Carol stood gathered some of the blood-soaked linens. "While he's stable, I'll start soaking some of these sheets. Cold water keeps blood from setting, you know. Just wish I had some of that enzyme cleaner..." She was smiling and babbling to keep Maggie's spirits up.

Allison stood out in the corridor alternately stretching her arms overhead and arching backward to get all the kinks out after sitting in a hunched position for so long. Beth approached her with a pair of slacks and a knife in her hand.
"When Daddy gets back on his feet, or foot, he doesn't need his pant leg dragging on the ground," she smiled. "I'm designing him a new wardrobe." She proudly held out the trousers to display her handiwork.

Allison was impressed with the young girl's unflagging optimism. She returned her smile. "Great idea. We'll find the infirmary once the Men have secured the area – I'm sure we'll find some crutches or a cane there. Maybe a wheelchair." She paused and chuckled. "Although Mr. Hershel is so feisty he may not wait for us to clear that area – he might start breaking up furniture to make his own crutches!"

Beth grinned broadly. "That would be Dad, definitely!"

Maggie emerged from the cell, her face tear-stained. "What are you doing?" She asked her sister.

The two strolled away while Beth explained her trouser strategy. Allison went back to her post next to Hershel's bunk, with Glenn still standing guard. Moments later Lori wandered back in and took a seat next to Allison.

"What's going on?" Allison asked, referring to the woman's conversation with Rick.

"Prisoners," Lori replied. "They found surviving prisoners locked in the cafeteria or someplace."

"Seriously? Wow." After a pause. "What's going to happen to them? I mean, what are Rick and the others…"

"I'm not sure," Lori's face grew tense. She turned and looked at Allison. "I told Rick that I would support his decision if he thought the best thing was to kill them."

"But…?" Allison sensed that there was more to the story.

Lori closed her eyes and lowered her head. "Rick said…." She sniffled slightly. "Rick said that I'd told him that once before, and…you know…with Shane….and…." her voice trailed off. She quickly swiped a tear from her cheek with the back of her hand.

"So you waffled once before," Allison tried to comfort the woman. "That was an intense, emotionally charged time for all of us. We'd just all literally run for our lives from the farm when you found out about Shane…." She paused and held Lori's hand. "I think that Rick will eventually realize that you do support his decision-making, his leadership. That the Shane thing was a momentary knee-jerk reaction…um, right?"

"Yes, of course." But Allison noticed that Lori didn't look her in the eyes when she said that, and that her voice wavered. She decided that now was not the time to play marriage counselor, that they needed to focus on Hershel and the proximity of those inmates.

"Is that what The Men are doing now, then?" Allison asked her, as she checked the dressing on Hershel's leg and then picked up her stethoscope to check his pulse and respiration. "Taking care of the prisoners, one way or the other?"

"I guess so. He didn't really elaborate on any specific plan of action."

"How's Hershel?" Carol's voice surprised the duo from the doorway.

"He's stable." Allison replied.

"Can you spare me for a bit? I need to…take care of something."
"Sure, you've earned a break," Allison smiled at the woman.

"Glenn, would you come help me with something?" Carol asked him.

"Um, Rick told me to stay here."

"We've got it covered," Allison told the young man. "I know what you're worried about, but so far there's no fever, and he's handcuffed besides."

Glenn hesitated and protested for a few more minutes before he reluctantly followed Carol.

A few minutes later Maggie and Beth returned to their father's bedside. "He's stable," Allison reassured them. "Why don't you sing something for your Dad?" she suggested to Beth. "It will soothe whatever part of his brain is still awake, and it might trigger something. I'm just going to step out for a second to...make a pit stop." She could barely say the word "pee" in front of Daryl, she sure as heck could not mention her bathroom intentions to a crowd of bystanders. When she eventually returned to the cell it was in an uproar.

"Do something!" Beth cried out.

Lori had her ear against Hershel's mouth and turned to Allison and said "He's not breathing!"

"Stand clear," Allison ordered. Then, to Lori, "Do you know CPR?" At the woman's affirmative nod she continued, "Start chest compressions, please. Count out loud."

"One and two and three and four," Lori pressed on Hershel's chest. She paused and Allison tilted his head back and puffed two breaths of air into his mouth. She lifted her head up and nodded at Lori.

"One and two and three and four."

As Allison was giving the second of two puffs Hershel stirred quite suddenly and struggled to sit up. Everyone in the room jumped back several steps, and Allison noticed out the corner of her eye that Carl had appeared suddenly and had his gun trained on Hershel, prepared for the worst case scenario. But instead of growling and drooling, Hershel opened his eyes and quickly glanced at everyone standing nearby. He caught his breath and then a slight smile appeared on his lips. His gimlet eyes weren't glazed over, they were clear and focused on his daughters. Beth was the first to fall into his arms and hug him. Maggie leaned over and made it a three-way hug. After they were done they stood back and Rick walked over to Hershel's bedside. The old man reached out and grasped Rick's hand. Allison brushed away a lock of hair from her eyes and wondered when exactly the sheriff had returned, so focused on her patient had she been. She stood up and walked backwards a few paces and then felt a hand grasp her shoulder. She turned and saw Daryl in the doorway of the cell. He looked from Hershel to her and then squeezed her shoulder and gave her an almost imperceptible nod of his head. She smiled at him, recognizing the Universal Daryl Symbol of Approval.
"Hey, can I get some help here?!" T-Dog's urgent tone made everyone turn their heads toward the gate.

"What've you got there?" Glenn asked as he and Carl rushed to relieve the man of the burden of packages he held in his massive arms.

"Canned corn, canned peas, canned cans….and there's much more where this came from!" He heaved a mighty sigh as he set down the largest of the heavy food service-sized cans he'd been carrying.

Maggie and Beth helped Glenn and T to move the supplies to the newly secured kitchen/cafeteria area after first ooohing and exclaiming over the bounty in front of them. Allison gazed at those glorious cans of vegetables, thinking that they looked more beautiful than anything she'd ever unwrapped on Christmas morning. Sure was interesting how much their priorities had changed in the past eight months, she thought wryly.

"Let's get you cleaned up," Daryl's voice brought her back to Earth.

"What?" she asked.

"You look like Carrie right after the prom," he replied, pointing out the blood that covered her arms and the front of her shirt. She turned and peered into the small shaving mirror on the wall. Somehow she'd managed to get Hershel's blood smeared on her cheek and in her hair, too. Well, it's not like doctors got extra points for neatness.

"Are the showers cleared?" she asked Daryl. "It would probably be easier to hose off there rather than in one of these sinks." She stepped close to Hershel and leaned down to speak to him. "You seem to be hangin' in there, how do you feel?"

"I'm able to open my eyes and see my beautiful daughters, so I feel great. Thanks to you, doctor," he added, placing his hand on top of hers.

"It was definitely a team effort," Allison assured him. "From Rick's, um, field amputation to the others getting you here pronto….and I certainly couldn't have managed without Lori and Carol."

"You're being too modest, but I will personally thank all of them, you can count on that."

"Until or unless I find an IV set-up in the infirmary, you're going to have to cooperate and drink all the fluids we bring you. You've got a lot of blood to replace, you know."

"Yes'm," the old man smiled at her.

"You get some rest now, I'll be back directly to check on you." She then turned to Lori. "Can you please check the kitchen and see if T-Dog found anything like juice or powdered fruit drink of some sort? If not, please bring Hershel a tall glass of water. And a straw, if you're able to find one," she added as an afterthought. "I'm going to scrub some of this stuff off of me, I'll be back in a bit." Before she could leave, though, Carl appeared in the hallway and a thought crossed her mind.

"Hey, Carl," she summoned him over. "Can you take me to the infirmary – that hospital area you found?" She bent down slightly and asked him quietly.
"What do you need?" Daryl asked, overhearing her question. "I'll go get it. You don't need to be wanderin' around anywhere."

She stood up straight and sighed. So much for discretion. "I want to see if there's a bedpan or something that can be used as a bedpan there," she explained in a low voice.

"Why do you need a bedpan?" Daryl asked out loud.

"I do not need a bedpan," Hershel piped up groggily from his bunk. "I am awake now, and perfectly capable... of..." his voice weakened and he struggled to continue, "getting up and to the toilet on my own..."

Allison sighed in exasperation and sat down on the chair closest to Hershel's head. "No, you are not capable of that. Not right now, at least. You've lost a lot of blood and the last thing we need is for you to topple over and crack your head open while trying to stand up. I'm running out of silk and bandages. So you just hush and stay put."

"Mind your tongue, young lady," Hershel grumbled, his hackles rising. " Doesn't matter how many degrees a person has, where I come from you show respect to your elders."

"You're right, and I apologize." Allison lowered her head and voice contritely. Then she said in the same low tone but with an evil smile, "But be advised that I do have a Foley out there in one of my bags, and I'm fresh out of Lidocaine gel. Think about it." She left the cell and Daryl followed her close behind.

"What's a Foley?" he asked her en route to the showers.

"It's a type of catheter. You know, for when a patient is unable to -- "

"I know what a catheter is for," he held up a hand to stop her explanation. "What's Lidocaine gel?"

"It's a topical anesthetic, it numbs as well as lubricates. Females tend to tolerate insertion of a cath better than males for some reason..."

"I think I can guess why," Daryl retorted sarcastically. "That particular body cavity is a one-way street, as far as I'm concerned. Nothin' needs to be going inside in the opposite direction." He shuddered at the mental image of a tiny tube being pushed into his urethra. "What has this woman done to my brain?" he wondered with a touch of amusement. "Since when do I call it a 'urethra' instead of just a plain ol' 'pee hole'?"

"Anyway, male nurses tend to be a bit more... compassionate, I guess, with male patients and use Lidocaine on the Foley to reduce any possible pain. Now your seasoned, old-school female nurses, the ones who have worked in veteran's hospitals for most of their careers, they just squirt a bit of KY lube on the cath and then just ram that baby home, whether the patient is a man or a woman."

"Oh, geez, do you mind?!" Daryl literally stopped and doubled over momentarily, his face contorted in imagined pain. He stood up and caught Allison smirking at him. "Still a regular ol' Angel of Mercy, ain't ya?" he gazed at her through narrowed eyes.

Her hand automatically went to her neck to finger the angel necklace he'd given her so long ago. "Sorry," she giggled and reached up and gave him a quick noogie. "Just messin' with you. Been a bit of a long day for all of us."

They entered a huge tiled room with shower heads sprouting from two of the walls. There were still some partially used bars of soap in the wall holders, fortunately, but Allison made a mental note to
Daryl was using his Swiss army knife to jimmy the lock on a large gun metal grey steel cabinet that was placed against a third wall. "Here ya go," he called to her. She turned and saw him holding out a towel. She fingered the rough fabric – she'd felt softer sandpaper before. Daryl read her thoughts. "That oughta exfoliate ya," he said with a half smile.

"'Exfoliate?!' You keep using words like that and I'll start to question that macho image of yours," Allison said with a laugh.

"If you must know," Daryl replied, averting his glance slightly, "I learned it from the dozens of bottles of fancy soaps and such at that tornado house." He blushed and muttered, "Gotta have something to read on the crapper, even if it's a shampoo bottle."

Allison's response completely dumbfounded him. She laughed and shook her head and then embraced him.

"Huh?" he grunted.

"I'm just happy to know that I'm not the only one who has read and re-read a toothpaste tube while….um….on the can. I thought that you'd think I was weird if I ever mentioned it…"

"Fer Christ's sake, everyone reads while they're on the crapper," Daryl tilted her chin up to look into her eyes. "Didn't you ever see your granddad take the sports section with him into the bathroom?"

"Well, sure, of course, but he was a man, and I didn't want you to think that I…"

"Think what? That you're special somehow and never have to take a dump?"

She giggled and buried her face in her hands. That particular expression usually made her shudder, but somehow when Daryl said it, it sounded funny, almost cute. She struggled to control herself and looked back up at him.

"Trust me, I won't think you're any less dainty or lady-like if you head off to the can with a newspaper under your arm," he smiled down at her and ruffled his knuckles quickly across her scalp.

"Well, that's something of a relief, no pun intended," she told him.

He saw her cheeks redden and then said softly, "I hope that eventually you'll not be embarrassed to say things in front of me."

"No, it's not you, it's not that at all," Allison hastened to reassure him. "I just…I dunno…maybe because of my upbringing, or maybe I've got a touch of some obsessive compulsive thing…"

"A touch?!" Daryl interrupted her with a rare grin.

"Okay, whatever, I just want you to know that it's not you, I've always been embarrassed to discuss bodily functions outside of a clinical setting. Heck, I'm one of those who searched for the most isolated restroom in the hospital while on duty when I had to….poop." She spoke that last word in a hushed tone.

"Oh, brother," Daryl snorted. "Maybe women are different," he added, because, truth be told, what did he know about women and their bathroom preferences? "All I know is that men don't hesitate
to do what needs to be done in a restroom, no matter how public. We all know that that's what toilets are made for."

"Can you do me a favor while I'm lathering up, please?" As best as one can with cold water, she thought to herself.

"Sure," he shrugged.

"Get me a clean shirt out of my bag. It's up on the perch." She stripped off her bloodied top. "I think this one has had it."

"You got it."

Dinner was both festive and somber…the group was thrilled to be sitting at an actual table and eating something besides charred squirrel or opossum for a change, but they were also concerned when they heard about the convicts The Men had found while clearing out the rest of the prison.

"How many are there?" Beth asked.

"There were five," Rick replied. "Now there's two. We've restricted them to Cell Block B."

"What happened to the other three? Walkers?" Maggie asked.

Allison noticed that Rick, T-Dog and Daryl seemed to exchange a look before Rick answered. "Yeah."

"What do you mean 'restricted to Cell Block B'?" Allison asked.

"I mean I gave them the rules, that that part of the prison was theirs and they were not to venture elsewhere."

"And they will comply because….why? They are known for following rules?" Allison asked skeptically. "I mean, that's why they were in prison in the first place, right? Because they were such fastidious rule-followers?"

"Just because they're in prison doesn't automatically mean they're bad people," T-Dog interjected.

Allison choked back the retort about people being in prison for a reason that automatically sprang to her lips. She was well aware that there was a disproportionate amount of People of Color in prison in comparison to the overall population of the U.S., and that she could possibly be treading a sensitive area with T-Dog. Instead she replied, "You're right, perhaps I spoke out of turn. I know that there is a hierarchy even among the prison population…depending upon what these particular inmates are in for, maybe they don't present a life-threatening danger to us."

"What do you mean a 'higher-archy'" Carl asked, interested as always when Allison brought up subjects that seemed taboo to the youngster.

"A pecking order," she explained. "In the prison system – from what I've read," she added hastily, lest anyone think she'd served time, "there are certain types of criminals that are looked down upon and pretty much hated by the rest of the prison population."

"So there are good criminals and bad ones?" Carl was trying to understand her explanation.

"Well, not necessarily 'good' criminals, but ones with better moral standards, if that makes any
sense. For example, even among armed robbers and drug dealers, child molesters are considered to be disgusting."

"I don't think my son needs to hear this," Lori complained.

"The time for shielding him from the harsh realities of life has passed," Rick eyed his wife. He turned to Carl and furthered Allison's point. "In the prison system, people who abuse children are the lowest of the low as far as inmates are concerned. Most of them have kids of their own, so they take that type of crime personally. Also, kids are helpless, easy targets….in a convict's mind you're not much of a man if that's the best you can do, take advantage of a child."

"Sorry I'm late, any food left?" Carol breezed in seemingly out of nowhere, interrupting the conversation.

"Yeah, sit tight, I'll fix you a plate," T-Dog told her.

"Where have you been?" Maggie asked.

"Oh, I was outside…working on…something," Carol seemed to dodge the question. "If y'all are done eating, I'll clean up."

Most of the rest of the group rose from the table. "I'll check on our patient," Allison said, eyeing Carol curiously. Luckily she'd found not only a bedpan but also a pair of crutches in the infirmary earlier. She'd cautioned Beth and Maggie that their father should not attempt steps for a couple of days, at least, though.

As she left the cafeteria en route to Hershel's cell she was intercepted by Glenn.

"Um, if you're wondering where Carol was before, she….uh….she was practicing a C-section on a walker."

"What?" Allison stopped in her tracks and turned to face him.

"I just thought you should know that she's, um, doing her best to learn what needs to be done…."

"She found a pregnant walker?" Allison was trying to understand what Glenn was telling her.

"No, it was just a female. I helped her find it. She said that since Hershel was sidelined, she might…you know…be called upon when Lori….you know….so she wanted to practice…" His voice trailed off as he stared at his feet.

"Oh." Allison was visibly nonplussed by this knowledge.

"I think she was trying to be prepared in case something happened to you, too," Glenn added helpfully.

"I see," Allison murmured. "Well, I guess it's good to be prepared…even though there's a huge difference in a gravid uterus, but whatever…practice makes perfect…" Her voice trailed off as she entered Hershel's cell.

"How are you feeling, Mr. Hershel? Are you up to eating some dinner?" She'd asked T-Dog to make a small plate of tuna and vegetables for the veterinarian, but she wanted to check his status first. Could he sit up a bit? Did he have the strength to feed himself? The old man was hungry as it turned out, but he also needed to relieve himself, which he did grudgingly when Allison brought him the bedpan. As he took care of matters at hand, Allison couldn't help but focus on what Glenn
had said. Was Carol only worried about the possibility of something happening to her, or did Carol doubt her capabilities as a doctor? Her mind was a tumble of thoughts when Hershel spoke up.

"Humiliating, that's what this is," he grumbled as she cleaned him up.

"Oh, for heaven's sake..." she rolled her eyes and huffed in exasperation. "Does this make you feel better? Maybe someday - far in the future, mind you - I'll have a baby and you can be there as I deliver, in all my spread-legged glory. I'll be in a similarly helpless and embarrassing position. A sort of tit-for-tat." She washed her hands at the small porcelain sink, not quite believing she'd just basically offered to expose herself to the vet to placate him. Desperate times call for desperate measures, she tried to reassure herself.

"Young lady," he grumbled, struggling up to a sitting position to accept his dinner plate, "I am going to take you up on that challenge!" He paused and then hastily added, "Not that I want to see your...you know...but I am the only one here other than you who is qualified to deliver a baby."

"Well if it takes the prospect of me being in an even more humiliating position than you using a simple bedpan to give you incentive to get back on the road to recovery, then, well..." she joked. "So be it. Mind you, I did say 'far in the future.'"

"Gives me some time to get expert on those crutches, then, I guess," he smiled at her.
Chapter 67

After brushing her teeth, changing into her tank top and sweat pants and tending to her nighttime ablutions, Allison settled down to sleep with Daryl on the perch, as they now called it. She hadn't realized how exhausted she was until she actually stretched out on her side on one of the two mattresses they'd pushed together to make a double bed. She heard Daryl's footsteps on the stairs and opened her eyes and watched him sit down on the top step and slip off his boots. He then slipped under the blanket beside her and pulled her close. Even though every fiber of her body felt like it had been dipped in lead at the moment, she involuntarily quivered in excitement at his touch. He kissed the top of her head and spoke quietly in a low voice.

"That was amazing, what you did today," he said.

"What? What did I do?" she was confused.

"What you did for Hershel. I mean, I've known that you're a doctor since I first met you, but that was the first time I've ever seen like…actual emergency surgery other than on TV. I've never personally known anyone that could actually save a life like you did today. It was just… amazing to see that in action."

Allison pulled her head out from underneath his chin to look up at him in confusion. "What are you talking about?"

"What do you mean, what am I talking about?"

"I mean you've been saving lives since you first joined this group." She was frankly amazed at his blank look. "For heaven's sake, Sweetie," she reached up and gently stroked the side of his face, "you've been feeding us and protecting us since…" she paused to remember that far back…"since Atlanta."

"That ain't the same thing…" he mumbled, looking away from her eyes. He didn't know quite how to accept her praise…despite the many months they'd spent together, this relationship stuff was still fairly new to him - no one in his life had ever looked up to him before. Certainly not a beautiful woman who curled up in his arms and who regarded him with complete trust and….well, adoration, dammit. The way she looked at him sometimes with those huge blue eyes of hers…like she had complete and absolute faith in him. And occasionally when he was alone with his thoughts on watch, he'd still wonder what a woman like her saw in a man like him and he worried about letting her down or somehow disappointing her.

"No, it's not the same thing," she agreed, reaching her hand higher to gently stroke his scalp. His involuntary sigh made her smile in the darkness. "It's a much bigger thing. We absolutely would not have made it this far…to the point where we were still alive and mobile and in this prison and Hershel in need of emergency surgery…if it hadn't been for all of your skills." She laid her head back down on the pillow and snuggled into his chest. "It's all teamwork, in the end, you know," she seemed to be almost thinking out loud. "The more people with weapons, the better protected we are…every time Carol does laundry or T-Dog cooks dinner, that frees up another person to keep watch or hunt for food…" Her voice trailed off as she slowly fell asleep. "Teamwork…" A moment later her steady breathing told Daryl that she had dozed off. He kissed the top of her head and closed his eyes with a heavy sigh.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡
"If you don't mind," Hershel's stern voice was tinged with irritation, "I'll be the one to decide whether or not I'm ready to get up." He was sitting on his bunk and reaching for the crutches that Lori held.

"It's barely been 72 hours," Allison stood nearby, protesting to no avail. She didn't want to come right out and say that at his age and with the very minimal treatment that she'd been able to administer – no blood transfusion, no IV fluids – her professional opinion was that it was far too soon for him to be attempting steps. "I really think that – "

"I'm sick and tired of looking at the bottom of that bunk," he interrupted her and jerked his head toward the top bed. "I've been laying around and relaxing too long." He reached his arms out to Lori. "Gimme those."

Allison was more afraid than angry, but her words came out harshly: "Well, if you're going to insist on falling over and cracking your stubborn head wide open, I'm not going to be a part of it." She began to leave the cell and then gestured for Beth to follow her.

"Make sure you and Lori are in position to catch him if he stumbles or begins to fall," she said quietly. "The two of you need to be on each side of him, but also keep an eye out – he may fall forward, backward, any which way…" She hastened to explain. "It's not just a matter of his balance being off while learning to walk on one foot - he's been laying prone for three days and when he gets up and tries to walk he's going be dizzy because the blood hasn't had to pump up to his fool head for a while." Beth nodded earnestly, taking in all Allison said. "Just please…take good care of him," she added before departing.

Allison walked outside to get some air and saw T-Dog, Carol, Rick and Daryl engaged in conversation out in the courtyard.

"What's going on?" she asked when she joined the group.

"How's Hershel?" Rick immediately asked.

"He's fine and as ornery as usual. He's bound and determined to attempt some steps on crutches today. Lori, Beth and Carl are helping him." She paused and then stretched the truth a bit. "He said I was making him nervous, so I left them to it."

Rick seemed to be satisfied with her reply and returned his attention to the others, directing them to move the various vehicles inside the compound.

"Bout time," Daryl muttered. "All these cars sittin' way out there are just a big ol' 'vacancy' sign."

"We could use some help," Carol commented. "Where are Glenn and Maggie?"

"Up in the guard tower," Daryl replied.

"Guard tower? Again? They were just up there last night." Allison couldn't tell whether Rick was confused or impressed.

"Hey Glenn!" Daryl called up to the tower. "You comin'?!"

Carol and T-Dog snickered at Daryl's unintentional double entendre.

Glenn stepped out of the guard shack, shirtless and buttoning his trousers. "Um, what's up guys?"

"We could use a hand down here," Daryl told him.
"Yeah, we'll be right down!"

"Who's that?" Allison asked, pointing in the opposite direction of the tower. Two men in prison blues – one tall, one short, one black, one white… "Mutt and Jeff," Allison muttered quietly - were walking toward them.

"No, Axel and Oscar," Carol whispered.

"Huh?"

"That's their names," Carol said. "T-Dog told me just a little about them the other day. Axel and Oscar."

"Stay here," Rick said very quietly to the two women. He, T-Dog and Daryl went over to confront the men.

"Please, mister," the scrawny white man with a ridiculous handlebar moustache said to Rick. "Don't make us stay in there."

"Our deal is non-negotiable," Rick stated firmly.

"That place is full of ghosts," the tall bald-headed black man said. "All those bodies…"

"Why didn't you take 'em outside and burn 'em, like we told you?" T-Dog asked.

"We did," the tall guy said. "But the far wall on the back side is down. Every time we go out those…things, they gather 'round." He shuddered slightly. "It's creepy. We'd rather take our chances out on the road than stay another day inside that cell block."

"Please, mister," the short one repeated to Rick. Allison decided that he must be Axel. Something about that moustache made him look like an "Axel" to her. "If you're trying to make a point, you've made it. But you gotta believe us, we ain't like Tómas and Andrew."

"Those men in there," Oscar inclined his head toward the prison building, "they were our friends. They had our backs when it came to guys like Tómas and Andrew."

"We can work or help y'all, whatever it takes to be part of your group," Axel was almost pleading. Rick turned and looked at Daryl. Daryl very subtly shook his head in a negative response.

"That's not an option," Rick told the men.

Oscar studied Rick for a moment and then grimly said to his friend, "See, I told ya this would be a waste of time. These pricks ain't no better than the ones who shot up our friends." He looked back at Rick. "I ain't sayin' we're saints or haven't done bad things in the past, but we've paid our dues."

"You've got two choices," Rick was steadfast. "You can stay in Cell Block B, or you can go on off. We'll give you enough supplies to last you for a week on the road while you find a new place."

And with that Daryl and Glenn locked the two inmates back inside their section of the prison grounds.

As the group turned and went to finish moving the vehicles, T-Dog asked Rick, "Are you sure you're making the right decision?"

"It's been just us for so long," Maggie remarked, "They're strangers. They make me nervous."
"We were strangers when you took us in," T-Dog pointed out.

"You showed up with a shot boy," Maggie clarified the difference.

"We've worked so hard for this place," Carol said. "What if they try to take it away from us?"

"I get guys like this," Daryl added. "I could've just as easily been with them as I am with y'all. They're criminals but that doesn't make 'em psychos."

"So you're with me on this?" T asked him.

"Hell, no!" Daryl replied emphatically.

"We haven't heard from you, Doc," T-Dog said to Allison. "Where do you stand?"

She sighed heavily. "I honestly don't know what to think. We don't know what they're in here for, and even if we asked them how do we know they'd answer truthfully? Most cons are experts in manipulation; have you ever seen any of the Manson gang during their parole hearings on Court TV? You'd swear they were all Sunday school teachers who made one little bad decision."

"I arrested a 19-year-old kid once," Rick related, "who was a suspect in a shooting. Well, he cried and acted so innocent during his trial, and his mama and his church pastor all testified that he was a good boy, just misunderstood…. He was acquitted. Two weeks later he shot and killed a young girl." He paused and eyed T-Dog steadily. "You want to go back to sleeping with one eye open?"

"I never stopped," T-Dog replied.

 Allison reached in the back seat of the vehicle that Carol pulled inside the fenced area and removed some belongings that had been stashed away for some months – a bag of supplies from that hospital they'd raided, along with some more clothes for her and Daryl. "I'll just run this stuff inside and then come back to help y'all." Rick, Glenn and Daryl went afield to gather wood so they could burn the bodies they'd cleared from the grounds.

Back inside the building, she set her armload of stuff down in a spare cell that she and Daryl used as a combination storage locker and dressing room. She heard a bunch of voices talking over one another and poked her head out of the cell. Down at the end Hershel was ambling around on his crutches like a seasoned pro, with Carl and Beth calling out encouragement and Lori standing close by mouthing uncertainties.

"Well, look at you," Allison said to the man, smiling in admiration. The old vet was a fighter, that was for sure. "I am very impressed!"

"He's doin' great, isn't he?" Beth gushed.

"It sure looks like it," Allison agreed. "But he probably shouldn't overdo it on his first day up. Maybe you should take a break for a while, Mr. Hershel, get some rest…"

"Hell no!" He said defiantly. Among other changes, the farmer's language had grown increasingly salty of late. Allison recalled a time not that long ago when he'd chastised Maggie for saying "damn." "I've rested enough, I'm itchin' to get outside and get some fresh air."

"OK," Lori remained at his side holding her hands out to catch him lest he stumble, "but please take it slowly and carefully…"

"Slow is for suckers!" Hershel quipped. "Come on, Carl, I'll race you!"
"You're on, Hershel!" the youngster grinned at him.

There was an overall lightness of mood that had been lacking for some weeks as the group walked outside into the sunshine and everyone was smiling broadly for a change. Hershel took several confident steps out into the courtyard and then paused and looked around. "Y'all cleared all those bodies out already?" he asked in amazement. He began stepping again. "This is starting to look like a place we can really live in," he added with approval.

"Woo hoo! Way to go, Hershel!" They heard Glenn's voice shouting from his spot out by the fence.

Just a moment later they all heard the shuffling sound at the same time. "Walkers!" Carl shouted.

After a split second of startled surprise, the group went into automatic mode, drawing their weapons and firing and stabbing.

"Daddy! Over here!" Beth was guiding Hershel back toward the steps leading into the building. As Allison spun and split the head of an approaching walker with her machete in one fluid swinging motion, she spied Hershel actually whacking a walker in the face with a crutch and knocked it down the stairway. Tough as nails, that guy, she thought to herself.

Lori was a few feet to Allison's left, firing her revolver. "Lori! Allison! This way!" Allison turned toward the sound of Maggie's voice and saw her holding a metal door open with one hand and firing her gun with the other. Allison stepped over and grasped Lori's free arm. "Come on!" As she guided her to the door Lori turned and called out "Carl!" Allison pushed Lori inside and followed closely behind her. Seconds later Carl stumbled in and Maggie shut the door behind them.

"This way!" Maggie shouted and they followed behind her as she dashed down one corridor after another. They frequently had to back up and change direction as they encountered walker after walker. Allison let Carl and Maggie handle the attackers, since Lori had suddenly started pausing every few steps to double over.

"Oooh," she moaned, grasping her belly.

Allison pulled Lori's arm around her shoulders and supported the woman as best she could. "Here, lean on me and try to walk," she told her. Suddenly an alarm of some sort started blaring, as if a prison escape was in progress.

"In here!" Carl called out over the din. He'd found yet another door in this vast metal maze. The three women pushed inside and Carl followed, pulling the door shut behind them. They appeared to be in some sort of boiler room.

"What on earth is that noise?" Lori moaned, hugging a large pipe and pressing her face against it.

"Never mind that," Maggie told her, "are you OK?"

"No," Lori gasped. "The baby…I think it's coming."

"We need to get you back to your cell!" Carl shouted, his voice rising in panic.

"There's no time," Lori struggled to speak in between waves of pain.

"Lori, listen to me," Allison tried to remain calm. "Do you think you're in active labor? Did the pain just start now?"
Lori breathed rapidly several times and then said, "No, I've had some mild back labor all day....but it wasn't really bad until – aargh!" she cried out in pain.

"OK, we do have to get you back to your cell stat," Allison replied. "Maggie, can you peek outside and see if the coast is clear?"

"No!" Lori gasped. "I'll never...I can't..." she emitted a mighty groan. "I won't make it that far. The baby's coming right now."

"Has your water broken yet?" Allison asked, but as her eyes adjusted to the dim light in the room she saw a frightening very dark wet spot spreading on the seat of Lori's jeans. Oh, no, this can't be happening, she thought to herself.

"Do something!" Carl cried in a panic. "She can't breathe! Something's wrong!"

"Women breathe like that when they give birth," Allison tried to reassure the boy. "All right, Lori, we're going to help you lie down," as she spoke she nodded to Maggie who stepped over and helped ease Lori to the floor. "We're going to have to undress you from the waist down so I can see what's going on," Allison added rather pointlessly, since Lori obviously knew it was necessary, but explaining each step to the patient was second nature to her. Carl's face was a mask of sheer panic; poor kid, Allison flashed; probably the first woman he's ever seen naked and it's his own mother.

"I don't have gloves, I'm sorry," she apologized. This was so wrong – she hadn't washed her hands, the area wasn't sterile, she had no equipment.... She pushed Lori's heels up to her buttocks and gently reached inside. Lori screamed in pain. Allison's hand was coated with thick blood when she removed it. Oh, no, she moaned inwardly; this was much more than traditional bloody show. Lori was hemorrhaging badly.

"Don't push, Lori," Allison ordered.

"I have to! Oh, God!" Lori screamed in pain.

"There's a problem, Lori," Allison tried to remain calm. "I don't think you're going to be able to deliver vaginally, it looks like – "

"Placenta previa," Lori grunted. "I know, that's why I had a C-section with Carl."

"You never told me that," Allison thought to herself, but it would do no good to lecture Lori now.

"You have to take the baby," Lori murmured.

"I know," Allison replied softly, "I'm so sorry...."

"No!" Lori interrupted. "I mean you have to save my baby."

"What?!" Allison had obviously misunderstood Lori. She'd thought that surely the woman had known what she meant – that in order to save Lori's life, Allison would have to abort the baby. Even then it would be touch and go – it depended upon whether she could stop the excessive bleeding afterward.

"You have to cut me open and save my baby. Please." Lori's pained words had a whispered emphasis.

"No! I can't. That would mean – " Now it was Allison's turn to sound panicked.
"I know what it means." Lori suddenly seemed to be engulfed by an incongruous sense of calm. "You have to do it. Save my baby. Please."

"No, Lori, I cannot do that. Medical protocol says – "

"I don't care, listen to me." She paused to catch her breath as another wave of pain clutched her body. "I am giving you my informed consent. Do you understand?"

Obviously Lori had been through this before if she was able to throw around terms like "informed consent" in her present condition.

"Lori, I don't have anything to sterilize you with or stitch you up with… I can't do it!"

"Do something!" Carl cried out again.

Ethics stated that in cases like this the physician should take steps to save the mother, especially if she had other living children to consider.

"Allison, I am begging you. Please." Lori's eyes and ragged voice both pleaded.

"If you don't do something, we'll lose them both," Maggie said quietly.

"I don't even have a scalpel!"

"Carl has a knife," Lori's voice was growing weaker.

The boy handed his knife to Allison with tears in his eyes. His mother motioned for him to come closer to her.

"Carl, promise me that you'll stay strong and won't let this world beat you. You are so brave and so smart and I am so proud of you! I want you to promise me that you'll carry on and take care of your father and your brother or sister. Grow up and be the man I know you will be." She reached up and stroked his cheek.

Carl nodded, tears streaming down his face. He leaned down and kissed Lori's forehead.

"When I….you have to do it. Rick can't be the one," she told Allison urgently. Allison nodded morosely. "Go ahead," Lori told her.

"Carl," Allison said, trying to keep her voice steady. "I need you to move over a bit and hold your mom's shoulders down very firmly. This is going to hurt when I do this, and if she jumps or moves I could accidentally cut too deeply." He nodded and moved into position.

Lori looked up at the ceiling dreamily and murmured, "Good night, love."

Allison stripped off her shirt and handed it to Maggie. "Here, please use this to wipe the blood from the field as I cut so that I can see." She took a deep breath and made the incision in Lori's belly. The woman's screams made every hair on Allison's body stand on end. It was almost unbearable. Nevertheless she parted the flesh along the cut line open slightly and reached her hands in. "The cord's wrapped around the neck, hold on," she said to Carl. She reached further in and the others saw her arms moving around at the shoulder. "There we go," she said almost to herself. She pulled back and brought a blood-covered infant out of Lori's womb. The baby remained limp and silent. Allison cradled it in her arms and placed her mouth over the baby's nose and mouth and alternately sucked and spat out the fluids that blocked the child's airway. Maggie struggled to control her gag reflex. Allison flipped the baby over and laid it face down over her left arm and gently massaged
between its shoulders. The infant wriggled slightly and Allison tapped it a bit harder on its back. Suddenly it clenched its tiny fists and waved its arms and legs while simultaneously letting loose with a healthy wail.

"Carl, can your baby sister borrow your jacket?" Allison asked with a smile. He slid it off and handed it to Maggie. Allison handed the baby to Maggie, who cradled it gingerly. Allison took the Carl's knife and cut the shoelace out of Lori's right boot. She used it to tie off the umbilical cord and then cut the cord, severing the baby girl from the mother who had sacrificed her life for her.

Maggie stood up and nudged the door open a crack. The baby had ceased crying and was now gurgling and waving her tiny fists around as if to test them. "Looks like it's clear," Maggie whispered. "Let's get out of here."

"Wait a minute." Allison stood up and, still holding Carl's knife, walked over to Lori's head. Before she could raise the weapon, though, Carl grabbed her hand.

"No," he said firmly. "I have to do it."

Maggie and Allison stood just outside the door with their backs to the boiler room. The gunshot startled the baby and she began crying again.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

Allison was the first to emerge into the courtyard when the trio finally found their way out. She blinked and squinted momentarily at the sudden burst of sunlight. She noticed that everyone else seemed to be standing still, like statues, staring at her. Maggie came out next, holding the crying baby, followed by Carl. Rick walked up to them filthy and sweaty, question marks all over his face. He looked at the babe in Maggie's arms, then to the door behind them as if waiting for Lori to emerge. Allison looked at him and said softly, "I'm so sorry."

Rick sniffled and then looked down at Carl's resolute face. "Oh, no!" Rick barked with a loud sob. He slowly wilted to the ground, repeatedly moaning, "No, no, no…." Carl walked stolidly past everyone and into the prison without speaking. Maggie walked over to Glenn, who embraced her and the baby wordlessly.

Allison stood mutely, feeling helpless and like a failure. Somehow Daryl was in front of her suddenly. She hadn't even noticed him running up to her. He tilted her chin up so that he could see her face. "Are you bit?" he asked anxiously. She looked at him in confusion. She wondered why he would ask her that. She was unaware that the lower half of her face was covered in blood, as were her arms and the front of her camisole.

"I'm so sorry," she kept repeating.
"Are you bit?" Daryl repeated as he tilted Allison's head back to see what the source of all that blood was.

"No, no, I'm OK, it's just that…Lori…I didn't want to…" she replied haltingly in a pleading tone.

Satisfied that she hadn't been bitten, Daryl briefly embraced her. Then he stood back and held her at arm's length. "Listen to me," he instructed, "you need to shake this off and get yourself together. You understand?" He then added in a lower voice, "These people are counting on you to be strong." What he didn't tell her was that he was the one who needed her to be strong – that he'd never seen her be anything other than confident and in control of every situation, and it had always been a source of reassurance to him.

"I tried but I didn't have the equipment…" Allison said, her chest heaving mournfully.

Rick suddenly pushed past the group with a growl and grabbed a hatchet out of Oscar's hand. He turned on his heel and marched toward the other side of the prison with a defiant set to his jaw.

"Rick! No! You don't have to – " Glenn started to protest, but Rick had already disappeared through the giant iron door.

Daryl grasped Allison's shoulders firmly and looked directly into her eyes as he spoke very firmly. "You need to pull yourself together. This ain't about you right now, OK? There's a baby to consider, and other folks countin' on you. You listenin' to me?! "

"Let me see the baby," Hershel spoke up. Maggie released herself from Glenn's grasp and presented the bloody bundle to the old farmer.

Daryl's stern words finally jolted Allison back into the present somewhat. As Hershel cradled the baby in his arms she reverted to doctor mode and automatically began giving him her clinical opinion. "I didn't give her a full APGAR, but her color and respiration and muscle tone all seem to be very good." She took a few deep breaths and struggled to compose herself. "We can evaluate her reflexes more fully later, but she did extend her limbs and grasp her hands shortly after birth."

"Do we have anything here a baby can eat?" Daryl asked.

"Not unless one of us starts spontaneously lactating." Allison replied slowly, wiping her face with a rag she didn't remember being handed. Daryl felt a small sense of relief inwardly…Allison must be coming back down to Earth if she's making smart-ass remarks, he thought.

"She seems to be healthy," Hershel acknowledged, "but she needs formula if she's going to last much longer."

"No. No way," Daryl was pacing like a caged animal. "Not her. We're not gonna lose another one." His wild eyes surveyed the group. "Any place we can get baby food that hasn't been looted?"

"Maggie and I…we saw a sign for a shopping center…it looked to be several miles off the highway," Glenn said. "It might not have been picked clean yet."

"OK, I'm off then," Daryl announced, pulling first his serape and then his crossbow across his shoulders.

Chapter 68
"We'll go with you," Maggie and Glenn piped up in unison.

"Me, too," Allison joined in.

"No," Daryl told her in a tone that indicated he would not tolerate any arguments. "You need to stay here and take care of the baby…and besides, you're in your underwear." He spoke the last part of his statement with a half-grin, instinctively knowing that Allison would be embarrassed once she realized she was standing in public in her camisole and her immediate reaction would be to scuttle away and banish all thoughts of going out on a run.

"OK," she agreed almost automatically at Daryl's sudden take-charge command.

"Beth!" He summoned the young girl to his side with a flick of his head. "Carl's just lost his mom, you need to keep an eye on him. His ol' man doesn't seem to be doin' very good, neither."

"I'll keep an eye on them," Beth assured him.

"And maybe help Allison get cleaned up so she can concentrate on takin' care of the baby."

Beth nodded in assent. "I'll handle it."

"Maggie! Glenn! Vamanos! We're losing the light!"

Beth turned slightly to Allison as Daryl continued to bark out orders and murmured, "When did he get so bossy?"

"I dunno," Allison whispered, almost standing at attention, "but I don't think we're allowed to talk right now." She felt like she was this close to being sent to the principal's office if she didn't straighten up and fly right. If her thoughts and emotions weren't busy swirling around like a tumble dryer she probably would have been impressed with both Daryl's take charge attitude and his proper conjugation of Spanish verbs. She walked to the first cell in the block and began bathing her arms and face.

"I'll get you a clean shirt," Beth offered. "Where do you keep your clothes?"

"In that dark blue bag in the end cell. The one with a privacy sheet hanging up." She scrubbed away at the various bodily fluids that were coagulating on her flesh. "We use that as a closet-slash-dressing room." She was still rinsing off when Beth returned with a faded blue short-sleeved sweater that Allison had liberated from some closet at some house during the past winter.

"Is this OK?" Beth asked.

"Fine," Allison replied, drying herself off. Beth stood in the doorway to give Allison some privacy while she stripped off her bloody camisole. She then quickly pulled the sweater over her head. "I don't think this is salvageable," she looked at her soiled undergarment. "I'll just toss it…." She left the cell with Beth close behind. "You know," she continued, "I wonder if there's any corn syrup in the kitchen…we can dilute that with warm water and feed the baby with that until the others get back. Where's Carol?" She looked around. Now that she thought about it, she hadn't seen the older woman since she'd returned from the boiler room.

Everyone in the room grew silent and looked at one another.

Allison suddenly caught the gist of their meaningful glances. "Oh, no…she didn't…."

"I'm afraid so," Hershel said quietly. "T-Dog, too."
"How? When?"

"T got bit closing the gate," Glenn said.

"I thought you were going on the supply run?" Allison was confused.

"Daryl ended up taking his bike, and there wasn't room for me," the young man explained.

"And Carol….?"

"We're not sure," Glenn admitted. "We found her headscarf down in the tombs not far from T's body, though."

"Geez…I can't believe it…." Allison shook her head in sorrow. She'd never been Carol's best friend, but she certainly had never wished her dead. And T-Dog had been everybody's friend; the man's heart was as big as his massive frame.

"We should get this young lady cleaned up," Hershel said in an effort to distract everyone. "Beth, can you heat up some water please?"

Carl was wondering around with an understandably vacant look on his face. He needed some immediate distraction. "Carl?" Allison called to him. "Can you please get some clean towels and a sheet from the laundry area so we can give your sister a proper bath?" He nodded and scooted away.

+++ +++ +++

After a few initial coughs of protest the baby had cooed and gurgled while she was gently bathed in the large kitchen sink. Beth had spread a clean sheet on one of the tables, and Allison lifted the baby out of the sink and wrapped her in a fresh towel. She then lay her down on the "examining table" to an intrigued audience – Glenn, Beth, Hershel, Carl and even Axel and Oscar were gathered around.

Allison removed the towel as if she was unveiling a rare Rembrandt. The baby wriggled slightly in blissful nudity. There was a chorus of "awws" and "oohs" and "how cute". "Would you folks like to see some fun baby tricks?" Allison asked the group.

"What do you mean?" Carl asked.

"I'll bet you didn't know how talented you were when you were your sister's age," Allison smiled at the boy. "In fact, all babies are born with certain reflexes – reflexes that they eventually lose, either in the next week or next several months. Watch carefully."

"This is called the palmar grasp reflex," she explained. "When an object touches the palm of the hand, the fingers will automatically close around it." With that Allison gently ran her index finger across the baby's left palm, and the infant immediately squeezed its fingers shut around it. "Oh, you're a strong one, you are!" she praised the baby. She performed a similar test on the right hand and got the same result.

"Likewise a stroke on the bottom of the foot should make the foot stretch away from the shin and the toes curl downward." As the baby performed satisfactorily Allison explained, "This is the plantar reflex."

"This one is pretty neat," she looked at Carl and smiled. "It's called the stepping reflex. When a newborn is held up with his feet touching a flat surface, he'll put one foot in front of the other as if
"he's trying to walk." She picked the baby up and demonstrated.

"Cool!" Carl and Axel said in unison.

"They lose this reflex at about six weeks," Allison continued, "and won't get it back until about eight or nine months old, when they're ready to learn to walk."

"Is this right?" Glenn interrupted. "I mean, should we be messing with her like this? She's a baby, not a doll or a wind-up toy."

"These are perfectly normal and regular tests for newborns," Hershel assured him. "This is how doctors check for any possible brain damage. If the baby doesn't step or grasp, that's a sign that further tests should be done to check for things like cerebral palsy."

"Do another one," Carl said, completely engrossed in the demonstration. He seemed to have momentarily forgotten the traumatic events that had occurred just hours ago.

"OK, how about the tonic neck reflex?" Allison said. "When I turn her head to one side, she should extend the arm on that side as well. It's sometimes called the 'fencing posture' because it looks like someone preparing for a sword fight." She gently manipulated the baby's head first to the right, then the left, and each time she shot her tiny arm straight out Carl grinned and said "Look! She did it!"

Allison gently brushed the right side of the baby's face, and the infant responded by turning her head in that direction and puckering her mouth into a sucking motion. "That's the rooting reflex," she explained. "It's how Nature tells babies how to find the nipple when a....um," she hesitated, not wanting to have to explain breastfeeding to Carl right then, "a bottle of formula is offered to it."

"Almost like a newborn puppy does," Oscar commented. The group turned and looked at him. "I never went to any pediatrician appointments with my kids or nothin', so I never seen these baby tricks," he quickly explained, "but I seen a litter of pups right after they was born a couple of times. They don't even open their eyes for a week or so, but they can still find their mama's belly, where the food is."

"Humans do have the same food-finding instinct to an extent," Allison agreed. "But unlike giraffes and zebras who have to run with the herd just hours after being born, it takes us almost a year to develop enough balance and muscle strength to support ourselves in an upright position and walk." The baby started squirming and fussing a bit on the table. "Humans are also born with incomplete plumbing, so we're going to have to find some lingerie for this young lady pretty quick."

"I was thinking we could use some of these towels," Beth was holding a couple of the large bath towels that Carl had fetched from the laundry room, "as diapers until we find something else. But how do we hold them in place?"

"What about tape?" Carl asked. "I've got duct tape in one of my bags."

Everyone chuckled and Hershel said with a smile, "That would probably work as good as anything else."

"Well, if the science project is over, I've got....um, some work to do outside," Glenn said with a grim look on his face.

"Can we be of help?" Axel asked.

Glenn studied the two prisoners for a moment but he didn't reply. When he strode out of the
building, they followed him nevertheless.

"She's probably hungry," Beth commented as the baby made little alternating coughing and whimpering sounds as they tried to fashion a terrycloth diaper for her.

"She should be OK for a few more hours," Hershel said to his daughter. "When you were born, you were so fussy it was almost 36 hours before you'd finally settle down and nurse."

"So are those two with us now?" Allison gestured with her head to indicate that she was referring to the inmates.

"They seem like decent enough fellows," was as far as Hershel would commit. He seemed as though he was still mulling it over. "Bethie," he changed the subject, "make sure to keep some water on a low simmer on the burner in the kitchen. We'll need warm water to mix with the formula when they get back."

It was getting dark outside and Allison was getting a little anxious. Beth was cradling the baby and walking back and forth with her, but the infant was going through more frequent bouts of crying. Suddenly every head turned toward the entrance as they heard the familiar roar of Daryl's motorcycle engine approach. Daryl and Maggie raced inside, followed closely by Glenn, Oscar and Axel.

"Allison!" Daryl barked while simultaneously tossing a backpack to her. She caught it and unzipped it in one motion. Jackpot! She ran to the kitchen and returned in record time with a bottle of warm formula. She was about to hand the bottle to Beth when to her surprise Daryl reached his arms out and said "give 'er here."

"Shhh…." He said softly to the babe as he cradled it gently in his arms. He took the bottle from Allison and then, as naturally as if he'd handled a dozen babies of his own, tilted the bottle just so and offered it to the baby. She accepted it greedily and began to suckle. "Is that what you want, sweetheart?" he said in a light, high-pitched voice to the bundle in his arms. He looked around the room with a self-satisfied smile. Allison stood in shock as she took in the tableau in front of her. Hard-as-nails Daryl Dixon expertly soothing and feeding an infant? She couldn't have been more surprised if Hershel had spontaneously grown a replacement leg.

"You got a love child somewhere I don't know about?" she mumbled with a disbelieving shake of her head.

He grinned and then looked back down at the baby who was making contented little noises as she snuggled in his arms and fed from the bottle. "She got a name yet?" Daryl asked.

"Well," Carl spoke up, his face growing serious once more, "I was thinking…maybe…Sophia?" He looked at the baby and then at the people in the room. "Or there's…Carol. Or Jacqui? Andrea? Patricia, Amy…or Lori." He eyes grew sad and he looked down at the ground as he finished the Roll Call of the Dead.

"How about Li'l Asskicker?" Daryl suggested. "That's a good name, right?" He smiled and spoke softly to the babe in his arms, "Do you like that, sweetheart? Li'l Asskicker?"

Before Allison could groan at the hideous nickname, Beth sidled up beside her and looked from her to Daryl to the baby. She dimpled and commented wistfully, "Maybe you'll be next…"

Allison knew what the girl was hinting at, but she couldn't resist quipping, "I don't think so. I prefer
my milk from a glass."
Chapter 69

Very early the next morning the group, save for Rick, gathered together out in the prison yard. Allison immediately realized what Glenn's mission had been the previous day when he'd went outside; there were three freshly dug graves in a neat row. One had a letter "C" spelled out in small rocks...Carol's spot, obviously, and Allison had no doubt that the stones had been placed by Daryl. All three plots had crudely constructed crosses made of twigs, but the center one had a larger marker with the crossbar made of a length of plywood. It looked like a large letter "T" and represented T-Dog's final resting place. Lori's grave was the first in line, honoring her former honorary status as the First Lady of the group.

"What did you bury?" Allison whispered to Glenn as they assembled. "I mean, not to be morbid, but were there any actual...remains?"

Glenn sighed and looked at the ground. "They found...some of T-Dog, but the walkers had done a job on him. Carol's head scarf was next to him." Allison personally knew Lori's fate. She presumed that the plots were more or less symbolic and assumed her place in the semi-circle. She noticed, out the corner of her eye, that Axel and Oscar were standing off to the side, heads bowed in respect.

Hershel began the service by reading some Bible passages. Then he looked around at the group and said, "It has been a tremendous shock to all of us to lose so many people so unexpectedly. Why don't we take a moment to share some happy memories of our friends?"

Everyone eyed one another and then Glenn finally spoke up. "I remember when...things...first started getting bad. When they started evacuating the city. T-Dog went house to house in his church's van gathering up all the senior citizens he knew who lived alone in his neighborhood. He drove them to safety." Glenn paused and sniffled. "He wasn't just a good person; he was the best."

"I remember one night we had watch together," Allison related, "and we got to talking...he mentioned that he was named after his father, that he was officially 'Theodore Douglas Junior.' His mother always called him 'Theo,' though, because his father was 'Theodore.' But when he was in elementary school...I forget which grade...The Cosby Show was rerun five days a week in the afternoons and the kids at school started calling him 'Theo Huxtable.' And apparently even though the rest of America thought the Huxtables were the very model of perfect children, when you're a young boy in elementary school Theo was a major goody-two-shoes. A suck-up. So T renamed himself 'T-Dog' because it sounded like a 'hood' name. Made him sound tough. His mom hated it and still called him 'Theo.' But even after he was grown up and big enough to defend himself against any bully who mocked him, all of his friends still called him 'T-Dog.'"

Everyone chuckled despite their tears and then fell quiet. After a moment or two Hershel hesitantly prompted, "...and Carol?" All eyes turned to Daryl, but he closed his eyes and gave an almost imperceptible shake of his head. He had never been a public speaker, and he surely wasn't going to begin now. There was an uncomfortable silence so Allison spoke up again. "I remember a time when all Carol could talk about was her old Maytag washing machine... and I have to admit that for a while I was convinced that that was all she was about – cooking and washing clothes. But as time went on and push came to shove she picked up a rifle and learned to shoot with the best of 'em."

"When Sophia..." Glenn picked up the narrative with a hitch to his voice, "...well, anyway, Carol missed her daughter desperately but she never let that grief defeat her. She always stayed strong and put on a brave face. I think that maybe Carol would want us to do the same thing – to mourn
those we've lost but not give up."

There were some mumbled "amens" and then Carl's tentative voice spoke. "A couple months ago, I think, maybe more than that...it was after we left the CDC...my mom talked about a family vacation that we took to the Grand Canyon. I don't remember it at all, but that's because I was a baby then. My mom says I got real sick somewhere in Texas. My dad said he didn't know a baby could throw up so much." He paused and there were a few chuckles from the group. "He turned the car around and we went back home and never saw the Grand Canyon. But I remember my mom looking at my dad when she told that story and saying 'that was the best vacation ever.' And they both smiled and looked so happy."

Poor kid, Allison thought to herself. Sounds like happy times between Carl's parents were few and far between in his short-term memory.

"She loved you very much," Maggie commented, reaching out and ruffling the boy's hair.

"You'd have to love someone to have fond memories of a vomit story," Glenn smile, wiping tears from his eyes.

"She was always taking care of things back at the farm," Beth offered. "She tried to keep a routine, to make things seem more...normal. Like it was back before all of this happened." She took a deep breath and then began to sing, as she had many months ago beside the graves of Sophia, Annette and Shawn...

"Some glad morning when this life is over, I'll fly away.
To a home on God's celestial shore, I'll fly away."

Maggie sang the chorus with her sister in flawless harmony:

"I'll fly away, fly away, Oh Glory
I'll fly away; (in the morning)
When I die, Hallelujah, by and by,
I'll fly away (I'll fly away)."

The rest of the group chimed in on the second verse, and Allison even saw Daryl's lips mouthing the words ever so slightly. They shared a moment of silence when the song was finished and then began to walk back to the building. Axel was unashamed of or perhaps unaware of the tears rolling down his face.

"My meemaw used to sing that hymn when I was a little boy," he said, glancing at Beth, "but she didn't sing it nearly as pretty as you." Beth smiled shyly in reply.

"I've maybe had one close friend in my whole life," Oscar remarked. "Y'all are lucky to have had so many."

"They weren't friends, they were family," Glenn corrected him.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

"She's hungry," Beth cooed at the bundle in her arms. She was sitting at one of the tables in the kitchen, feeding the baby. The others were scattered around the room quietly eating that morning's
portion of oatmeal.

The door at the far end of the kitchen swung open and Rick entered. He looked around the room and then asked no one in particular, "How is everyone?"

There were a few murmurs of "fine" and then Rick continued, "I've been clearing out the boiler block."

"How many walkers did you find?" Hershel asked.

"Bout a dozen, maybe two," Rick replied.

"You don't have to clear out the bodies alone," Glenn said, "I can help."

"No, I'll handle it," Rick was firm. "I just came back to check on Carl and make sure everything was OK." He paused and then asked, "Everyone got a knife and gun?"

"Yeah," Daryl answered from his seat on the steps. "We're running low on ammo, though."

"Maggie and I are going to make a supply run today," Glenn said. "We found a phone book, it lists some stores we haven't tried yet. Maybe we'll find some baby supplies, too. Formula, diapers…"

"Axel's down workin' on the generator right now, seein' if he can get it workin' case we need it later," Daryl added. "A couple of us are gonna go down and make a sweep through the lower level, make sure it's clear."

"OK, then, sounds like everything is under control," Rick said as if he was on automatic pilot. He gave Carl a quick smile then turned on his heel and left the room.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

Daryl led the way through the dark and gloomy corridor, with Carl just a step behind him. Allison walked alongside Oscar as they cautiously scoped out this lower level of the prison. She'd never been very far outside of Cell Block C, certainly not this deep into the bowels of the building. It gave her the creeps, even though she knew that Daryl and Oscar had done a preliminary inspection of the area the day before. It was her own fault, she knew; she'd badgered Daryl to allow her to come on this mission…she'd felt restless for some reason and wanted to be up and about and doing something. Maybe it was because lately every time she looked at the baby it reminded her of how she'd failed Lori. Or maybe it was because back in the cell block she still expected to find Carol collecting soiled linens or T-Dog at the stove trying to concoct an enticing meal. She just needed to be somewhere else other than the place that suddenly harbored so many sad reminders.

"My mom used to like her wine," Daryl spoke up suddenly as they prowled, apropos of nothing. It was out of character, to say the least, for him to initiate conversation, especially in a group situation, so she listened with interest. "And she liked to smoke in bed, too. Virginia Slims."

What the cool girls in high school smoked, Allison thought to herself. Had she been brave enough to smoke, she'd always pictured herself choosing Eve or Misty, some brand with pretty decorations that would look elegant while grasped between her fingers.

"One day I was out playin' with some kids in the neighborhood," Daryl continued, "…couldn't do that when Merle was around…they had bikes, I didn't….anyway, we heard fire trucks and everyone raced off to see where they were goin'. I got there late 'cause I didn't have a bike…then I saw that the trucks were at my house." He pushed a cell door open with his crossbow and poked his head inside. "Fireman came out and told me that my ma was gone. Like she was erased, there was
nothin' left of her. Like it wasn't even real."

Allison suddenly recalled that day they'd seen burned walkers in a car…Daryl had been quite curious about what happens to the human body in a fire. She now regretted having been so honest with him, telling him how the body fat literally cooked and… She involuntarily shuddered. When would she learn to keep her mouth shut? Maybe she should tell him now that most likely his mom wasn't conscious when the flames reached her body – that if she'd been passed out drunk when the fire started, a few breaths of super-heated air caused her lungs to fill with fluid (the body's natural protective response) and she'd literally drowned long before her body was incinerated. Nah, this was probably not the time for elaboration.

Carl absorbed this information and then replied simply, "I shot my mom in the head." They continued walking and peering into nooks and crannies. "She was…she hadn't turned yet. I ended it. It was real." The young boy who seemed more like a man at that moment looked up at Daryl and added, "Sorry about your mom."

"Sorry 'bout yours," Daryl replied.

I am so glad I escaped the sadness of the cell block, Allison thought to herself sarcastically. Then she immediately chastised herself for being selfish. Carl's the one who lost his mother, he has every reason in the world to feel bereft, and here she's worried about buoying up her own emotions.

"That's what I'm talking about!" Oscar's voice interrupted her thoughts. The others followed him into the cell to see what had caught his attention. It was a pair of slippers.

"What the hell do you need slippers for?" Daryl asked.

Oscar looked at Daryl as if he'd spontaneously sprouted horns. "You know, the end of the day, to relax," he explained.

Apparently he was still in the prison mind-set, Allison thought…despite the fact that the world as they'd all known it had basically collapsed, he still found solace in something he'd been denied as an inmate. Suddenly they heard a growl and looked up to see a walker out in the corridor. Daryl aimed his crossbow, but before he could pull the trigger Oscar shot it in the head.

"We must've missed him yesterday," Oscar commented.

Daryl hovered over the corpse and then pulled a dagger from the walker's neck. "That's Carol's knife," he said aloud.

"Should we…" Carl began to ask, but Daryl cut him off.

"Y'all just go back to the cell block, everything's clear here. I'll....take care of ...." He glanced in the direction of the metal door that was just slightly moving.

"What?" Allison asked, surprised. "And leave you alone here?"

"Oscar and Carl can lead you back safely, I'll be fine, don't worry 'bout me." His face was set in a grim expression that warned her not to protest further.

With a flashlight in one hand and a pair of slippers in the other, Oscar said to Allison and Carl, "C'mon, let's go."
into the kitchen area to find Axel at the sink clumsily washing up the breakfast bowls. Rick and Hershel were standing nearby, chatting, and Rick for once was holding his daughter.

Allison gestured to the bowl Axel was rinsing out. "Now that's what I'm talking about!" she said with exaggerated enthusiasm.

All eyes turned to the mustachioed man at the sink. "What?" Axel asked, confused. He looked at what Allison was pointing at and said, "I don't get it, what do you want a bowl for?"

"End of the day, you know, to eat out of," she replied with a straight face. Carl burst into laughter as he caught her reference. It made her happy to hear him enjoy a light-hearted moment after swapping dead mom stories with Daryl earlier. Who knew that on the list of things that she and Daryl had in common – a love of classic rock and old TV shows, hunting – she'd be able to add "mothers who died in a fire"?

"Go on and laugh," Oscar defended himself, holding his new slippers out in front of him, "but next time your dogs are barking after a long hard day, don't you dare think of borrowing these!"

Allison laughed along with Carl and Rick shook his head. "I guess that means something to y'all." He walked over to where Beth was sitting. "Can you take her for a while? It's time for me to go out and walk the perimeter. Carl, you wanna come help me?" The youngster eagerly followed Rick outside, gun in hand, obviously pleased to spend some one-on-one time with his father.

"How's your leg, Mr. Hershel?" Allison turned her attention to the veterinarian who never seemed to rest. "Mind if I take a look and see how my knitting is holding up?" He sat down wordlessly on a chair next to one of the tables and propped his injured leg up on another chair. "You want to do it here?" Allison double-checked, thinking it would be more private to do it in his cell.

"Hell, I got nothing to hide, Beth's been altering my slacks for me so she's seen what gory details are left." "OK," Allison shrugged and removed the two layers of tube socks Hershel was wearing to protect the stump. The stitches were healing very nicely, and the stump wasn't quite as tender as before. "Any phantom limb pain?" she asked.

"Not pain, but I feel my foot all the time. I'm wiggling my toes right now." He winked at Beth who smiled in return. He then leaned over and looked directly into Allison's eyes. "You know, fussin' over me isn't going to bring her back," he said quietly. The crafty old guy could read her thoughts sometimes.

"I just…" Allison paused for a moment, then blurted, "I can't stop thinking about it. What I did. You know as well as I do that the protocol is to save the mother…"

"Maggie told me that Lori gave you her informed consent." "She was out of her mind with pain and pregnancy hormones, she would have consented to anything." "That's not true," Hershel said. "You saw how things had been between her and Rick. I think she'd grown tired of living like this a long time ago."

"Even with Rick being…well, cold to her, that might've changed eventually. Or they could have still co-existed, even if not as husband and wife…"

"That's my point," Hershel interrupted. "I don't think she wanted to. I'd talked with her several
times during the winter and she hadn't been happy for quite some time. It's none of my business, but I don't think she was ever the same after Shane died. I believe the only reason she bothered to carry on as long as she did was for the baby."

"You really think she was that depressed?" Allison asked.

"She all but came right out and said that she felt responsible for Shane's death, and that if something happened to her baby, well, she didn't want to be accountable for another life, especially an innocent one who had no say in the matter."

"Look at daddy," Beth interjected. Allison had almost forgotten that the girl was nearby. "He had his leg cut off with a hatchet and no anesthetic. But he didn't die of shock or infection. I think that a big part of the reason he survived is because he wanted to."

"You could be right," Allison nodded, replacing the socks back on Hershel's leg. "Or it could have been because he's a stubborn old man." She grinned at the farmer and he poked at her with a crutch.

"You best mind your manners, young lady...don't think you can outrun me if you rile me up!" All three of them laughed until the door crashed open and Rick strode in carrying an unconscious woman in his arms.

"In here, dad," Carl called, running ahead and placing a blanket on the ground. Rick bent down and placed the girl on the floor. He looked up at Hershel and beckoned him over.

"Found her outside," Rick explained briefly. "She was carrying that." He pointed to a red shopping basket that Carl was holding. Allison glanced at it and saw several cans of baby formula poking out the top of it.

"Is she bit?" Hershel asked.

"Shot," Rick replied, touching a bloody spot on her thigh. Rick stood up and got some water from the sink. Allison dashed off silently. When she returned a few moments later with her call bag, Rick was splashing cold water on the woman's bare chest. She began to stir.

"Wh-where? What?" She blinked and partially sat up, trying to take in her surroundings. She had long dreadlocks tied back with a brightly patterned headscarf and flawless ebony skin that fairly glowed. She was very attractive, Allison noted to herself. She was also rather provocatively dressed for someone who had apparently been wandering around alone outside for who knows how long. She wore a very low-cut tank top that was layered with a thin leather vest that was cinched tight like a bustier, thrusting her cleavage almost up to her neck.

Rick removed a long sword – a katana, Allison believed it was called – from a holster on the woman's back. "You're safe here," he told her. "You'll get this back when you leave."

Allison stepped closer to her and spoke. "Have you got a - - "

"A what? A name?" the girl almost growled.

"Actually I was going to say 'a top button,' but a name will do."

Before she could reply Hershel told her, "Lay back and let me look at that...do you know who shot you?"

She sat up abruptly and glared at Hershel with fire in her eyes. "Don't you touch me, old man!"
Hershel stumbled backward on his crutches, startled at her reaction.

"It's OK," Rick tried to assure her, "He's a doctor."

"I didn't ask for your help," she said between clenched teeth.

"Well, you're here now and you're not makin' the decisions."

"Carl," Allison said to the boy, "can you please get me a bed sheet and a bottle of water?" The youngster set down the basket of groceries and scuttled away. She turned and looked over her shoulder. "Axel, if there's still some warm water boiling, I could use a small pot of it here along with a few towels."

"Where did you get that?" Rick demanded, pointing to the shopping basket.

The mysterious woman studied him before replying. "Pretty white girl dropped it. Place a few miles away, small shopping center."

"This man here," Rick placed a hand on Hershel's shoulder, "is that girl's father."

"What happened to her?" Hershel asked anxiously.

"Some guy took 'em, her and an Asian boy."

"What do you mean, 'some guy'?" Rick asked her. "Who?"

"Same sorry son of a bitch who shot me," she spat.

Carl returned with the requested items and Allison turned to the group. "The interrogation can wait for a few minutes, OK, while I take a look at that wound. Can y'all step out into the corridor and give us some privacy?" They retreated as requested and Allison stood up and unfurled the sheet.

"I'll hold this up best I can as a curtain so you can slip out of those slacks real quick."

"I ain't undressing!" the woman protested.

"Look, I've seen tourniquets looser than those pants. You've got an open wound and it looks and smells like you've been bathing in walker blood. That cut needs to be cleaned and probably a stitch or two taken."

The woman stared at Allison for several minutes before reluctantly struggling to a standing position and removing her trousers.

"Here, you can use this as a gown of sorts now to cover with," Allison handed her the sheet and she wrapped it around her upper body as she lay back down on her side.

"You a nurse?" the woman asked.

"Me? Nah," Allison told her while pulling on a pair of gloves. "I used to be a rodeo clown, but I quit shortly before the outbreak. There just wasn't any advancement for women, it was such an Old Boys' Club..." She dabbed a towel in the pan of warm water and was about to wash off the area near the wound when the woman recoiled, her eyes wide.

"Relax," Allison smiled, "I'm just yanking your chain. I'm not a nurse, I'm a doctor. My name's Allison, and this might sting a bit." She dabbed some Betadine on the wound. "Looks like just two or three stitches will close this nicely," she observed. "Are you allergic to any antibiotics?"
"Michonne."

"Excuse me?"

"My name is Michonne."

"Oh, OK. This will probably go faster if you answer my questions in the order I ask them." She smiled at Michonne again, trying to put her at ease as she pierced her flesh with a small curved needle. She worked quickly and just minutes later tied the last knot and snipped the thread. "This is absorbable gut," she explained, "so you won't have to worry about having them removed." She began repacking her bag as she continued, "Not to sound like a typical man, but I'm done with you, you can put your clothes back on." She stood up and held the sheet up like a curtain once again.

Michonne actually let a small smile escape her. "I don't have any allergies," she said from behind the sheet. "I'm done," she added a few seconds later.

Allison began folding the sheet up and Michonne sat back down on the blanket. "The wound doesn't look infected, but I'm going to give you a couple of amoxicillin just to be safe." She handed her the pills and the bottle of water. "Make sure you finish this, you're a little dehydrated." She called toward the corridor, "I'm done with Michonne in here now," indirectly letting them know the woman's name.

Rick and Hershel came back in and began peppering Michonne with questions. But before they got very far Daryl's voice was heard from behind.

"Who the hell is that?" he asked. He didn't wait for an answer but instead said, "Rick, Allison, c'mere quick, you'll wanna see this."

They followed him into a cell and then stopped in their tracks at the sight before them. Carol! Carol was alive and lying on the bunk. She was pretty grungy and looked worse for wear, but she still managed a smile. Allison turned at looked at Daryl, a million questions running through her mind. He simply said, "Found her down below, trapped in a room. Poor thing's been there a couple a days, she's probably hungry...dehydrated."

Carol slowly rose to her feet and tearfully embraced Rick. Allison smiled at the woman and hated herself for being irritated at Daryl referring to her as a "poor thing" in such a pitying tone of voice. What was wrong with her, she thought to herself – this woman had virtually come back from the dead, and not as a walker, and your first reaction is jealousy? How evil is that?

Rick had tears in his eyes as he handed Carol off to Hershel, who hugged her tightly while balancing on one crutch. Peering behind him Carol caught sight of Beth holding the baby. "Oh!" Carol let go of Hershel and her hand flew to her mouth. She walked the few steps to Beth and said, "Can I...?" while reaching out her arms. Beth gently handed her the infant and Carol looked to Rick and formed the word "Lori" silently with her mouth. He closed his eyes and very subtly shook his head. "Oh, nooo," Carol mourned, closing her eyes and lowering her forehead onto Rick's shoulder.

"Here, I thought ya might be needin' this," Axel had appeared suddenly with the pan of warm water and towels. "Should I get a bottle of water, too?"

"Please," Allison answered in the affirmative. "Why don't we let Carol sit down and get some rest and breathing room?" She addressed the group.
"Yeah, we need to get back to the girl," Rick jerked his head to the area where Michonne was waiting behind a locked door. "Get some answers from her."

"You got everything under control here?" Daryl asked Allison. When she smiled and assured him, he followed Rick and Hershel to assist them with their interview.

Allison began to gently bathe Carol's face. "I can do this myself," Carol began to protest, but Allison felt the need to atone for her earlier selfish thoughts.

"No, you need to save your strength for now. Here," Axel had returned with a bottle of water. "Sip this slowly."

"Is there by any chance any Jello in the pantry someplace?" Allison asked Axel.

"Yeah, there's boxes of the stuff in one cupboard. We never used it 'cause there's no refrigeration. It wouldn't gel up, you follow me?"

"That's fine, we want it to be liquid for now. Would you mind boiling some water and making a box right quick?"

"Course not," he smiled, happy to be of service and ingrati­ate himself as much as possible with the group. He figured they'd accept Oscar quick enough because he was big, they could use the muscle. Axel wanted to make sure they saw him as being useful, too, and not just as another mouth to feed.

Allison bathed Carol's neck and arms. "You can shower tomorrow and I'll get you some clean clothes then," she told the woman. "But for now you need to rest after we get some food in you."

"Seems like all I've done for the past…however many days…is rest," Carol replied.

"Well, this will be proper rest, with hydration and nutrition. You should start feeling stronger in 24 hours or so."

"How did Daryl know where to find me?" Carol asked.

"To tell the truth," Allison said slowly, "he'd found your scarf after the attack and we all thought that you'd…that you were…" She paused as Carol absorbed this information and then continued. "But when we were making a sweep of that lower area yesterday, he found your knife in a walker's neck. That's what made him really scour the area." She didn't add that after finding her weapon that way they'd all presumed that she'd turned.

"He recognized my knife," Carol said dreamily. "That's so sweet…"

"Yeah, 'sweet' is the first word I thought of, too," Allison replied, but Carol didn't seem to sense that she was being a bit sarcastic.

"What happened to Lori? I didn't want to ask Rick."

"She went into active labor in the boiler room during the attack. Had to do an emergency C-section. She…she didn't make it." Carol's eyes teared up. "She was hemorrhaging badly, placenta previa," Allison felt the need to explain herself. "Even if I'd had the proper equipment…you know, to stitch her up, I don't know if the outcome would've been any different. Not without a transfusion."

"I'm sure you did your best," Carol said, patting Allison's hand. Maybe she was sincere, but Allison
couldn't help but feel that the older woman was being the tiniest bit condescending. Darn it, why did she have to read something into everyone's remarks today?! Luckily Axel returned at that moment with warm Jello in a juice tumbler.

"It's warm, but not too hot," he said with a smile.

"Here you go," Allison handed the plastic cup to Carol. "Sip this slowly, as much as you can for now, and then try to get some rest. I'll be back in a bit to check on you."
Leaving Carol to get some proper rest, Allison returned to the area where Rick, Hershel and Daryl were talking to the mysterious Michonne.

"Where did he take them?" Hershel asked her yet again. No one could accuse the woman of being a chatterbox, that was for sure. Daryl raised his crossbow at her menacingly, and she finally spoke.

"Fine, you can go find 'em yourself."

Rick reached over and pushed Daryl's weapon downward a few inches so it wasn't pointing right at her face. "Look, those people are our friends. Her father is very worried about her. If you can help us, tell us anything about where they were taken..."

"There's a place," she finally said, "about 10 miles from here. "A town, sort of, called Woodbury, about 75 survivors. I think they were taken there ... it's run by this guy who calls himself the Governor. Pretty boy, charming, Jim Jones type."

"They got muscle?" Daryl asked.


"Could you get us inside there?" Rick asked.

Michonne eyeballed him as if she was affronted that he automatically presumed she'd be willing to lead him anywhere. But then again, these people had helped her, whether she'd requested it or not. And she'd overheard them to each other talking in the next room...the overall feeling was very different than it had been at Woodbury. As dank and dreary as the prison appeared physically, there was actually a warmth to it that the more festively decorated Woodbury had definitely lacked. She'd been on her own for so long though...trusting people too often had led to disaster in the past. She gave every appearance of wrestling with her conscience before finally replying.

"I think so. There's a curfew after dark so most of the residents are inside at night. There's just a few guards on the wall then and I think I saw at least one spot that we could sneak in through."

"Well, what are we waiting for then?" Beth asked. She'd been hovering behind her father, anxious for information about her sister. "We have to rescue them! I'll go right now!"

"I'm in," Oscar spoke up. Allison hadn't even noticed him leaning in the corner.

"Me, too," Axel volunteered.

"We can't run off half-cocked," Rick told the group. He looked around the room and selected his "team" – Oscar, Michonne and Daryl. Of course. If it was dangerous Rick always included Daryl. And Daryl never refused, darn him, Allison thought to herself. She was cursed to love a man who never backed down from a threat, and who had so much honor that he felt responsible for protecting their entire group. Deep down she knew she wouldn't want him to behave any other way – then he wouldn't be Daryl, after all. But she still couldn't push back that wave of panic that washed over her every time he prepared to leave them.

The reconnaissance team adjourned to the weapons room to prepare for the next day's mission. They would be leaving at sunrise and, Rick told the others with transparent optimism, hoped to return to the prison with Maggie and Glenn in time for dinner. As they packed a variety of weapons
into bags Carol's voice spoke up.

"Is there anything I can help you with?" Heads turned toward the doorway, where the gray-haired woman was standing, cuddling the baby in her arms.

"We're good," Daryl replied, returning to his work.

"Should you be up, ma'am?" Axel inquired politely. "I mean, after what you been through…"

"I feel fine," Carol assured him with a smile. "Sometimes I think I must be part cat, since I seem to have nine lives…" She looked down at the baby wistfully. She was thinking of her years being on the receiving end of Ed's beatings, and the time she almost got left behind at the farm, and that long winter before she really learned how to handle a weapon… By rights she should have died several times, but someone seemed to be watching over her. And for the past 10 months or so that someone was Daryl, she was certain of it. Her eyes wandered back to the table, where Allison was at Daryl's elbow, packing various guns and grenades or whatever they were into a canvas bag as he handed them to her. Carol felt a momentary stab of guilt. While she was slowly fading away in that closet-sized room, she'd promised God that if she somehow made it out of there alive she'd do the right thing and apologize to Allison for that night at the farm…for stumbling and pushing her into a group of walkers. She tried not to dwell on that memory too long; if she did, it forced her to confront the fact that maybe she hadn't actually stumbled at all… Anyway, she had meant her prayer at the time, she truly had, but then whose face did she see when that door finally swung open? And when Daryl tenderly scooped her up and held her close and carried her to safety, different memories came flooding back to her. She'd pressed her face into his shoulder and inhaled his scent and remembered holding on to him on his motorcycle when he rescued her at the farm. And the chewed fingernails on his calloused hand as he extended it that day in Dale's RV and set down the bottle with the Cherokee Rose. It seemed as though every time she had finally convinced herself that Daryl didn't like her in "that" way, he turned around and did something sweet for her. And during those times when she felt so achingly alone in this new world, memories of Daryl's thoughtful gestures felt like a warm embrace around her heart. So maybe she was being evil for not keeping her promise to God…but on the other hand, she thought, God hadn't always been completely square with her, either.

The baby started fussing a bit suddenly, and as Carol tried to soothe her she looked up at the rest of the group and asked, "By the way, does she have a name yet?"

"Well," Axel drawled, "Daryl's been callin' her - - "

"Oh, geez, we don't need to hear what Daryl's been calling her. God forbid she ever starts answering to that name!" Allison shuddered. Daryl, Rick, and Oscar chuckled.

Carl walked over and gently stroked his sister's head. "Daryl's been calling her L'il Asskicker," he explained to Carol.

"'Asskicker?!'" she giggled. "Oh, that's too funny!"

"Dad and I talked it over, though," Carl continued, "and we decided to call her Judith."

"Much better," Beth approved.

"Meh," Daryl grunted, "maybe her middle name can be Asskicker, then."

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

Dawn was just breaking as Oscar and Daryl loaded the last of the bags into the trunk of the
Hyundai. Allison was standing nearby with Beth and Michonne, who was still limping slightly from her leg wound. Michonne glanced around the expansive prison grounds. "Wasn't this place overrun?" she asked Beth.

"It was," the young girl replied.

"You cleared it out all by yourselves? Just a few?" Michonne pressed on skeptically.

Beth sighed. "There were others," she said simply.

Daryl approached Carol and told her, "Stay safe."

She smiled and replied, "Nine lives, remember?"

He then turned to Allison, who was trying to remain stoic despite her fears about this seemingly very dangerous mission. "Take care of things here, 'K?" he said to her, "but don't forget to take care of your own self." He wrapped a hand around the back of her neck and pulled her close. He planted a gentle kiss on her forehead and let his lips linger for just a few seconds.

When he removed his lips Allison tilted her face upward and said, in as steady a voice as she could manage, "Please take care of yourself."

"I always do," he smiled at her. He gave her a playful noogie on top of her head before getting into the car.

Michonne followed behind him, shaking her head over the scene she'd just witnessed. First that young girl tells her that this tiny rag-tag group cleared out a whole prison full of walkers, and now this grungy redneck who looked like he could eat an entire rusted-out Dodge without belching is being all playful. With a girl. These people were just full of surprises, she thought to herself.

Carl and Axel quickly closed the gate after the car pulled out, and the others watched quietly as it disappeared in the distance.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

Allison felt antsy while Daryl and the others were gone, and she was unable to relax. She paced around, looking for something productive to do, when she spied Axel sitting beside Beth in her cell. Beth was cradling Judith in her arms and feeding her with a maternal smile on her face.

"You're real good with her," Axel commented. "You got little sisters?"

"No." Beth shook her head and continued to focus on the baby in her arms.

"Hey, um, Axel? Can I have a quick word with you?" Allison spoke out impulsively. Thus far the mustachioed inmate had seemed to fit in with the group, always anxious to be of service. But now that little bit of uncertainty, of distrust, that Allison had always harbored about the convict nudged its way to the forefront of her brain. The man who hadn't seen a woman, much less been with one, in who knew how long was finally showing his true colors. The colors she'd feared from the first day Oscar and Axel had been welcomed to their group. This was part of her hesitation when it came to accepting the two prisoners, as she still thought of them, into their fold. As a doctor, as a woman, and as a dedicated reader of True Crime books, she knew that the male libido often had a mind of its own and that "cons" were called that for a reason. As nice and polite as these men presented themselves, they'd been locked up alone for a long time…and now there was a ready selection, so to speak, of females ready for the pickin'. She was reminded yet again of how fortunate their group had been when it came to the males respecting the females and
acknowledging boundaries.

Axel stepped out into the corridor and Allison gestured for him to follow her as she paced. After a few minutes she laid her cards on the table.

"Beth's only 17, why don't you leave her alone?"

"Well, with all due respect," he drawled somewhat cautiously, "Seventeen is legal age in Georgia."

"That may be true," Allison acknowledged, "but to be honest, emotionally she's much younger. She's been very protected and sheltered by her daddy all her life." She paused and then turned and faced him. "Her daddy, who may only have one solid leg, but who still manages to kill walkers just the same."

"I honestly didn't mean nothin', really," Axel tried to assure her, "No harm, you read me? It's just that…well, Maggie is with Glenn, and you're with Daryl – and he scares me a little – and Carol's a lesbian, so I just thought - -"

His statement was interrupted with a huge snort of laughter from Allison. She was thankful that she hadn't been drinking anything at that moment, because it would've shot right out her nose.

"What?!" She managed to squeak out. "Carol? What makes you think…"

Axel squirmed with uncertainty. "Well, I just thought…you know…with that short hair and all…"

Allison smiled at him and an idea occurred to her. "Carol's not a lesbian. She was married before… she lost her husband and her daughter to this plague…." She paused for dramatic effect and then added, "I'm not sure, but she seems to have been very lonely for a while…" She then used her big blue eyes to maximum effect by lowering her lids and looking up through her lashes.

"Really?" He asked. "That's very interesting…" He strode off and Allison smiled smugly. Maybe it was her imagination, but it seemed to her that Carol was back to making eyes at Daryl ever since he'd carried her back from the lower level. Hmph. She'd pretty much laid off of that flirting stuff for the past few months. Well, maybe a little attention from another male would help her to switch gears again. Hopefully Axel had a smoother line than "I ain't been with a broad in a long time, and rumor has it you ain't a lesbian, so how's about we get busy..."

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

Allison tried to get comfy in her bed on the perch, but all she could do was toss and turn. And worry. Daryl and the rest weren't back yet. She didn't really expect them to be back in time for dinner as Rick had jokingly predicted, but she didn't think they'd be gone overnight. Maybe they'd rescued Glenn and Maggie and were just holed up some place so they didn't have to travel in the dark, she tried to reassure herself. She finally dug through one of Daryl's bags and pulled out a shirt that was in desperate need of washing that he hadn't yet relinquished and hugged it to herself. She took a deep breath and inhaled his scent. "Please be OK, please be OK…." she mentally repeated to herself until exhaustion finally took over and she fell into a fitful sleep.

Early the next morning she wandered outside to the gate. Maybe if she stared through the fence long enough it would magically bring them back. When she got there she found Carol and Carl already standing there. Maybe they were grasping at the same straw she was.

"Hey," she greeted them.

"Hey," Carl replied while Carol smiled and nodded.
"What's up?" Allison asked, just to make conversation.

"We were just talking about how quiet it is," Carol answered. "How you never notice the sounds of, say, jets until they're gone."

"I wish I could've flown on a plane," Carl said wistfully. "Have you ever been on a jet, Allison?"

"A couple of times," she told him. "The scariest time, though, was when I flew to England."

"You flew overseas?" Carol asked with interest.

"Yeah, a back when I was in college my friend won a contest on the radio...you had to be X caller or something when you heard a song by the Beatles. Anyway, somehow she managed to be the right caller and won a trip for two to England for six days – four in London and two in Liverpool. She took me with her."

"How was it?" Carol asked.

"The flight or England?"

"Either, both."

"England was a bit of culture shock," Allison admitted. "They supposedly speak the same language as we do, but I remember on our first day there some man on the street stopped me and asked if he could 'bum a fag.' I didn't know what he meant, I thought he was somehow asking if I was a homosexual. I later found out when we met up with our tour guide that he was actually asking for a cigarette. The tour guy said that Americans stand out by the way they dress and the way they walk (don't ask me how, I thought we blended right in) and that a lot of Europeans love American cigarettes – Marlboros, particularly."

Carl and Carol chuckled.

"The prize included a car service that picked us up at the airport, and I spent the entire ride to the hotel cringing in my seat. I knew that in the UK they drive on the left-hand side of the road, but I didn't know how scary it would feel to actually do it. It took forever to get used to oncoming traffic passing us on the right."

"That would be strange," Carol agreed.

"And I've driven through downtown Atlanta during rush hour," Allison continued, "but that was nothing compared to the traffic in central London. Between those confusing roundabouts and those double-decker buses – oh, they call them 'coaches', not buses – and not nearly enough traffic lights..." She shuddered. "I'd hate to have to drive there regularly."

"What about the plane ride?" Carl asked. "What was that like, flying over the ocean?"

"It was pretty nice," Allison admitted. "The prize included business class tickets on British Airways, so we had some nice leg room, and free cocktails, and hot towels to freshen up with in the morning after breakfast. The only thing that made me kind of nervous was the...how to describe it...dry British sense of humor, I guess, when the pre-flight instructions were given. The dark, forbidding Atlantic Ocean looming below us was jauntily referred to as 'the drink'. The person making the announcement actually described an emergency water landing by saying 'If we're unfortunate enough to land in the drink, you should be none the worse for the dunking' and then went on to explain how to inflate the life jacket provided under each seat."
Carl laughed and said, "You're dramatic, but funny."

"True story, though, Allison assured him. The sound of a car engine suddenly made all three heads look down the driveway. Carl rushed to open the gate to allow the green Hyundai to enter. The trio surrounded the car, peering into the windows anxiously. After a moment they stepped back to allow the passengers to exit.

It was obvious that they were all doing a head count as Rick, Michonne, Glenn and Maggie emerged. Carol and Allison both stuck their heads into the open back door as if to say "Is that all?"

"Are y'all OK?" Allison asked Rick.

"Glenn and Michonne need lookin' at," he told her. She saw Glenn's bruised and bleeding face and tried to stifle the wave of panic that rose in her throat.

"Where's Daryl?" she prodded Rick. To Glenn she asked, “Can you walk? Should we get the - ”

Glenn shook his head slightly and waved his hand, indicating that he could make his own way back to the building.

Rick took a deep breath before replying. "He's alive. Merle was there. At Woodbury. That Governor had them pitted against one another in some sort of gladiator fight...even had an arena-type thing. How sick is that?"

"And Daryl…?" she wished he'd get to the point.

Rick seemed hesitant to look her in the eye. "He left. With Merle. They decided to strike out on their own."

"What do you mean 'he left'?" Carol asked.

"I mean he and Merle left. They're taking their chances out there together."

"That's it?" Allison asked, her mind reeling. "He....he didn't say anything else?"

Rick finally met her gaze and said quietly, "He said that you'd understand."

Allison fell back a few steps and tried to absorb this new information. Carol covered her mouth with her hand as if she was stifling a cry. Rick began giving orders.

"Glenn needs medical attention, and probably Michonne, too," he told Allison. "Take them inside and see to them. I'll find Hershel to help you."

With that, everyone walked or limped back to Cell Block C.

"What about Oscar?" Carl asked as they trooped back to the prison. Glenn was leaning heavily on Maggie, and Michonne was trailing along somewhat slowly.

Rick closed his eyes and shook his head sadly.

"Oh, no," Carol murmured.

"We wouldn't have made it out of there without him," Maggie commented.

"I'll tell Axel," Rick said, holding the door open for Glenn. The rest followed him inside, except for Hershel who gestured at Allison to wait with him.
"I'll get started with Glenn, see how bad his injuries are," he told her. "That girl – Michonne – didn't seem comfortable letting me examine her the other day. Would you mind taking a look at her and patching her up?"

"Sure," Allison replied, her voice flat. She was still trying to grasp the fact that Daryl was gone. "Send Carl or Beth down to my cell if you need anything – bandages or anesthetics, whatever – before I get done with Michonne."

"Michonne," Allison called as she walked inside, "I need to take a look at your injuries. Can you please go have a seat in that cell over there - the one with the sheet hanging up in the front?"

"She must be in some pain," Allison thought to herself when Michonne did as requested without a word of protest. She noticed that the woman was not only walking a bit slowly, which could've been due to her previous leg injury, but was also swaying a bit from side to side as she stepped. She followed her into the cell and gestured for Michonne to sit down on the bunk.

"Looks like you took a punch or two to the face," Allison commented as she pulled up a chair and gently pushed Michonne's dreads back so she could get a better look at the bruising. "I have to ask you some questions. Please answer them verbally. Don't shake your head yes or no. Got it?"

"Yes," Michonne's voice was just above a whisper.

"Do you have any specific pain in your head or neck? Or just an overall headache?"

"Headache, I guess."

"Do you feel nauseated at all? Dizzy? Have you vomited since this happened?"

"No, I haven't thrown up. Maybe I'm a little dizzy. I'm not sure. I think I'm more tired than anything."

Allison got a pen light out from her bag. Dizziness and confusion…classic signs of a concussion, she thought to herself. "Look straight ahead for me, please." She shone the light into each of Michonne's eyes. "Good news, your pupils are equal and reactive," she told her. "Did you lose consciousness at all? Even for a minute?"

"No."

"Tell me what happened. Who did this to you, what were you hit with, things like that." Allison mainly wanted to see if Michonne was able to string a story together sequentially, and also if her short-term memory was intact. When Michonne mentioned something about "fish tanks", though, Allison started to wonder if there was more brain damage involved than she'd initially suspected.

"Fish tanks? You mean like aquariums?"

"Yeah. I knocked a whole wall of 'em over. Smashed all over the ground. Glass and water everywhere."

"What happened to all the fish?"

Michonne narrowed her eyes as if she knew her story was being doubted. "He didn't keep guppies in them, he kept heads in them. Walker heads. Dozens of them. Some kind of weird trophy collection."

Allison sat back in her chair to try to make sense this latest revelation. She held out her right hand.
"Squeeze my hand tightly with your right hand. Rick said something about gladiator fights…and you're telling me the same guy also collected heads…what is the deal with this so-called governor? Now squeeze my hand with your left."

"He's a sick bastard, is what he is."

"As if we don't have enough to worry about with the walkers…" Allison shook her head in disgust. "Follow the tip of my flashlight with your eyes only. Don't move your head." A few minutes later she told Michonne, "It looks to me like you've got a slight concussion. Nothing too major, but still nothing to mess with. You need at least 24 hours of quiet bed rest, preferably 48 if possible. And by quiet I mean no talking, no reading, no nothing. Your brain needs absolute quiet time to recover." She paused and then asked gently, "Do you have any other injuries I need to look at? Did you get kicked in the torso, in the stomach? Did the governor…well, did he…" She struggled for the proper words, because Michonne's glare intimidated her. "Did he do anything else to you that might require treatment?"

"No," Michonne replied. "Nothing like that happened. It was mainly a fist fight. I don't think any ribs are broken or anything. Doesn't feel like it."

"All right," Allison said, rising from her chair, "I'll take you at your word. I'll get a bed in another cell prepared for you and leave you to get some rest. Don't worry, I'll hang a sheet up across the bars like in this cell so you'll have some privacy. You'll be left alone for the most part, but I'll be checking in on you regularly. There's a bathroom down at the end of that corridor," she pointed in the proper direction. "If you feel shaky on your feet when you get up, call for assistance. That's not a request, that's an order. If I'm not nearby, then Beth or Carol will help you. I'll leave a bottle of water by your bedside – you need to rehydrate." She stood up to leave.

"It wasn't his fault, y'know," Michonne's sleepy voice stopped Allison as she was exiting.

Allison returned to where Michonne sat. "Excuse me?" she asked.

"Daryl…" The lack of sleep was catching up with Michonne and her words became more labored. "He wanted to come back…they wouldn't let him…cause of Merle…"

"His brother?"

"Yeah…Merle…He's the one who beat up Glenn like that…" Her eyes were starting to flutter shut even though she was still sitting up. "Glenn didn't want Merle in the prison…Daryl wouldn't leave his brother…big argument…" Her voice trailed off as she slumped backward against the wall.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

After getting Michonne settled into a quiet cell, Allison grabbed her medical bags and went to check on Glenn. She stopped first in the kitchen/cafeteria area to wash her hands and noticed Carol consoling Axel out the corner of her eye.

"Oscar was my friend…" he was saying. "He always had my back when it came to guys like Tómas…" His voice broke as he looked up at Carol and continued. "You read me?"

Carol sat down next to him and pulled his head to her shoulder. "From what Rick said, he went down fighting for us, for whatever that's worth," she told the man.

"Like my heart's not aching enough with Daryl gone," Allison thought to herself, "I have to hear a hardened prisoner cry about the death of his friend. It's almost too much to bear…" She felt tears beginning to well up in her eyes and then shook them off. There was work to be done. She saw that
Hershel was still sitting in a cell with Glenn, so she proceeded to the next cell where Maggie was sitting alone. She decided to look at her first.

"Hey," she said as a way of an awkward greeting. She wasn't sure what had happened to Maggie in Woodbury, but from the way she was sitting huddled in the corner of her bunk, hugging herself, Allison had a sick suspicion. She'd treated a tragically large number of rape victims back at the hospital, but never had the patient been someone she knew personally.

"Hey," Maggie replied dully.

"I, um, just want to make sure you're OK," she pulled up a chair and sat down. "Glenn and Michonne got worked over pretty good, how are you?" Allison noticed that Maggie didn't have any cuts or bruises on her face, which made her all the more suspicious of what she might have endured...injuries that didn't show on a fully dressed person.

"I'm fine," Maggie replied in a monotone.

"I don't mean to pry," Allison spoke hesitantly, "but I have to be frank right now. Did the Governor assault you...um...in a way that might require...." She closed her eyes and shook her head in frustration. "Oh, jeez, I'm trying to think of a way to be tactful, but time is of the essence. Do you need antibiotics, or...any other medications....?"

"Like Plan B pills? If you're asking me if he raped me, then the answer is 'no'. He didn't." The heavy sigh she heaved after speaking indicated to Allison that there was more to the story.

"What did happen, then?" she asked gently. "Michonne said that Daryl's brother is the one who beat up Glenn like that. Did he hurt you, too?"

Maggie shook her head in the negative. "Merle never touched me, but Glenn was in the room next to me and I could hear Merle beating the shit out of him." She closed her eyes in remembered anguish.

"Why?" The question burst forth before Allison could check herself.

"I don't know...we were outside a strip mall after we'd gotten the baby formula and other stuff, and then suddenly this guy with a blade on one hand..."

"A blade?"

"He had this thing rigged up on his arm...where his hand is missing...it looks like a bayonet. Anyway, he popped up out of nowhere and Glenn recognized him. And he wanted to know if Daryl was still alive, and where we were staying..." She paused and sighed. "Glenn wouldn't tell him, and next thing I knew this guy, Merle, had a gun to my head."

"Oh, no..." Allison was appalled.

"He forced Glenn to drive us to this Woodbury place...Merle took Glenn into another room and I was tied up in a chair by myself until the Governor came in."

"I'm so sorry all this happened to you," Allison said. "I just don't understand – what is up with Daryl's brother? I mean, why did he torture Glenn, why did he kidnap y'all in the first place? I don't get it."

"From what I could tell he's working for the Governor. Seems to be his sergeant-at-arms or something."
"But what does the Governor want with us, with the prison? Does he want to move his group here and take us over? It doesn't make sense."

"You're trying to make sense out of insanity," Maggie replied wearily, slumping back against her pillow. "It ain't gonna work."

"Can I get you anything before I go check on Glenn?" Allison asked. "OK, you get some rest for now, then and just yell if you need anything."

Allison hesitated a moment in the doorway of Glenn's cell. Hershel still had a stethoscope on his chest and was moving it very methodically over seemingly every inch of Glenn's flesh. Allison knew he was trying to detect any broken ribs the best he could without an X-ray.

"May I come in?" She asked somewhat formally. This whole situation – Michonne, Maggie and Glenn attacked, Merle revealed to be alive and well and some sort of maniac, Daryl gone – was making her more unsettled every minute.

"Please," Hershel sat back on his chair and smiled at her. "I think he looks worse than he actually is, thank the Lord."

"I have an otoscope if you need one," Allison offered. She wasn't sure how much "human" equipment the vet had in his personal bag of tricks.

"As a matter of fact, I don't have one of my own." He gestured to an empty chair against the wall. "Why don't you pull up a seat so that I may observe an expert at work."

She smiled at his very diplomatic professional courtesy. "I don't know if 'expert' is the right word, but I guess I shouldn't argue with you in front of the patient. Don't want to scare him." She gently placed the heel of her right hand on the opposite side of Glenn's head as she peered into his ear with the otoscope. No bleeding or apparent damage to the eardrum. She checked the other ear and proceeded to ask Glenn a series of questions, most of which were similar to those she'd asked Michonne. Hershel watched with interest as she had Glenn press against her hands and squeeze her fingers. He actually had never harbored any doubts about her expertise, but he was pleasantly reassured to note how very thorough she was in her examination (especially with their limited equipment). Had he been the attending physician evaluating her work back in med school, he would have given her high marks.

"Did you hear anything in his chest?" Allison asked him.

"Well, I hope he heard a heartbeat at least," Glenn remarked a bit testily.

Hershel chuckled. "That I did, don't worry. It's just a figure of speech." To Allison he said, "No wheezing or crackles. I don't think anything's broken. Like I said before, he looks worse than he is. How is Michonne?"

"Mild concussion," Allison replied. "She'll need a day or two of rest and quiet." She pondered for a second and then commented, "Odd, though. She doesn't have half the contusions that Glenn does. And yet her injuries are more severe."

"I've been thinking about that, too," Hershel admitted. "Daryl's brother has military experience, from what I've heard. I don't know much about the Governor, but it seems to me that Merle would be capable of doing a whole lot more damage with just a few punches than he did here."

"He did enough," Glenn barked through swollen lips.
"My point is," Hershel continued, "Maybe he was putting on a...well, a show of sorts...hurting you without really hurting you. Just to satisfy the Governor. Maybe he's just as afraid of the Governor as everyone else seems to be."

"He could've fooled me when he let that walker loose in the room while I was tied up," Glenn snarled.

"I guess we'll never know for sure what was on his mind," Hershel remarked. "I just thank God that you and Maggie are alive and back here with us."

"And Daryl's not," Glenn countered. "We went through all that to rescue him and then he just left us."

"He didn't have much of a choice, as I understand it," Allison said, looking at Glenn. "Merle's his brother. It's only natural for him to want to stick with family."

"We're his family," Glenn argued. "And Merle's crazy."

"Oh, for heaven's sake," Allison was getting just plain exasperated. She was trying not to blame Glenn for forcing Daryl to make such a choice, and she was also upset with Merle for causing this whole mess. "I know you grew up in Michigan, so let me explain something to you. This is the South. We don't hide our crazy people up the attic or lock them away in hospitals. We bring 'em right out in the living room for all the world to see. No one in the South asks whether or not you have crazy people in your family, they just ask what side they're on." She began packing up her gear. "I'm not making excuses for what Merle did to you, I'm just saying that you shouldn't blame or resent Daryl for choosing to stay with his blood kin, no matter how erratic or psychotic he may be. It's just the way things are."

Glenn was silent for a moment and then asked, "What side were your crazy relatives on?" He had the hint of a smile on his face.

"Both," she replied, keeping her tone a little more light-hearted to show him there were no hard feelings. She picked up her bags and started to leave when a high-pitched wail suddenly echoed off the walls from some distant place in the prison.

"Did you hear that?" Hershel and Glenn asked in unison. Seconds later Beth poked her head into the cell and asked the same question.

"Walkers don't scream," Hershel commented. "That was a person. A living one."

"But I thought the prison was secure," Beth said. "Who could have gotten inside?"

"There's only one way to find out," Carl's voice joined the discussion. The boy had his gun drawn and was obviously itching to see who or what had invaded their safehouse.

"And why is she screaming, whoever she is?" Glenn continued Beth's train of thought. "And is she alone?" He started to stand up from the bunk and gave every appearance of intending to go out to investigate the source of the noise.

"You're in no shape to go anywhere," Allison told Glenn, placing her hand against his chest to keep him from leaving.

"Where's Rick?" Beth asked.
"He's outside somewhere," Hershel answered. "Been there since y'all got back."

"We should go find him and ask him what to do," Carol said worriedly. She was standing in the corridor outside the cell, cradling Judith in her arms, Axel close at her side.

"No," Hershel told her. "It's too dangerous and would take too long. He tends to wander outside the gates." Obviously the old man had been observing Rick and his erratic behavior for a while.

"I'm going," Carl said definitely. "My dad put me in charge before when he left, remember?"

"I think he meant in charge of this area, our secure living space," Allison said, choosing her words carefully. She knew that now more than ever Carl hated being thought of as a kid. It was true that he'd grown up several years in the space of the last eight months, and he was a good shot and had many walker kills under his belt…. But he was still a kid. More specifically, he was Rick's only son. If, God forbid, something happened to him while he was out hunting whatever had made that noise….Oh geez….if Rick was acting wacky now, losing Carl would certainly be the final punch in his one-way ticket to Never-Never Land.

Another distant scream pierced the air.

"I'll go with you," Axel said suddenly.

"Me too," Beth chimed in. The others looked at Hershel at that moment, and it looked as if he was about to object. To everyone's surprise, instead he said, "Make sure you all take weapons. And don't take any unnecessary chances." Apparently he'd decided that Beth needed an opportunity to do something besides mind the baby and wash dishes.

Allison locked the gate behind them as the trio set off on their mission. She watched them disappear into the gloom and then Hershel's voice startled her. She hadn't heard him walk up behind her.

"I just hope my foolhardiness won't come back and bite me in the ass," he murmured almost to himself.
"If Allison was here she'd be covering her ears and singing 'la-la-la' out loud," Daryl thought to himself as Merle relieved himself against a tree. Daryl smiled thinking of Allison and how squeamish she sometimes was when it came to some bodily functions, despite being a doctor. He knew he could make her cringe by just saying the word "panties," and he sometimes uttered it completely at random and out of context just to tease her. And then she'd get doubly mad because he had no such "trigger words" that he disliked – she would try her best, saying things like "scab" and "circumcision" – but none bothered him like they did her. He must have chuckled out loud at the memory because Merle's voice caught him by surprise.

"What's so damned funny, baby bro?" Merle asked over his shoulder.

"Wha- huh? Nothin'. Why'd you ask?"

"Cause you were laughing. At somethin'. Just sayin' it better not be me."

"Wasn't laughing," Daryl quickly tried to defend himself. "Nothin' funny out here, for sure. Must've been clearing my throat or somethin'."

"Whatever," Merle zipped his pants and walked over to where Daryl was standing.

"Just been thinkin'," Daryl continued, "Nothin' out here but skeeters and ants."

"Patience, l'il brother, sooner or later a squirrel's bound to scurry 'cross your path."

"Even so," Daryl replied dejectedly, "That ain't much food."

"Better than nothing," Merle told him.

Daryl was unconvinced. "Probably woulda had better luck looking through some of those houses we passed back on the turn-off."

"Is that what your new friends taught ya, hmm?" Merle's voice took a mocking tone. "How to loot for booty?"

Daryl didn't bother taking Merle's bait. Instead he said, "We've been at it for hours. Maybe we should find a stream, try to catch us some fish."

"I think you're just trying to lead me back to that road, get me over to the prison…"

Daryl shrugged noncommittally. "Got shelter. Food. Pot to piss in. Might not be a bad idea."

"For you, maybe," Merle replied. "Ain't gonna be no damned party for me."

"We can all get used to each other," Daryl said quietly.

"Makes no difference, anyway," Merle stated. "They're all dead."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Right about now," Merle noisily hocked up a glob saliva and spat, "the Governor's probably hosting a housewarming party, where he's gonna bury what's left of your pals." He started walking away. "C'mon, let's go hook some fish."
Daryl silently followed his brother with conflicted emotions. He'd been thinking about the people back at the prison ever since he'd parted ways with Rick…but he hadn't actually worried about their safety until Merle mentioned the Governor possibly paying a return visit.

Allison climbed the stairs to the second level of their cell block, a bundle of clean towels in her arms. She'd been alternating between helping Carol with laundry and taking watch duty in the past day and a half. Anything to keep busy. Both Michonne and Glenn were up and about again, so she wasn't needed on hospital duty. No one seemed to know what Michonne's status with the group was; Rick had been making noises about sending her away once she got better, but Rick hadn't been around much lately. He was preoccupied with pacing around outside.

She hadn't had a lot of contact with those new people that had found their way inside the prison, the ones who Carl and Beth had discovered. Hershel thought it best that Tyreese, Sasha, and the other two men (Allison couldn't remember their names) not know too much about how many people lived at the prison or anything about them until Rick had given the OK for them to remain. Hershel himself hadn't admitted to the man whose leg he'd stitched up that he was a doctor; he'd simply said that he'd had a bit of medical training.

"You're real good with her," Carol was saying to Beth, as the younger girl changed Judith's diaper.

"I've always wanted to have a child," Beth told her.

"Best not let your daddy hear you say that," Allison warned her as she climbed the top step. "He just might lock you up in Solitary."

Carol chuckled and gently placed Judith in the post office mail tray that had been turned into a tiny bed for the baby. Someone had decorated it and painted "L'il Asskicker" on the side. It would make a nice conversation piece for Judith someday when she was a teenager, Allison thought to herself.

"I'm still pissed at Daryl, aren't you?" Beth announced suddenly. Allison looked up and was surprised to see the question directed at her.

"No, I'm not angry with him…" she replied slowly, "I miss him, but I understand why he made the choice that he did. I mean, when you think about it, he really didn't have a choice, did he? I mean, suppose you had to choose between Maggie and the group for some reason?"

"Daryl has his code that he lives by," Carol said before Beth could answer. "The world needs more men like that." Judith made a few gurgling noises from her new bed and Carol announced, "I think she likes it in there. I remember…" her eyes grew distant for a second, "…those first three months or so after she was born, Sophia seemed to cry all night long. So loud she'd wake the neighbors. A couple of times Ed even went to a friend's house to sleep, he couldn't stand the noise." She pulled the blanket a little snugger around the infant and then looked up at Beth. "I'd like to think that I'm not the same woman I was a year ago," she said thoughtfully. "In fact, I'd like to think that if Ed walked through that door right now and told me to come with him that I'd tell him to go to hell."

"You would, I'm sure," Beth agreed earnestly.

"I don't know," Carol mused. "Men like Ed, and like Merle, they get inside your head. After a while they make you believe you deserve the abuse. You don't remember any other way of life."
"But Daryl's so strong," Beth argued, "he could stand up to anybody!"

"You've never met his brother," Carol told her.

"I've never met Merle, either," Allison added, "but you have to remember, Daryl grew up with him, had been with him all of his life until the past year. You can't completely overcome a lifetime of classical conditioning in a comparatively short time."

"Well, whatever," Beth had a habit of tuning out slightly when Allison started using what she silently called her "chemical words". "It's just that we're weak without him."

"We're weaker," Allison amended, "but not weak. We're going to have to just regroup and work harder at protecting ourselves. We've made it through worse situations."

"Tyreese and his people seem very capable," Carol commented. "We'll just have to see what happens when Rick gets back."

"I don't know what was goin' through your head, boy, pointing that bow at me, right at my head," Merle grumbled as they trudged away after they had killed a bunch of walkers that had a group of Latinos surrounded on a bridge over Yellow Jacket Creek. He tried to defend his actions – refusing to assist at first, rifling through their belongings for food - in typical Merle fashion. "I ain't never wasted energy on someone who ain't cooked me a meal or at least fellaciated my piece."

"They had a baby," Daryl barked, getting more and more frustrated with his brother's attitude.

"A baby beaner, probably an illegal. So what? Hell, they couldn't even thank us for savin' their sorry asses, they didn't speak English."

"Allison coulda talked to them, she speaks Spanish," Daryl was more or less thinking out loud as he walked.

"This ain't the first time you mentioned some skirt named Allison," Merle observed. "Who is she? You been gettin' you some trim at that prison? Is that why you're so all-fired hot to get back there?"

"She's a doctor," Daryl mumbled, trying to ignore the second part of Merle's question. "She's saved our asses more times than I can count."

"So what's the story with you and her? Is little Darylina dipping his wick in a Spic?" Merle made his typical lewd tongue and pelvic thrusting gestures that he used as a visual aid whenever the topic of conversation was sex.

Daryl spun around and gave Merle a look that actually stopped the elder Dixon in his tracks. "You best take that back or else I'm gonna point this at your fool head again. And this time I won't hesitate to pull the trigger." He gestured with his crossbow menacingly.

Merle held up his hands in a peace-making gesture. "No offense, bro, it's all good. Was just bein' happy for you finally gettin' your rocks off - - "

Daryl grabbed Merle by the front of his shirt and almost knocked him off his feet. "What'd I just say?!" His face was mere inches from his brother's.
"OK, it's cool, we're good," Merle's voice was actually a little shaky. He couldn't ever remember seeing such rage in his brother's eyes. "I didn't know that you and...."

Daryl shoved his brother back as let he go of his shirt. "It's not that you didn't know, it's that you didn't think. You never do. You're just a simple-minded piece of shit - - "

With those insulting words directed at him Merle instinctively fought back. He grabbed Daryl and threw him to the ground, the hem of his shirt still clasped in his fist. When the fabric tore away, Merle noticed the scars on his brother's back. Daryl automatically struggled to cover himself.

"Oh, shit, I'm...I'm sorry, I didn't know that he..." Merle actually sounded surprised and genuinely apologetic.

Daryl slowly collected himself – his thoughts and his gear – as he stood up to face his brother. He looked at Merle, the only kin he had left in this world. The big brother who'd taught him how to hunt and track, who'd found food for them when their old man was off on a bender and their ma was too drunk to cook. The guy who'd protected him from bullies who dared to taunt him just for being a Dixon. The one who'd brought him up with his own brand of "tough love" which, honestly, would be defined as "abuse" in any textbook. "I'm making a man outta you, Darylina," was always the reason. Or the excuse. "Pussy." "Faggot." "No one gives a shit about you 'cept old Merle." "Get your ugly ass over here and bring me a beer." That's all he'd heard from Merle ever since he could remember..... "Daryl, what do you think? Is this a good idea?" "You're a decent man." "You're every bit as good as them." "You're smart, you're funny, I love you." That's what he'd heard in the months since he'd joined that group at the quarry. Words spoken to him regularly by folks who were in no way related to him.

"You knew," Daryl growled at his brother as he pulled the remnants of his torn shirt back into place. "You just didn't wanna...and then you left me...."

"You don't understand," Merle interrupted, "I had to leave...otherwise I woulda killed him."

Daryl eyed his brother for several minutes. The images kept swirling in his head – L'il Asskicker eagerly taking the bottle from him, Rick thanking him for taking care of "things", Hershel seeking his opinion, Allison always looking at him with unquestioning trust – and finally, like thunder, a realization presented itself boldly. Those people he'd left behind at the prison – they were his family now. Just like Glenn had said. And he'd left them unprotected and vulnerable. He turned and started striding away.

"Where are ya goin'?" Merle called after him.

"Back where I belong," Daryl flung over his shoulder.

"I – I can't go there," Merle's voice took on a defeated tone. Daryl stopped in his tracks and turned around. "I shot that black bitch and I damn near killed the Chinaman."

"He's Korean," Daryl hissed with his jaw clenched.

"Whatever," Merle shrugged helplessly. But Daryl simply turned and stomped away. After a few minutes of mental wrestling, Merle cussed out loud and then double-timed it to catch up with his brother.

‡‡‡ ‡‡‡ ‡‡‡
‡‡‡ ‡‡‡ ‡‡‡
Much later that afternoon Allison found herself donning a heavy bullet-proof vest/body armor thingy from the weapons room at Hershel's insistence. "We're short-handed now, we must take every precaution," he'd told her as she was about to depart for guard duty.

Truth be told, the past few hours had been a swirl of activity that had raced from one extreme to another. Rick had finally come inside for more than a few minutes and, when he walked into the kitchen area, faced Tyreese for the first time. Hershel politely introduced the towering man and his group to Rick, and Allison immediately noticed that Rick ignored Tyreese's extended hand. Such a breach of basic etiquette was so unlike Rick, who despite the current state of the world, still addressed strangers as "Ma'am" and "Sir". Rick not shaking Tyreese's hand immediately caused her to focus on the sheriff's face, to see if perhaps he wasn't paying attention. Rick's gaze was directed up at the second story catwalk, and after a few moments of silence he started babbling nonsense – as if he was talking to someone standing up there. Tyreese's group left in a rush after Rick had some sort of meltdown and pulled his gun on them.

Now Rick was back outside the main gate wandering around with a purpose known only to him, and Glenn had suddenly promoted himself to group leader and was issuing orders to the group. He mentioned something about taking a car to go check out the far end of the prison, and it was at that point that Allison had volunteered to go back on watch duty. She didn't want to hear the rest of the heated debate that had ensued. When Hershel asked her to wear body armor it seemed like he wanted to say something more, get something off of his chest. Allison sensed that he was feeling edgy and uncomfortable with Glenn's assumption of leadership, but that he was also hesitant to outright criticize the man who had become something of a son to him.

She crossed the courtyard en route to the guard tower. She noticed Carol and Axel chatting away animatedly in the forecourt. From the smile on Carol's face it appeared that she was maybe enjoying the attention that the convict lavished upon her. Allison smiled to herself; despite whatever was in his criminal past, he'd certainly worked hard to become a part of their group. He never shied away from physical labor and seemed earnest when it came to keeping the prison safe. "It would be nice if the two of them had something in common," Allison thought as she walked, "maybe Carol could develop a relationship based on – " Her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a vehicle engine. She turned and looked toward the gate, expecting to see Glenn pulling up in the Hyundai. But there was no car in the driveway, and before she had time to consider that fact she heard distinctive the bang and whistle of a projectile being fired from a rifle. As she stood trying to comprehend what was happening, she saw Axel drop to the ground. A split second later the air was filled with the sound of gunfire. Allison turned to run for cover but an almighty punch to her chest took her breath away and knocked her down to the ground.

Allison lay stunned for several moments before she realized what was happening. They were being fired upon, and a bullet had hit her body armor. "Darn, that hurt!" was her first thought as her senses returned. As she continued to hear gunfire her vast mental library of true crime books came in handy – she stayed completely still and played dead. That's how the folks who'd endured everything from the Virginia Tech shootings to the Utah Hi-Fi Shop robbery had lived to tell their stories. Minutes later the shooting noises stopped. She heard a vehicle engine roaring and then a crash noise. She carefully lifted her head up to look and saw that a delivery truck of some sort had broken through the front gate and was disgorging a herd of walkers. She scrambled to her feet and ran to duck behind a filing cabinet and other assorted objects that provided a makeshift wall. She was relieved to see that Carol hadn't been hurt and was now armed. Maggie whispered a few directives and the trio of women emerged from their hiding place and started firing on the walkers. Allison saw both Hershel and Rick in the distance, and then a dark figure running toward them. It was Michonne, who killed the walkers nearest Hershel and then offered her shoulder for him to lean on.
In a single motion, it seemed, the green Hyundai pulled up the driveway and a person completely covered in body armor from head to toe exited the cab of the walker delivery truck and ran in the opposite direction. Glenn rushed to meet Michonne and help Hershel into the car. Carl opened the gate and Glenn drove inside the compound. Everyone was safe for the moment, save for Rick….Allison squinted to see in the far distance. It appeared that Rick was out of ammo, but before she had time to worry about that she thought she also saw a familiar figure just past him. The walker that had been attacking Rick collapsed to the ground and Allison did a double-take. Was that really Daryl standing there?
Carl slid the gate open and then closed it behind the Hyundai after Glenn pulled in. Beth rushed over to first hug her father as he emerged from the car, and then Michonne, who had helped to save his life. Allison noticed that the usually very reserved woman returned Beth's embrace and gave her a quick reassuring pat on the back. Maggie had apparently resolved her differences with Glenn, because she was holding his hand with one of hers and hugging Hershel with her other arm. After quickly checking to see if anyone was hurt, Allison pressed against the fence and watched Rick, Daryl and a man she presumed to be Merle make their way across the field to the prison gate. Their progress was stilted, as they had to occasionally pause to kill a random walker, and while she waited for them she stripped off the bulky and hot body armor. When she unstrapped it she realized that her entire front was sore. She pulled the collar of her shirt away and peeked down the front. No wonder she was hurting; the vest had stopped the bullet but had left a nasty red mark that was surrounded by a black and purple bruise that was spreading up her chest and across her ribcage.

"He came back," Allison heard a voice whisper almost reverently behind her. She turned and saw Carol standing there, staring intently through the fence. Meanwhile poor Axel lay dead on the ground, his blood that moments before had been so hot for Carol now forming a puddle around his head. Was the woman that fickle or just shell-shocked, Allison had to wonder. The sound of the gate sliding open turned her attention back to the fence; Rick, Daryl and Merle dashed inside to safety and Carl locked the gate behind them. She was prevented from throwing her arms around Daryl by the rest of the group…she was somehow shifted to the back of the crowd as everyone rushed forward to greet Rick and Daryl and make sure that neither was injured or bitten. A few seconds later Merle's presence was acknowledged by Glenn, who pointed at the man and abruptly asked, "What's he doing here?!"

"We need to discuss this," Rick replied. "Let's all go inside and – "

"No! No way!" Glenn was adamant. "He is NOT - "

"I said," Rick repeated with emphasis, "that we will have a discussion on this matter. Inside." He gestured with his head and everyone followed his directive and walked back to Cell Block C.

As the group assembled in the cell block Daryl made some quick introductions. "Merle, this is Hershel – we stayed at his farm for a while. He's Maggie's dad. And that's Beth, his other daughter. You remember Carol, and Carl…and this is Allison, my, um, friend." He looked down at his feet and shuffled uncomfortably as he spoke those last words.

Allison's urge to run up and embrace Daryl in a bear hug was stifled when he uttered those words to his brother. She stood stunned for several seconds before somewhat recovering her wits. She extended her hand to Merle to shake it. "How do you do, nice to finally meet you," she said with a smile. She then approached Daryl and gave him a playful punch in his shoulder. "Great to have you back…pal."

She was so consumed by her own emotions and her hurt at his introduction that she didn't notice his grimace when she greeted him thusly. She didn't know that Daryl's guts were doing somersaults when he'd brought together the only two people that he loved in this current life. Fact was, he'd been dreading this meeting since Merle had agreed to follow him back to the prison. Allison looked up to him, she thought he was all…handsome and strong and smart and stuff. Merle, on the other hand, had a habit of mocking and teasing him at every possible turn. He'd been afraid that if he'd introduced Allison as his "girlfriend" that Merle would have let loose with a string of
inappropriate comments. He was trying to avoid giving Merle any ammunition to belittle him in
front of his woman, at least until after the issue of whether or not Merle would be allowed to stay in
the prison was settled.

Glenn started to say something again about Merle's presence but Rick interrupted him, stating that
first things first; before they had any discussions on the future of the group they needed to give
Axel a proper burial. Allison was surprised to see that even though he hadn't known the man and
only had one hand, Merle was one of the first to step up and grab a shovel. An hour later she joined
the group around Axel's grave. The service was fairly quick, in fear of the Governor launching a
second attack as they all stood outside, vulnerable. Carol talked about how Axel actually had
thought of the prison as a home, how – outside of bullies like Tómas – he didn't mind serving his
time. Allison felt profound sympathy for the man who was apparently one of the rare inmates who
actually liked the structure of the prison schedule, who appreciated being fed three meals per day
and having his clothing provided to him. It was another reminder of how a person's upbringing
could be so different from hers. She'd read about convicts in her true crime books who would get
themselves arrested again after being paroled, simply because life behind bars was better than any
of the alternatives they had on the outside. How bad could anyone's life have been, she thought to
herself…. and then she turned her gaze to Daryl. Realization abruptly smacked her upside the head.

"Oh my God," she thought to herself. "How arrogant have I been, preaching to the others about
Daryl's lifetime of negative conditioning, and then I go and feel sorry for myself because he didn't
introduce me as his 'girlfriend' to Merle?!" If Merle had so nonchalantly beat the heck out of Glenn,
who knew what he had done to his younger brother over the years? No doubt Daryl had learned as
he grew up that keeping quiet about anything personal in his life was the best way to not be taunted
or worse by his big brother.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

The discussion was mixed after the group reconvened in the cell block later that day. The two main
topics on the table seemed to be a) What would the Governor's next move be, and b) Should Merle
be allowed to stay in the prison. Daryl was adamant on that second point – if Merle was forced to
leave, then he'd go off with him. Hershel, of all people, was the first to voice his support in favor
or Merle.

"Merle has military experience, which could be very helpful to us. And let's not underestimate his
loyalty to his brother. He may be erratic, but if Daryl is with us, then I think Merle will be, too."

"We're wastin' time debating this," Merle spoke from the cell he'd been temporarily confined to.
"We should've slid out of here last night and lived to fight another day. That truck through the
fence thing? That was just him ringin' the doorbell. We might have some thick walls to hide
behind, but he's got the guns and the numbers, and if he decides to surround this place…shoot, he
could just starve us out if he wanted to."

"**You** started this!" Maggie shouted suddenly, pointing at Merle. "This is all on you!"

"What difference does it make whose fault it is?" Beth interjected. "The point is what do we do
now?"

Glenn's head whipped around in shock when Beth spoke. Was Maggie's own sister actually
defending Merle Dixon? Or was she just trying to get their conversation back on the right track?
Maybe he'd been punched in the head once too many times and was over-thinking her remark. But
still…now that he thought about it, she hadn't exactly joined in on the Merle hate…

"If the Governor wants this place so badly, why don't we just move on and let him have it?"
Allison asked.

"It ain't the building he wants, Bright Eyes, it's what's inside it. Ain't that right, Michonne?" He looked pointedly at the dark-skinned woman.

"I get the feeling that I'm not exactly up to speed on everything," Allison was confused.

"It seems our Nubian Queen here stabbed the Governor smack in the eye with a piece of glass," Merle drawled.

"And he's holding a grudge over a little thing like that?" Allison asked sarcastically. This was just great. They wouldn't be safe wherever they went as long as that man was alive.

"Not just that," Michonne said quietly. "I killed Penny, too. His daughter. She'd already turned but he had her chained up in a closet, waiting for a cure, I suppose. I think he screamed louder when I took her down than when I took his eye. And he's pissed at Merle, too, for not killing me when he had the chance."

"I said before, after Maggie and Glenn got back, that we should leave. Now Axel's dead….Get back here!" Hershel shouted at Rick's retreating back. "You're slipping, Rick. We all understand why, but now is not the time. You have to get your head clear and do something!"

"One thing he needs to do, right now, immediately," Allison stepped forward and blocked Rick's path, "is get some sleep. That is not a suggestion, that is a medical directive." She grasped Rick's arm and looked into his eyes. "I can't remember the last time I've seen you actually lay down and get some serious sack time. Lack of sleep can be as deadly as a gunshot, eventually. It can literally kill you. In the meantime it will make you hallucinate and affect your decision-making." She turned and looked at Daryl, whose eyes were framed with the same dark circles as Rick's. "The same goes for you – you've been on the run since you left here to get Maggie and Glenn out of Woodbury. Your resistance is down, your body is getting weaker – you need to get some sleep."

"I can't, I have to…or someone has to…" Daryl fumbled for words and surreptitiously stole a glance in the direction of his brother. Allison caught his meaning.

"What if Merle comes with me on watch duty for a while? He looks a little more bushy-tailed than you. I can give him the lay of the land, and so help me Merle if you turn that last comment into a dirty double-entendre and make a nasty remark," she said without pausing, looking evenly at the man, "I'll surgically castrate you as you sleep."

"Yes, ma'am," Merle replied with a half-smile that made him look like his brother. It almost physically pained him not to make a sexual joke when she offered to give him "the lay of the land," but her tone of voice, not to mention the threat to his gonads, stunned him into silence.

"You sure you wanna…I mean, you'll be OK with that?" Rick asked her.

"Why wouldn't she be?" Daryl growled. "He ain't a rapist or nothin', fer Christ's sake."

"Enough already," Allison held her hands up. "You two are getting cranky, it's time for your naps."

Glenn unlocked the door to Merle's cell and nodded mutely toward the assortment of rifles leaned up in a row against the wall. As Merle considered his choices, Daryl asked, "Where's our stuff?"

Allison looked at him and saw him gesture toward the perch.

"Oh, I, um, moved it to our dressing room," she replied, referring to the sheet-draped cell that they'd used as a combination closet and changing area. "I got lonely up there alone…you can move
it back if you want. I know you don't like sleeping in a cage."

"No, s'okay," he told her.

She picked up her rifle and was about to leave when Carl stopped her. "Here," he was holding out the bullet-proof vest. "You should wear this if you're going to be on watch."

"You're right, it already saved me once," she thanked the boy. When she lifted her arms to slip the vest over her head, her shirt raised up and exposed part of her black-and-blue torso.

"Wow! Look at those colors!" Carl exclaimed without thinking. He stepped closer to her and reached out as if he was going to touch her. "Does that hurt?"

"Ever been hit with a bullet while wearing body armor?" she asked him.

"No."

"Hurts!"

"I got shot once without a vest, you know," Carl told her, squaring up his shoulders as if was a "who's a bigger badass" competition.

"Yes, you did," she smiled at him. His remark was a bittersweet reminder that even though their circumstances forced him into adult situations on a daily basis, he was still an adolescent. He had to scrounge for food, kill walkers, and focus every waking moment on plain old survival at an age when his biggest worries should be homework and acne and getting picked last when they chose teams in gym class. "You had to have surgery, too, so I got off very lucky now that I think about it."

She pulled the Velcro straps on the armor tight and then said to Merle, "Off we go."

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

"Y'know, you look different than I 'spected, Bright Eyes," Merle said to Allison as they paced the catwalk, keeping an eye on the landscape in the distance.

"Oh? What did you expect?" Allison was frankly curious as to why he expected anything. Had Daryl talked about her to his brother?

"Daryl mentioned that you speak Spanish, so I thought you were Mexican," he replied.

"I studied it for six years in high school and college. French, too. But I'm more fluent in Spanish because I used to use it almost every day on the job...lots of Spanish-speaking patients in the ER."

"Hmph," he grunted. "Big surprise there. Lots of illegals in Atlanta."

"That may be true, but I worked at a hospital in Durham, not Atlanta. Went to med school there as well."

"Durham? You go to UNC?"

"No, Duke."

"Yeah? Hmph." Another grunt. "Daryl didn't mention that you were a rich bitch. Just told me I shouldn't say things like 'bitch' to you, like you're fuckin' Princess Grace or something."
"And I see that you took his advice to heart," she muttered.

"Don't give me grief, girlie, I can't change overnight, even if I cared to. I ain't my brother, you know."

"Yes, I know. It was obviously a very windy day when the apple fell from that family tree."

Merle actually chuckled at her little barb, so she decided to clear up one of his previous points. "For the record, I'm not rich, never was. Grew up near Toccoa, Georgia, went to Duke on an academic scholarship."

"Oh." He seemed to consider this information. "Makes sense, I guess. Daryl did say that you were real smart, too. Your Royal Highness," he added those last words with a slight sneer.

"Actually, Princess Grace's title was Her Serene Highness, but I'm not one to correct people." She tried to keep a straight face while saying that but it didn't work. This time she laughed along with Merle.

"Oh yeah, I could tell that about you," Merle said, rolling his eyes.

They were quiet for a few minutes and then she broached a subject that had been bothering her. "So what's the deal with you and Glenn? Why did you beat him up like that? And Maggie?"

Merle seemed offended by the last portion of her question. "I didn't have nothin' to do with whatever the Governor did to Maggie. I would never do anything like that to a woman, no real man would. That's pussy stuff. Oops, I forgot I'm not s'posed to say sex words like that. Anyway, Glenn, well…that was partly his fault. I was tryin' to find my brother, all he had to do was tell me where Daryl was. He was bein' stubborn. 'Sides, far as I knew, he was one of those with Officer Friendly, who left me handcuffed on a roof to die. I was showin' him the same amount of compassion he showed me in Atlanta. Far as I'm concerned, he is part of what cost me my hand."

"He went back for you," Allison told him. "Daryl and T-Dog and Rick and Glenn all went back there to retrieve you. In fact, that's how they happened to find me."

"Well, how was I s'posed to know that they'd come back? There were biters pushin' at the door, I had to make a decision."

"Maybe if you weren't tweaking at the time…" she started to say without thinking.

"What the hell does that have to do with anything?" He growled at her.

Merle was obviously getting worked up, so Allison considered her words carefully before she spoke her mind.

"To be honest, I've always tried to be pretty non-judgmental when it comes to personal recreational habits, as long as those habits don't affect innocent bystanders. You want to pickle your liver in booze? Fine, just don't get behind the wheel and kill a family on their way home from church. Go ahead and fry your brains on meth, but lock yourself up someplace. Don't go up on a roof all crazed and threaten people with a gun."

"You weren't even there, what do you know about anything."

"I've heard all about it from people who were there," Allison told him. "And I don't mean just Rick…I remember Andrea said – "
"Oh, Andrea," Merle interrupted her. "Now there's a good, reliable source of information." His voice took on a bitter tone. "You're gonna take the word of some broad whose loyalty depends strictly on whose dick is in her – oops, sorry," his eyes narrowed and his tone became even more taunting, "her 'you know what'."

She shrugged off his words and naïvely asked, "How did you know about Andrea and Shane? You weren't at the farm when she…." All of a sudden she felt stupid for speaking before thoroughly thinking. "Wait a minute, are we talking about the same thing?"

"I don't think so, Bright Eyes," he grinned. "I was referin' to Andrea cozying up to the Governor and sharing his bed. I didn't know that Shane had boned her as well…just proves my point. She belongs to anyone who she thinks is in charge, who can do her some good politically, so to speak."

Allison was trying to sort out his words. "What are you saying – Andrea knows the Governor? You've seen her? I mean, when all that chaos happened at the farm, and she got separated from the group…we didn't know…"

"I found her and Michonne in the woods a couple of weeks ago. Apparently they'd been palling around together all winter. She was pretty sick, though, pneumonia or something, so I took 'em both to Woodbury." He made it sound as if he was doing a noble deed, he conveniently didn't mention that he was scoring points by collecting bodies for the Governor.

"And she's still there? Doesn't she know what he's like, what he's done?"

Merle shrugged. "She probably don't care. She's got a warm bed, regular chow, and some prestige because she's banging the boss. Why not stay where she's Queen Bee, rather than hang here with y'all where she's just a drone?" He peered through his rifle scope and scanned the horizon.

They paced the catwalk quietly, surveying the area, and then Allison asked somewhat hesitantly, "Are you going to stay with us now?"

"Don't seem like it's strictly up to me, now, does it?" Merle replied. "I think most of your group would rather feed me back to the Governor."

"Well, I'm glad you're here." She caught his curious glance and hastened to explain, "I know it means a lot to Daryl. He's wondered about you all this time. I mean, we're all like a family now, but you're still his blood kin. Heck, you practically raised him from what I've heard."

"Didn't have much of a choice," Merle commented.

"Well, we're all lucky that you taught Daryl the things that you did. If it wasn't for his hunting and tracking skills, we probably would've starved long ago. And he probably would've died that time he fell and impaled himself on one of his bolts out in the woods all alone if he hadn't known how to remove it and treat the wound. The rest of us are learning the hard way, by trial and error, how to get along in this new world. But thanks to Daryl, and indirectly to you, we've had a good teacher."

She smiled at him guilelessly.

Merle felt vastly unsettled by her praise. Was this girl for real? He couldn't remember anyone in his whole life ever telling him that he'd done good, much less that they were grateful for him being around. Princess Gracie should only know that he and Daryl had originally stopped by that camp at the quarry to steal anything they could use. How soft had his baby brother gone since he'd joined this group, anyway?

"This conversation has gotten entirely too serious," he finally said. "Is there any whiskey around
this place? That's one thing I miss about Woodbury – the Governor had a fine selection of sippin' bourbon."

Allison smiled nostalgically. "You remind me of my granddaddy…he loved his Wild Turkey. I remember when he'd take me to Loot Starkins' place – "

"Loot Starkins' truck stop? Over near Dawsonville?" Merle interrupted her excitedly.

"Yeah, you know the place?"

"Hell, ol' Fartblossom was one of my runnin' around buddies back in the day!"

"Old who?"

"Loot's oldest boy."

"I've never met him, but as I recall his son's name was Ludlow," Allison said.

"Yeah, but everyone who knew Lud called him 'Fartblossom,' 'cause he – "

Allison held up her hand. "Never mind, I can guess why."

Merle continued his thought despite her objection. "Yep, we'd always say to him 'Goddamn, Lud, anyone can stink, but you could knock a buzzard off a shitwagon!'" He laughed uproariously at the memory.

"Tell the truth," Allison smiled sweetly at him, "before all this happened you used to write verses for Hallmark, right?"

That sent Merle into another round of belly laughs. He finally paused long enough to wipe his eyes and tell her, "You may be a prissy know-it-all, but you're kind of OK."

"Thanks. I think."

"Well, well, I know I've never had so much fun on guard duty." Allison looked to the left to see Maggie and Carl approaching. "We're here to relieve you," Maggie said, "but if you're having a good time we'll gladly leave you to it."

"No, I think we're done for now, thanks," Allison told her and started walking back to the prison.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

Allison ate a quick dinner that Carol had very kindly left warming for her in the kitchen and then retreated to her cell for the night. Daryl wasn't there and she wondered if he'd gotten any rest earlier and where he was now. She brushed her teeth in the porcelain sink and quickly stripped off her clothes and slipped into a pair of sweat pants and an oversized man's long john shirt, courtesy of Otis. She had her back to the door when she heard a low, husky, hesitant voice.

"Hey."

The very sound was like a caress and the hairs on the back of her neck tingled. She slowly turned around and saw Daryl standing in the doorway, his hair slightly wet. So that's where he'd been; he'd apparently taken a shower. "Hey," she replied softly.

"I, um, didn't know if it was OK if I…I mean, if we both…" He looked at the bed on the floor and at her and fidgeted. They were both suddenly very shy in front of one another.
"Of course," she replied, "If you want to, that is."

He closed the door behind him and fixed the sheet hanging on it so that it afforded them some privacy. They stood and looked at each other wordlessly for several minutes. Daryl finally took a few tentative steps to close the distance between them. He saw the purple, black and blue discoloration that now stretched up to just under her collarbone and reached one hand gently to touch it.

"That looks painful," he said. "You OK?"

"I'm fine," she replied. "It looks worse than it feels." He kept his hand there and she slowly reached her own up to cover his. She very softly stroked the back of his hand and then suddenly his lips were on hers, pressing frantically. She responded in full measure, but he was stronger and he pushed her back against the wall. Their tongues fought each other greedily and their grunts soon filled the air around them.

"Oh my God," he said against her mouth, his words muffled. She didn't reply but instead fumbled with his belt buckle. She managed to undo his pants enough so that she could reach inside and pull him out. He looked up to the ceiling, eyes closed, and moaned at her touch. In one swift motion he pushed her sweats and underpants down to her ankles, and she quickly stepped out of them. He lifted her up by the hips and she wrapped her legs around his waist.

"Ooh, Daryl, oh my God, you feel…." She moaned into his neck as he thrust into her. There was nothing tender about his movements, this was nothing but pure animal lust. And she ground her own hips into him just as hard, loving the feel of him inside of her, relishing in his hot breath against her face and neck as he grunted like a caveman, dripping wet with desire as his face contorted in pleasure. Four strokes, five, and then with an almighty thrust that threatened to tear her in two he exploded. She dug her nails into his neck and back and pulled him tight against her as the waves of sheer ecstasy washed over her. As they both caught their breath, she slowly unpretzeled her legs from his body and then collapsed onto the mattress. She hadn't the strength to stand up any longer.

Daryl sank down next to her but refused to meet her eyes when she leaned over to kiss him. "I'm sorry," he said instead.

"For what?" she was confused.

"For….for…you know, so quickly," he mumbled and gestured vaguely. "It's been a long time, I guess."

"You have nothing to apologize for," she said softly, and then playfully punched him in the shoulder and said more loudly, "buddy."

He covered his face with his hands, but she saw a hint of a smile before he did. "Oh, cripes, I'll never hear the end of that, will I?" He removed his hands and finally looked at her. "I didn't mean, you know, when I said before — "

She silenced him with a kiss. "I know you didn't, I'm just funnin' with you." She gently stroked his scalp. "I'm glad you came back," she told him.

"I am too," he said huskily.

She lifted her top up and over her head and tossed it aside and then looked at him. "Are you going to get comfy now and keep me warm, or what?" She smiled coquettishly. He gave her his half-
smile and removed his shirt. She helped him squiggle out of his slacks and then he pulled the blanket over them both as she snuggled against him.

"I love you, Angel," he whispered.

Unbeknownst to them, fortunately (as they both would've died from embarrassment), Merle had been on his way to the bathroom when he heard their grunts and groans. He kept walking and smiled to himself. "Well, Darylina," he thought, proud of his baby brother, "maybe you do have a set of stones after all."
Chapter 73

Waking up the next morning was wonderful for the first time in a long time. Despite the threat of the Governor looming over their heads, Allison felt almost serene. Her worries never seemed as dire or desperate when Daryl was there. She sighed contentedly and watched the sky start to brighten through the barred window. The sun was rising, and suddenly so was Daryl. She felt his, er, lower half stir first since he was on his side, pressed tightly against her. She smiled and was just about to reach for him when he opened his eyes and rolled onto his back. He rubbed a hand across his face and then half-way sat up.

"What time is it? Christ, is the sun already out?" He turned and looked at Allison. "I haven't slept this late…I dunno since when." She craned her neck upward and he leaned down to meet her halfway with a kiss. "You make me lazy, woman."

"You needed the rest," she told him. "And I needed a good tumble," she added with a shy smile.

He averted his eyes for a quick second and muttered, "I hope it was…OK."

"Better than OK," she assured him, kissing him on the cheek.

"Gotta get up, we're burnin' daylight," he muttered, picking up his scattered clothing. He paused and looked at the rumpled items he'd been wearing for days.

"You've got some clean stuff in that blue bag over there," Allison pointed. "I washed the stuff you left behind, except for…" Now it was her turn to be a little embarrassed. He cocked his head in confusion. "Except for this," she finished, reaching underneath her pillow. She pulled out a T-shirt of his that was long overdue for a laundering. "I, um, sort of slept with it when you were gone."

"It's all dirty," he remarked without thinking.

"Well….it smelled like you, OK? It reminded me of you and it was kind of soothing to hug it while I fell asleep," she explained hastily.

He walked over to the blue bag and started rummaging inside. "We've got to get you a stuffed animal or something," he told her with a half-smile.

She pulled on her own clothes while he dressed. "I'll take and wash those today," she said, gesturing at his discarded things. "You got anything else that needs washing in your backpack?"

"Yeah," he chuckled, lacing up a boot. "I think all you have to do is whistle and they'll walk to the laundry room by themselves, though."

"Pretty ripe, huh?" she grinned at him. She didn't care how stiff with filth his underwear was, it just felt so good to have him back, to banter comfortably with him like this again.

"How'd watch duty go with Merle? You didn't kill him, I noticed, so I guess he behaved."

Allison rolled her hair into a bun as she answered him. "It was fine. We talked a little, that was about it. Turns out he knew someone from where near where I grew up."

"Small world," Daryl commented.

"Yeah, but I'd still hate to have to paint it," she smirked.
"Oh, geez," he rolled his eyes. "I'm gonna go find Rick and see what he's got goin' today. Maybe help Glenn fix that fence."

"Aren't you going to get something to eat first?"

"You go on ahead, I wanna talk to Rick first and then I'll grab something. I promise," he added after catching the look she'd shot him.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

Allison strolled into the kitchen area and was surprised to see only Beth and Carl there. Beth was at the stove, stirring a large pot, and Carl was sitting in the seat closest to her.

"Where is everyone?" Allison asked with a smile as she grabbed a bowl. She felt so light-hearted that she didn't even mind that oatmeal was the only item on the breakfast menu for approximately the 18th day in a row.

"Some have already eaten, some are still sleeping," Beth told her, scooping some of the hot cereal into her bowl. "Help yourself to some coffee," she added.

Allison settled into a chair next to Carl. "Thanks for making breakfast," she said to the young girl.

"Carol actually got everything started," Beth corrected her. "Apparently Judith woke her up extra-early, because she had everything already fired up when I got here 'bout an hour ago. I told her to go get some sleep, but she's got the baby in her cell with her so who knows how long she'll rest." She sighed. "I told her that Maggie could watch the baby for a few hours, but Carol just hates to let Judith out of her sight."

Carl exchanged a look with Allison; they both knew why Carol was so protective of the child. "How long before Judith can, y'know, sleep all night and not need formula?" He asked Allison.

"Every baby is different," she told him, "but she'll start sleeping longer hours before she's able to eat solid food."

"Why do babies cry so much, anyway?" he asked.

"Because it's the only way they can communicate. You used to cry just as much when you were your sister's age."

"I bet I didn't."

"You'd lose that bet. All human babies have tiny little tummies, and they can only eat so much at one time. But they also digest that food very quickly, because they are growing at a very fast rate and their brains and other organs need nutrition. So they get hungry every two to three hours, and since they can't say 'I'm ready for my next bottle' they cry. And the more they eat, the more they need their diapers changed, so they cry again. I think you see the pattern…"

"But why doesn't God or – or- Nature make the baby's stomach bigger, then?" Carl asked with impeccable logic. "Make it big enough so it can eat enough food?"

"Well, because human mothers don't carry their unborn babies in a suitcase, they have to carry them in their own bellies," Allison tried to explain delicately. "There is only so much room in there, so a lot of a human's growth has to be done after it's born. And - " she added, anticipating his next question, "other animals like puppies and kittens have much smaller brains, so their heads are tiny, and the mama can carry more than a few. But humans have very large brains by comparison –
"That's why we can speak, and walk upright and read and write, et cetera. So our heads take up most of the available room inside mom before we're born."

"That's another thing I don't get," Carl said, with an edge of irritation to his tone, "is how the baby gets in there in the first place. I mean, I know it has something to do with a husband and a wife, but then how do, like, girls in high school have babies? They're not even married…"

Allison was suddenly reminded of a remark Lori had made almost a year ago, back at the Greene farm. After she'd had that car accident and Shane had inadvertently announced her pregnancy to the world. "We haven't had The Talk with him yet," she'd said. Oh, brother, Allison thought to herself. Apparently during all those months she'd grown large with Judith she still hadn't explained the Facts of Life to her son. Of course, they'd been pretty much on the run that entire time, with their main concerns being food and shelter, so perhaps there hadn't been a lot opportunities for parent/child fireside chats. Beth seemed to sense the problem and sought to diffuse the situation with a distraction.

"Allison!" she said, a little too eagerly. "How was guard duty with Merle?"

"It went OK," Allison told her, thankful for her assistance. "He's kinda rough around the edges, and very different from Daryl, but…it went OK."

Beth suddenly seemed interested beyond just distracting Carl. "He does seem very…rough," she said, her eyes shining. "Kinda, I dunno, manly… like a motorcycle gang guy."

"Yeah, I guess so," Allison agreed, remembering now how Beth had sort of semi-defended Merle in front of the group the day before. Her sudden enthusiasm made Allison recall a talk show she'd seen years ago, where the subject was "Why Good Girls Fall for Bad Boys."

"Well, what is he really like?" Beth pressed for more information. "Why did he beat up Glenn? I don't think he really meant to, do you?"

"He said it was because Glenn wouldn't give him the information he wanted about where Daryl was. So he – "

"He interrogated him the only way he knew how to," Beth supplied. "Because that's the way he was raised. Kind of wild….a survivalist…."

"I guess you could say that," Allison agreed with her, mainly because Carl now seemed to be focused on this topic and not human conception. "Wild? Why, according to Merle – " she adopted a gruff speaking voice with an exaggerated Southern accent in an effort to imitate Daryl's brother properly – "he's the baddest S.O.B. that ever walked in these here parts. He's three-quarters grizzly bear and one third car wreck descended from a rabid dog on his father's side." She assumed a swaggering posture in her chair. "John Wayne was a poofier compared to Merle. He walks taller, spits further and belches louder than any of us needle-necks and - - " She noticed that both of their facial expressions had suddenly changed. " – and he's standing right behind me now, isn't he?" she finished.

"Sorry to interrupt your little nightclub act, Gracie," the familiar gruff voice said, "but I was wonderin' if I could have a word with you?"

"Yeah, sure," Allison turned and smiled weakly at Merle. "Let me rinse out my dishes and I'll be right with you."

"I'll be waitin' in my cell," he said with a tight smile.
"I get why he calls you 'Bright Eyes'," Beth whispered, even though Merle had departed, "but why 'Gracie'?"

"Long story," Allison sighed. She stood up and started toward the sink.

"I'll clean this for you," Beth took the empty bowl and coffee cup from her. "You'd best see what he wants." She paused and then added quietly, "Good luck."

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

When she walked into Merle's cell, he was sitting on the bunk with a sardonic grin.

"I asked my little brother earlier where I could rinse out some of my dainties," he said before she could ask what he wanted. "He didn't know, because apparently you do all his laundry for him." He got up from the bed and picked up an overstuffed duffel bag. "I don't suppose you could direct me to the laundry room…." He paused and then narrowed his eyes and continued in an oily voice, "unless maybe you feel so guilty about mocking me in front of an audience that you'd feel obliged to…"

Oh, he was good, Allison thought to herself. A master manipulator. Someone who'd discerned enough of her personality while they'd been alone together to know that she now felt hideously guilty at being caught red-handed making fun of him. Oh well…she handled vomit and other bodily fluids daily as a doctor, she could certainly deal with Merle's soiled clothing…she guessed.

"You've got me," she told him without glee. "Your stuff will be hanging up to dry on the clothesline in my cell, should be dry in a couple of hours."

"'Your' cell?" Merle grinned at her in a way that made her flesh prickle. "Seems to me that you should be using the plural, since my little bro is staying in there with you. Hell, that makes you pretty much 'family' then, don't it?" He laughed his raspy laugh as Allison trudged away with his dirty clothes, her jaw clench. 

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

"What the hell…?" Daryl asked in confusion when he returned to their cell in the early evening. Allison had apparently taken over the adjoining cell, and it too had a sheet hanging over the front bars for privacy. He poked his head inside the second cell and saw three rows of clothesline strung up with a variety of garments hanging up to dry.

"Hey there," Allison greeted him as she ducked under a pair of cargo trousers. "How was your day, dear?" She gave him a playful smile.

"I don't remember having so many clothes," Daryl said, looking around the room.

"Well, I – "

"Hey, some of these belong to Merle!" He declared upon closer inspection. "What's goin' on? He didn't ask you to do his wash, did he?"

"Well, he saw me collecting your things and I sorta volunteered," Allison hedged.

Daryl eyed her suspiciously.

"What could I say?" She defended herself. "Like I told you, he saw me getting our things together to wash them…it would have been rude to not offer."

"He don't need your pity, he's been managing just fine with one hand."
Allison wasn't prepared to confess to Daryl that her guilty conscience was due to publicly poking fun at Merle, and not because he was somewhat handicapped, so she replied instead, "It's not pity, he's family."

"Hmph," Daryl wasn't at all sure how he felt about Allison handling his brother's soiled underwear. "I'm just sayin' don't let him bully you into doin' something you don't want to."

"I won't," she assured him. "But none of the other men do their own laundry," she added. "If I hadn't washed his stuff, I dunno if he would have asked Carol or Beth to do it for him. And if we're trying to, you know, assimilate him into the group, it wouldn't really help to single him out like that. Force him to do something Rick and Glenn and Hershel don't have to, I mean."

"I'm gonna go wash up for dinner," Daryl said after a pause, still unconvinced by her reasoning. He wasn't at all concerned about Merle being interested in Allison in a romantic or sexual way; it had always been an unwritten rule between the brothers that they never made any sort of advance on one another's women. Not that Daryl had ever "had" a woman or girlfriend before, but it was always understood that those sort of relationships were more or less sacred territory. No, what he worried about was Merle's ability to manipulate and cajole and…well, charm, and Allison's eagerness to please. He didn't want her to be taken advantage of and feel obligated to do any extra grunt work.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

Later that evening Daryl and Allison settled at a kitchen table, a couple of oil lamps illuminating their work area. He was cleaning and oiling his crossbow, and she was patching the knee in a pair of his pants. Several members of their group were gathered in front of a "campfire" of candles over in front of the cell block, chatting and passing the time until Beth started singing. Allison absent-mindedly tapped her foot along with Beth's song as she concentrated on her stitching.

"I wonder if there's any place nearby that we could catch some catfish," Allison asked aloud.

" Mostly trout 'round these parts," Daryl replied. "Some large-mouth bass, maybe. Why'd you ask?"

Allison nodded at a nearby shelf. "Those big cans of lard and sacks of breadcrumbs over yonder….just reminds me of my daddy frying up fresh-caught catfish on the Coleman stove when I was a kid." She paused to smile at the memory. "I s'pose trout or bass could be fried just as well. It's just a matter of catching 'em."

Daryl seemed to consider her comment. "Could probably rustle up some poles and such some place…gotta be a hardware store or somethin' in the area. Heck, when I was growin' up most every gas station sold fishing lures and supplies."

"Supplies are one thing," Allison told him, "but it seems like right now we can't risk anyone going out and spending a leisurely afternoon fishing, what with the Governor and his crew out there somewhere." She sighed heavily before continuing with her train of thought. "I know we all worked very hard to claim this prison, and I don't mean to undermine Rick, but sometimes I wonder if it wouldn't be better for us all to give this place up and just hit the road again, like we used to do….find a place far away from here – a farm or something. Out from underneath the Governor's radar. Actually have a place where we can plant vegetables like Hershel talked about doing here…"

"Mind if I join you folks?" Hershel's voice surprised both Daryl and Allison and made them look up from their handiwork.

"Of course you're always welcome, Mr. Hershel," Allison told the old man.
He eased himself into a chair at their table and set his crutches to the side. "Couldn't help overhearing part of your conversation," he apologized. "I agree with you, young lady, that whether we stay here or move elsewhere, we need to plan ahead. Grow some food, build some pens or hutches so that Daryl here can capture, say, a few live rabbits and we can breed them for food."

"The pros of staying here," Allison was thinking out loud, "are that there is already fencing in place, for the most part, to protect us from walkers, and the prison has its own water tower, so we have running water, even if it's ice cold. There's a nice patch of soil suitable for growing vegetables." She paused and then continued. "The cons? Mainly, the Governor. Us always having to be on guard against an attack. Walkers are one thing, we're getting better at working around them. But some guy with an army and an agenda?" She shook her head, at a loss for any possible solution to their most pressing problem.

"Reliable vehicles and fuel are going to get scarcer as time goes on," Hershel pointed out. "If we decide to attempt a major relocation, it should probably be sooner rather than later."

"Gasoline has a limited shelf life," Daryl agreed. "Cold weather's comin', a lot of the stored gas is sure to oxidize and gum up. This time next year we're gonna have to make runs on foot or horseback or somethin'."

"Well, I'm glad that at least some of us are planning ahead," a gruff voice piped up. Merle walked over and took a seat near Hershel. "But a year from now? Y'all are being awfully optimistic." He set the pair of pants he'd been carrying on the table. "Hey, Bright Eyes, since you got your sewin' kit out, I wonder if you wouldn't mind stitching up the pockets on these. Can't put anything in 'em without it fallin' clean through."

Allison reached over to take the slacks from him but froze suddenly when Daryl growled. "What the hell, Merle, you got her doin' your washin' and now you want her to do your mendin'?! She ain't your wife, y'know."

Merle chuckled in that slow, cheeky manner so typical of him. "Well, little brother," he made a point of looking at Allison's left hand, "don't look like she's yours, neither."

"Shut up," Daryl grumbled, looking down at his bow and wiping it with more force than necessary. Allison stole a sidelong glance at him…is he actually blushing just a little bit?, she wondered with surprise.

"S'OK," she said aloud, taking the trousers. "While I've got my needle threaded and all…might as well."

They were all silent for a moment or two, and Beth's soprano could be heard over the others who were joining in with her (in varying keys). Merle looked at the older man and stated, "So you're the farmer Hershel."

"He's also a doctor," Allison added. "A veterinarian. He saved Carl's life after he was shot."

"And you're Merle, the black sheep," Hershel replied, eyeing the one-handed man.

"I have nothing to add to that," Allison remarked.

"That your girl in there?" Merle gestured with his head. "The one singin'? She's got a beautiful voice."

"Beth, my youngest," Hershel confirmed. "She and Maggie are the two most precious things to me in the world."
"I want you to know," Merle took on a serious tone, "that whatever happened to Maggie at Woodbury – I wasn't in that room, that wasn't me. That was the Governor, and I wouldn't have brought them there if I'd known that he…" His voice drifted off and he actually looked sincerely remorseful. "I've done things I ain't proud of, things I've had to do to get along and survive…but I'd never do that to a woman."

No, you'd just shoot at one, Allison thought to herself, remembering Michonne's leg wound. But she didn't speak out loud, waiting instead for Hershel to take Merle down a notch or two. Instead, to her shock, the old vet seemed to be nodding in understanding.

"And if your right hand offend you, cut it off, and cast it from you: for it is profitable for you that one of your members should perish – " he quoted.

"...and not that your whole body should be cast into hell," Merle finished. "Matthew 5:30. Woodbury had a damn fine library. One of the few things I miss about it." His face grew very somber. "You know, when the Governor returns, and he will return, he's gonna kill me first. Then my brother, your girls, you, Glenn, Carl…the baby…whoever's left. He'll save Rick for last so that he can see his family and friends die ugly." He looked at the others around the table. "He'll keep Michonne and Allison alive to take back with him. Michonne so he can slowly and painfully repay her for his eye and his daughter…and Allison because she's a doctor and can be useful." He saw that Allison was about to protest and added ominously, "Believe me, Gracie, you can object all you want, but he will eventually convince you to cooperate." He sat back in his chair. "That's who we're dealing with."

"So what's our best alternative?" Allison asked, feeling helpless. "We stay here and try to fight, or we move on as far as we can go with no gasoline to get anywhere?"

"Obviously, any decision affecting the group will ultimately be up to Rick," Hershel said, "but maybe we can present him with some options to consider."

"Bro was right about gasoline deteriorating," Merle commented. "Diesel fuel lasts longer. Not a whole lot, but maybe a year or so. But the thing is," he leaned forward to make sure he had everyone's attention, "diesel engines can run on vegetable oil."

"That's true," Hershel confirmed, "Rudolph Diesel demonstrated his invention using peanut oil at the 1900 World's Fair in Paris."

Allison had to bite the insides of her cheeks to keep from asking the old vet if he'd been present at that demonstration. Instead she said, "So if we get some diesel cars or trucks, we just need to find a load of Crisco and we're home free?"

"Not only vehicles," Daryl mused, "but generators. If we do leave this place and find a house or farm, the thing to do would be to get ourselves a diesel generator. We could have unlimited electricity again."

"Unlimited as long as we find enough Wesson-ality," Allison mumbled.

"Let me ask you this, Gracie," Merle said in an overly reasonable tone, as if he was explaining something to a child, "just how many McDonald's and Chick-Fil-A and K-Fried-C restaurants do you think there are in Coweta County alone, much less the entire state of Georgia? And each and every one of 'em has a big ol' receptacle out in back of the building full of used cooking oil." He smiled smugly at Allison as she understood his logic and needled, "Hurts, don't it, when big dumb ol' Merle actually knows something, huh?"
"Why, Merle, I don't think of you as 'old'," Allison replied with a sweet smile. Darn him…what was really irking her was that he could read her so easily when she'd kept a poker face. No one other than…well, Daryl… had ever been able to virtually articulate her thoughts like that. What the heck, was this some sort of special Dixon family talent? At least Daryl had to good grace to never call her out publicly like that.

"Glenn seems like he's all about stayin' here and defending our turf," Daryl commented. "Almost seems like a point of pride thing rather than a logic thing."

"Similar to Rick," Allison agreed. "I'm thinking that they're remembering how hard we worked to make this place our own, and how we had to move from place to place before we found this prison. But…I dunno…I sure don't look forward to living in a car and looking for a new home…but still I have to wonder, where is the bigger risk? Staying here and fighting or trying our luck on the road?"

Daryl put the cap back on the can of oil. "These are questions we'd best ask Rick. What he says goes." He stood up and slung his crossbow over his shoulder. "C'mon, Merle, our turn on watch."

Daryl then turned to Allison and asked, "You OK?"

"I'm fine, I'll just finish up my mending and then head back to our room," she assured him.

"See ya later, then," he ruffled his knuckles across the top of her head affectionately.

After Daryl and Merle departed, Allison noted that Hershel made no move to leave. She waited a few minutes and then decided to ask him about something that was weighing on her mind.

"If you don't mind me saying so, Mr. Hershel, I'm a bit surprised that you get on so well with Merle," she commented without looking up from her sewing.

"Why are you surprised?" he asked.

"Well, it's just…what with Glenn and all…"

"He will have to reconcile all of that with Glenn, it's not my business. I don't approve of him using violence like that, but I can understand where it came from…” Allison now looked up at him in confusion. "My father was a despicable man. He was a nasty drunk who never showed me a moment's worth of compassion. I left home when I was 16 because of him. I suspect that Merle and Daryl's father wasn't much different. And they absorbed and adapted in their own ways over the years. Merle escaped by joining the military; it gave him a home and three meals a day. And because of his previous conditioning he was an ideal candidate for the training that comes with boot camp. Do as you are told and you don't get punished. Follow orders and everything is golden."

"But – "

"You're a smart, well-read gal," Hershel ignored Allison's attempted interruption. "Surely you remember Lieutenant William Calley?"

"Of course. The My Lai Massacre. He was just 'following orders.' And he got court martialed for killing women and children."

"But his sentence was eventually reduced because of 'command responsibility' – it was eventually determined that he was, in fact, following the orders of his superiors, as he'd been trained to do without question since he'd first enlisted." He paused and seemed to collect his thoughts. "Again, I'm not saying that I approve of what Merle did, but I am saying that maybe he is not inherently an evil person."
"Even though he shot Michonne?"

"Think about it – Merle is a skilled hunter and has military experience. He could have killed her at twice the distance, based on her powder burns. I may be reading too much into it, but I'm thinking that he was being truthful when he told us he couldn't hurt a woman. Maybe that was as far as he could morally go – he had orders from the Governor to kill her, and he could go back to Woodbury and truthfully say that he'd shot Michonne, but she'd gotten away." He let Allison digest all this before adding, "One more thing to think about, about the difference between bad and truly evil, that is… Remember Shane? He was prepared to kill Rick, his best friend, in cold blood. Merle risked his own life to save that same man from walkers. Rick – who, in his mind, cost him his hand."

He stood up to leave. "Think about it," he repeated.
Chapter 74

The next morning Allison busied herself taking the dry laundry off the clothes lines and folding garments into separate piles. She sang softly to make the task less tedious.

Do you remember

Grandma's lye soap

Good for everything in the home

And the secret was in the scrubbing

It didn't suds and wouldn't foam….

A throaty chuckle made her look over her shoulder. "Ain't that cute," Merle said as he reached up to help her unpin a shirt, deftly using both his hand and his stump. "You've got yer own little laundry song."

"It's nothing," she was embarrassed at being caught singing to herself. "Just some ditty my Granddaddy had on an old comedy album." She took the shirt from Merle and folded it. "There's a pile over there on the bunk that's all your stuff."

"I appreciate you doin' it for me, Bright Eyes, that was right neighborly of you." He didn't move to collect his clothing but instead continued to assist Allison in taking down the laundry. "Thought I'd find Daryl here," he commented.

"He was, earlier. Went out with Glenn a little while ago. I think they're still fixing the fence."

"Mm." He tossed a clothespin into the bucket she had on the floor nearby. "Who's on watch?"

"Carl and Michonne, I think."

"Carl. Sheriff Rick's boy?"

"Yeah. He's young but he's become a very good shot," she told him. She folded another shirt and grew thoughtful. Finally she remarked, "Poor kid has been through so much for someone his age…"

"I'll say," Merle agreed, unclasping another clothespin. "First real live vagina the kid ever sees belongs to his mother."

"Oh, geeeez!" Allison screwed up her face in disgust.

"What?!" Merle turned to her and shrugged in mock innocence. "I thought that was the proper medical term."

"Nevertheless it's not a word I bandy about in casual conversation." After she'd recovered from the shock of his comment she realized that he said it just for that reason – for shock value. Much like Daryl sometimes did to tease her, saying words that he knew made her cringe, like "panties."
"Anyway, I particularly don't like thinking about Carl in…that situation." Her face un-cringed and now looked sad. "It was such a perfect storm of everything that could've gone wrong…if only walkers hadn't invaded, if only I'd had my bag with me when Lori went into active labor…" She shook her head at the memory.
Merle felt a rare pang of guilt for bringing up what was obviously some sort of sensitive subject with her. He'd heard the basic details of Judith's birth, and how Carl had been the one to put his mother down. He personally thought it was a miracle that the baby had even survived and wasn't a walker or some other strange mutant creature, seeing as no one seemed to know what exactly it was that made people turn.

"Hey," he said, waiting for Allison to look at him. "From what I've heard about what happened to Rick's wife, well, it wasn't your fault. Hell, if you hadn't been there the baby woulda died along with her."

"Hey," he said, waiting for Allison to look at him. "From what I've heard about what happened to Rick's wife, well, it wasn't your fault. Hell, if you hadn't been there the baby woulda died along with her." He removed the pegs from a pair of slacks and handed the trousers to Allison. "You ain't Alan Alda, and this ain't M*A*S*H. You or no one else is gonna be able to save everyone in this world. Best you start counting your wins and stop thinking about your losses."

"I guess you're right, Sidney Freedman," Allison acknowledged, unable to resist throwing his M*A*S*H analogy back at him. She nudged the bucket along with her foot as they moved further down the clothesline. "But what you said…about Carl…got me to thinking…” her eyebrows knit as she thought back many years, "I'm a girl and I can't recall ever seeing my mama undressed. My goodness, poor Carl…" She paused in her work and looked at Merle. "Do you know that apparently his parents had never had the 'birds and bees' talk with him? I mean, I'm sure he'd seen things on the Internet and heard stuff from his little friends, but from the few comments he's made to me it appears that he's still not exactly sure where babies actually come from."

"Well someone better tell him the facts of life soon," Merle replied, "'cause he's probably havin' wet dreams about Beth and doesn't know why or what's making his sheets all sticky when he wakes up."

He saw Allison's face begin to squish up in disgust again, so he hastened to explain. "I'm not trying to embarrass you, Gracie, I'm bein' serious. Not knowin' about that kind of thing can really screw a boy up. Maybe he knows why his voice is changin' and why he's growin' hair on his body – hell, they show you movies about that in school. But there's stuff they don't teach ya, things a kid needs to know so he don't think he's some kind of freak, that he's got somethin' wrong with him."

"You're right, I'm sure, but Rick has so much else on his mind right now…besides, Carl might feel weird asking his dad about stuff like that. I know I would've burst into flames on the spot if my Granny had even said the word 'intercourse' to me." Allison folded one of Daryl's shirts and set it on top of his pile. She wondered who, if anyone, Carl might go to with his questions. Hopefully he wouldn't choose Merle; God only knew what kind of advice the boy would get from that corner.

"Is Daryl around?" Carol's voice interrupted Allison's train of thought.

"He's outside somewhere with Rick," she replied.

"Oh…” Carol looked vaguely disappointed.

"What's up?" Allison asked.

"I was thinking of making a sling to carry Judith in," the older woman explained, gesturing around the front of her body. "If we ever have to go somewhere in a hurry, it would be safer and more convenient."

"Oh, sure, like the rebozo women in Mexico use," Allison agreed. "Why did you need Daryl for that?"

"I wondered if he could look around…maybe in the boiler room or that room with all the tools… and see if he could find a nice-sized O-ring. I remember seeing some adjustable slings in catalogs,
and they used a big metal or nylon ring. I'm hoping I can rig up a big bed sheet or something like that."

"Or maybe something like Daryl's poncho," Allison was struck with sudden inspiration. "It's about the right size and it's made of sturdy fabric."

Carol gave her a frosty smile. "I'm surprised that you know what a rebozo is but you don't know that Daryl's wrap is actually a serape, not a poncho. And he'll be needing that now that the weather is getting cooler." There was a trace of rebuke in her tone. "I'll look out in the yard, see if I find him there. If you see him, be a dear and tell him I'm looking for him, 'k?"

Allison waited a few beats after the older woman left and then muttered, "I'll call the darned thing Daryl's Technicolor Dreamcoat if I darn well want to."

"Hoooo-weee," Merle's low exclamation startled her. She'd all but forgotten that he was still there. "Such strong language from Miss Prim and Proper. What's that all about, anyway?"

"What? Nothing, nothing," she waved him off. "Here are your slacks, I fixed the pockets." He took them from her and glanced over them.

"You fixed the button, too," he noticed, tugging at the fastener above the zipper. "Thank you kindly."

"Well, it was about ready to fall off," she remarked. Then, after a moment, she asked him rather exasperatedly, "What I'd like to know is did some old lady with a crew cut pull a thorn out of Daryl's paw when he was a baby or something?"

"Whoa, what?!" Merle was taken aback by her sudden change in topic and the insistent tone in her voice. He looked at the cell door as if Carol was still standing there, and then back at Allison. "Wait a minute, you're not..." he started chuckling. "You're not telling me that you're...." Now he was outright laughing. "...jealous of Mousy or somethin'?"

"Of course not," Allison retorted instantly, then backtracked. "Well, maybe a little. Maybe not jealous, but.... Oh, just forget it." She shook her head in frustration.

"OK, just take a deep breath, Bright Eyes, and calm down." He struggled to control his amusement. "Now what in the hell makes you think my brother has any interest in her whatsoever? I mean, I know she's sniffin' after him for some reason - "

"You noticed it too? I mean, I'm not imagining it, right?" Allison was like a hound dog on point.

"Hard not to notice when she brings me food in my cell one minute and then threatens to slit my throat the next."

"What?!" It was Allison's turn to be surprised.

"Told me that if I hurt Daryl she'd kill me in my sleep," he said with a snort, as if Carol ever had a chance of catching him off-guard. "Warned me not to underestimate her, whatever the hell that's s'posed to mean."

"Huh? Seriously? What is she talking about? After all you went through to find your brother, why on Earth would you hurt him? That's absurd."

"Well, maybe you're the only one that thinks that way, Gracie. Most everyone else here seems to think I'm the Devil himself." He actually looked thoughtful, almost sad, for a moment. "Anyway,
"Time of day? He gave her a flower once!" Allison was tempted to tell him, but she already felt a little embarrassed at confessing as much as she already had to Merle. She didn't want to look like some giddy teenager, even though that's how Carol managed to make her feel quite often. Instead she shrugged slightly and replied, "I dunno…can any man resist a woman who fawns over him like that? I mean, just imagine, for example, if Daryl had overheard her threatening you like she did…that's pretty heady stuff, no?"

Merle only barely heard her words, because he was still trying to wrap his mind around the fact that not one but two women were actually interested in his little brother. Daryl had always been so ill at ease around women – at least around the ones Merle had picked up and brought home - that he’d actually begun to worry about the boy. Sure, he’d often teased Daryl about being gay, but he’d never really thought his brother actually swung that way; hell, it wasn't like Daryl knew anything about interior decorating or musical theater. So knowing that it had taken his brother this long to finally hook up with a woman, he was certain that it had to be something serious. And even if it was the End of the World, Merle was sure that Daryl would not have taken up with Bright Eyes the way he had just so he wouldn't die a virgin. What surprised Merle even more than Darylina finally poppin' his cherry was that this woman actually felt threatened by someone like Mousy. Daryl treated Carol respectfully and kindly, Merle had noticed, but he wasn't nearly as relaxed with her as he was with Allison, from what he'd seen in the brief time he'd been at the prison. Shit, the couple of times he'd been nearby while the Daryl and Bright Eyes were sitting and working on their various little projects and gabbin' about nothing in particular it seemed to Merle as if they'd been together forever. And Merle had never seen Daryl not tense up when someone even looked like they were going to touch him, but he'd seen Gracie casually stroking Daryl's hair and massages his shoulders when the two of them thought no one else was looking. Didn't she see that as well? Seemed very strange to him that such a well-educated and supposedly intelligent person like Allison didn't know by now that Daryl wasn't the type to stray. Then again, he'd always heard that there was a difference between book smarts and street smarts.

"Well?" Allison pressed for an answer while Merle seemed to be deep in thought.

Merle gave her that mocking smile of his. "I know my brother and how he is, but seein' how up close and personal you've been with him, I'd think that you'd know him, too."

Allison returned to removing clothing from the line. "I guess I probably sound silly to you but…" She lowered her voice and looked at Merle out the corner of her eye, suddenly shy about what she was going to confess. "…Daryl is my first boyfriend - or whatever the term is at my age - so I'm still kind of on a learning curve when it comes to a lot of this stuff."

"All those wild frat parties that go on at college and you never had a boyfriend?!” Merle exclaimed in disbelief.

"Sssh!" Allison admonished him. Did the entire prison have to know her business? "While everyone else was partying I was either studying or getting in my clinical experience. Besides…” She kicked the clothespin pail with more force than was necessary, "someone has to ask you out more than once to become a 'boyfriend'."

"I guess some folks are just late bloomers, huh?" Merle remarked. No wonder she and Daryl fit together so well. And now he fully understood why Daryl had been so emphatic when he'd described Allison as a "nice" girl – he meant in the Ozzie-and-Harriet- malt-shop universe. A universe Merle previously thought had a Population of One – his sensitive, shy baby brother. Who woulda thought... He chuckled despite himself, thinking of an old joke he'd heard years ago –
"What's the definition of a "virgin"? An ugly third-grader!"

"Something funny?" Allison asked defensively, folding the last shirt.

"Not 'ha-ha' funny," Merle quickly covered his ass, "just...well, funny that it took the dead to rise for you and my bro to find each other." He shook his head and walked over to the bunk to pick up his pile of clean clothes. "Thanks again for the fluff-n-fold." He turned and took about half a step before he nearly collided with the young blonde singer and the bundle in her arms.

"Whoa there, excuse me!" Merle hopped backward, trying not to knock Beth off balance. "You sorta snuck on me there." He took a moment to regain his composure and then asked, "How is the princess?"

Beth smiled shyly, lowered her eyelids a bit, and replied, "I'm fine, don't worry." A moment later it struck her that Merle had actually been referring to Judith, and her cheeks reddened as she stole a worried glance at him. "Sorry," she muttered.

To Allison's surprise, rather than taking advantage of an awkward situation (as he surely would have with anyone else), he smiled warmly at Beth and assured the girl, "No need for apologies, I should have specified 'The Little Princess'." His facial expression was Sincerity Itself, and Beth's responsive grin and eye-batting indicated that she fully believed that Merle thought of her as the Main or Primary Princess.

"He's very smooth," Allison admitted to herself. Daryl had casually commented once or twice long ago how Merle had always been something of a ladies' man back in their hometown, and to be honest when she first met Merle he hadn't impressed her as the Valentino type. But seeing him in action just then changed her mind – he definitely knew how to turn on the charm.

"I hate to bother you," Beth said to Allison.

"Not a bother, what's up?"

"Could you hold her for a few? I have to warm up her bottle." Beth gently handed Judith to Allison. "I couldn't find Carol or Maggie..."

"Sure, no problem," Allison assured the girl, cradling the infant. "I've got her." Beth trotted off and Allison began pacing the corridor in front of the cells and cooing softly to Judith to keep her amused until her lunch was ready.

"She's a baby, not a stack of laundry," Merle had set down his pile of clothing and fell into step with her. "You gotta hold her closer, wrap your arms around her more..."

Allison was just about to inform Merle that Judith seemed perfectly fine and, by the way, she could do without comments from the peanut gallery when Daryl marched up to them.

"Do you know what Carol's talking about?" Daryl asked her. "Something about a metal O-ring for a sling? But not a sling like for a broken arm though...?"

"A baby sling," Allison explained, pausing in her pacing. "It's a sort of big piece of fabric a person can wear over their shoulder to use to carry a baby, like a cloth cradle. The ring is something you thread the fabric through so that you can adjust the the length..." She was unable to gesture very much due to the infant in her arms.

"Oh..." Daryl nodded slightly in understanding, "like the slip ring on a dog collar." He studied Judith with a critical eye and began thinking out loud, "It'll have to be strong enough to hold her..."
without breaking….how much do you reckon she weighs now?"

"Here, why don't you hoist her and see if you can get a general idea?" Allison offered. She started to extend her arms toward Daryl when Judith's facial expression very suddenly changed from a gummy grin to one of….well, intense concentration. Or something. "Is she OK?" Allison asked anxiously. "She was so happy just a sec – " Her sentence was interrupted by a distinctly unpleasant aroma. A few seconds later, Judith was smiling again.

"Oh, geez," Allison turned her face away from the offending diaper.

"My God," Daryl remarked, his own eyes squinting in discomfort, "are you sure that formula we been feedin' her isn't expired or spoiled or something?"

Merle chuckled heartily. "They do lose that new car smell eventually, don't they?" He looked at Allison and added, "Smells to me like someone needs a diaper change."

"Right this minute?" Allison asked, a bit nonplussed. "Can't we wait for Beth to come back and handle it? I mean, look at her smile," she nodded toward the baby in her arms. "Why not let her enjoy it for a while?"

"Ain't that how babies get diaper rash and that stuff?" Daryl asked with concern.

"Would you like to wallow in your own shit – er, feces?" Merle caught the look Daryl shot him when he dared to curse in front of his precious girlfriend. "Besides, you could probably do with the practice, Gracie." He shot her one of those unsettling Merle smiles.

"Oh, please," she mumbled in irritation. Then she sighed and started walking toward the staircase. "Diapers and stuff are upstairs," she said. To her surprise, both men followed her. And to her further surprise, Merle took it upon himself to supervise the entire diaper-changing process.

"You gotta make sure to wipe everything clean…doncha have any baby powder?"

"Traditional talcum powder has been contraindicated for many years," Allison said between gritted teeth, not caring if she sounded pompous with her "big words". "Can cause lung damage if the baby inhales it." She took another baby wipe out of the box and made a point out of cleansing every nook and cranny of Judith's nether regions. "What exactly makes you such an authority on babies, anyway, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Who do you think took care of his scrawny ass whenever our Ma was sick?" Merle replied, gesturing toward Daryl. Allison remembered what Daryl had told Carl about his mother's love of wine and concluded that that was the "sickness" Merle was referring to.

"Shut up," Daryl mumbled grumpily, a bit embarrassed.

"Hey, baby bro, it ain't like you were born house-broken!" Merle laughed, enjoying making Daryl squirm. "And back in those days," he returned his attention to Allison, who was pressing the adhesive tabs on the disposable diaper into place, "we didn't have none of those sticky tapes. Uh-uh," he shook his head, "had to use safety pins. Was a bona fide art, pinning a diaper on a squirmy-ass baby without hurting him…..too much." He chuckled as he glanced sideways at Daryl.

"That explains some scars," Daryl retorted, returning his brother's look.

Beth had just climbed the stairs with Judith's bottle when a commotion from down below made all four of them look over the railing. Carl had come running breathlessly from outside and had met Rick, who'd apparently been in the kitchen area, halfway in the corridor.
"You gotta come! Someone's approaching!" The boy gasped. "It's Andrea!"

"Is she alone?" Rick bent down and asked.

"Dunno," Carl tried to catch his breath. "Maggie and me saw her outside the fence…"

Rick stood up straight and called orders up to the group on the balcony. "Beth, take care of Judith! Merle, Daryl, Allison, grab your weapons and meet me out front!"
Chapter 75

Allison slipped her rifle over her shoulder and double-timed it to keep up with Rick, Daryl, and Merle, who were running out to the prison yard in a straight line. Once they reached the pavement, they fanned out and Rick called out, "Are you alone?"

Allison looked beyond the fence and saw Andrea standing there, wrestling with a walker on a snare pole.

"Rick! Open up!" She yelled.

"Show me your hands!" Rick shouted in response. Then, over his shoulder, "Allison, stay with me; Daryl, you and Merle back us up." They kept jogging and Rick barked a command at Carl, which prompted the boy to open the gate. Andrea released her walker with one hand and brought a hatchet down on its head with the other. By the time she stepped inside the yard and the gate was closed behind her, Rick and Allison had surrounded her.

"On your knees!" Rick commanded.

"Wha- what do you mean? Rick? It's me – "

Allison cut her off by wordlessly placing a hand on Andrea's shoulder and pushing downward. Andrea looked at her in irritation and confusion as she bent her knees with her hands still up in the air. Rick snatched the bag that Andrea had been carrying and then nodded at Allison. Allison understood suddenly why Rick had told her to accompany him – she was a female and a doctor, so she could pat down Andrea without any question of impropriety. As she reached underneath Andrea's outer shirt and felt under her arms and around her back she thought of those thousands of episodes of COPS she'd watched over the years.

"Do you have anything on you that's going to poke or stab me?" She asked Andrea, moving her hands quickly down Andrea's sides. "Any knives or other sharp objects?"

"I asked you if you were alone," Rick said sternly while rifling through the contents of her bag. Satisfied that there was nothing dangerous inside, zipped it back up.

"No, yes," Andrea tried to answer the barrage of questions. "I mean, yes I'm alone and no I'm not carrying anything." She huffed at the indignity of the situation.

"Stand up, please," Allison said, and she turned Andrea's pants pockets inside out. She stepped back and nodded at Rick to indicate that Andrea wasn't concealing any weapons. Rick tossed the bag back to Andrea and gestured for her to follow Daryl and Merle inside the prison.

Andrea hesitated at the top of the stairway once she got inside, waiting for her eyes to adjust not only to the darkness compared to outside, but also to the tableau before her. She hadn't seen these people in so long… Carol was the first to step forward and embrace her. And the only one, it turned out. "We thought you were dead," Carol murmured has she hugged Andrea. Everyone else remained in place, eyeing her almost suspiciously.

"My God," Andrea gasped. "Hershel…what happened?" She took in his crutches and missing foot. "…and Carl…" She was surprised to see that the boy had grown up so much in a little less than a year. She continued to look around the room as she slowly approached the group. "Where's Shane?" she finally asked.
Rick lowered his glance and shook his head subtly.

"And Lori?" She persisted.

"She had a girl," Hershel replied somberly. "Lori didn't survive."

"Neither did T-Dog," Maggie added, not that Andrea had bothered to ask.

"You all live here?" Andrea said, not quite knowing how to respond to the news of so many deaths nor the icy, suspicious looks she was getting from the group.

"Here and in the cell block," Glenn told her.

"There?" She pointed. "Can I look?" She started walking in that direction before Rick abruptly stopped her.

"I'm sorry, but I can't allow that," he said.

"I'm not an enemy, Rick."

"We had that field and courtyard until your boyfriend tore down the fence with a truck and shot us up."

"He said you fired first," Andrea defended the Governor.

"Well, he's lying," Rick responded.

"He killed an inmate who'd survived in here," Hershel remarked.

"We liked him. He was one of us," Daryl added.

"I didn't know anything about that," Andrea said, glancing nervously around the room. "As soon as I found out I came. I didn't even know you were in Woodbury until the shootout."

"That was days ago," Glenn reminded her.

"I told you, I came as soon as I could."

"What do you mean 'as soon as you could'? Is Woodbury some sort of prison camp? Do you need Governor Hot Pants' permission to leave?" Allison asked her.

Andrea looked pointedly at Michonne. "What have you told them?"

"Nothing," Michonne replied evenly.

"I don't get it," Andrea was suddenly affronted. "I left Atlanta with you people and now I'm the odd man out?"

"He almost killed Michonne and he would have killed us," Glenn said.

"With his finger on the trigger!" Andrea pointed at Merle. "Isn't he the one who kidnapped you? Who beat you?"

"Under who's direction?" Allison piped up. "For heaven's sake, Andrea, the man had fish tanks full of heads and staged a gladiator fight-to-the-death between Merle and Daryl! Think about it. Are these the actions of a rational human being?!"
"Look," Andrea held up her hands as if to hold off the verbal attacks heaped upon her, "I cannot excuse or explain what Philip has done… But I am here trying to bring us together. We have to work this out."

"There's nothing to work out," Rick replied emphatically. "We're gonna kill him. I don't know how or when, but we will."

"We can settle this," Andrea insisted. "There is room at Woodbury for all of you."

"You know better than that," Merle said in a tone that indicated that he also knew better than that. "What makes you think this man wants to negotiate?" Hershel asked. "Did he say that?"

"No," Andrea admitted.

"Then why did you come here?" Rick asked.

"Because he's gearing up for war," Andrea assumed an aggressive stance. "The people are terrified. They see you as killers. They're training to attack."

"I'll tell you what," Daryl spoke up. "Next time you see Philip, tell him I'm gonna take his other eye."

"We've taken too much shit for too long," Glenn added. "He wants a war? He's got one."

Andrea looked around at the prison group, seeing nothing but resistance in their eyes. "Rick," she pleaded, "If you don't sit down and try to work this out, I don't know what's going to happen." She stood up straight and adopted the posture of an orator. "He has a whole town. Look at you – you've lost so much already. You can't stand alone anymore."

"We've been doin' just fine alone until the Governor showed up," Carl said with confidence, crossing his arms in front of himself.

"You want to make this right," Rick said, "get us inside."

"No," Andrea shook her head.

"Then we've got nothing to talk about," the sheriff dismissed her.

"There are innocent people…!" Andrea looked around for support from any quarter. She received nothing but icy stares in response.

"You've poisoned them!" She accused Michonne.

"I just told them the truth," Michonne shrugged.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

Outside in the yard, Andrea strolled with Michonne, trying to make sense of all the hostility she'd encountered inside.

"I didn't choose him over you, you know," she began, trying to explain herself. "I just wanted a life. But once we entered Woodbury you became hostile."

"That's 'cause I could see it," Michonne said quietly.
"See what?"

"That you were under his spell from the second you laid eyes on him." As always her stoic expression concealed her true feelings - the hurt she felt every time she thought of how quickly and easily Andrea had tossed her aside for the Governor. Surviving together all those months on the road, through that harsh winter, just the two of them...Michonne had begun to think of Andrea as a sister instead of just a friend. It was a cold, harsh slap to realize that the feeling apparently wasn't mutual. She felt not only betrayed but also foolish, and she regretted ever opening up her heart the tiniest bit to let someone in.

"That's not true," Andrea insisted.

"And you still are."

"I am there because those people need me."

"Those people didn't even know you existed until a few weeks ago," Michonne scoffed. "What about these people?"

"I'm trying to save them, too!"

Michonne could not believe Andrea's sudden narcissism. "I did not realize that the Messiah complex was contagious."

"Go to hell, Michonne." Andrea started stalking off when Michonne called to her.

"He sent Merle to kill me. Would have killed you, too, if you had come with me. But you didn't, did you? Uh-uh. You chose a warm bed over a friend." Andrea started to speak but Michonne cut her off. "That's why I went back to Woodbury. To expose him for what he is. I knew it would hurt you, but you wouldn't listen whenever I tried to tell you. You needed to see it." She stared steadily at the blonde woman for several seconds before turning and walking away.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

Andrea went back inside the prison in search of a friendly face. Rick, Hershel and Daryl were huddled together in the kitchen area discussing something. They very pointedly paused their conversation as Andrea got closer so she passed them by and continued on to the area she'd been in previously. She glanced at Merle, who was sitting in a cell wrapping tape on his prosthesis, and then nearly bumped into Allison as she emerged from another cell.

"Oops, didn't see you there, sorry," Allison muttered without making eye contact and was about to continue on her way when Andrea caught her by the sleeve.

"Can you explain something to me?" Andrea asked her. "What is up with all the hatred? You know, in case you all have forgotten, you left me behind at the farm that night. I should be the one who's harboring a grudge."

"When the rest of us eventually rendezvoused the night of the fire and you weren't there, Daryl and Glenn were all ready to go back for you. But Carol, Lori and T-Dog all said that they'd seen you fall down, that walkers had gotten you," Allison told her. "Rick wouldn't let anyone go back then; he figured that if you had managed to escape that you'd be long gone from the farm anyway." She sighed as she remembered that night. "We lost Patricia and Jimmy that night, too, and it was just by some miracle or twist of fate or whatever you want to call it that we all found each other after that chaos. Rick didn't want to split the group up and risk losing anyone else." She paused to
consider how exactly to phrase what she wanted to tell Andrea. "Look, we're all very happy that you're alive and well, we really are. We've lost so many, it's a joy to see someone return from the dead who isn't a walker. But what I, what we all, don't understand is why you're throwing your lot in with the Governor, after all he's done."

"What about what you all have done? Innocent people were killed at Woodbury thanks to this group."

"An innocent person was killed here as well, and it could have easily been more. I know you don't like to be told what to do but sometimes you just have to – "

"What do you mean," Andrea interrupted, her eyes narrowing, "'I don't like to be told what to do’?"

"Just that. You have a history of bristling and automatically doing the opposite whenever someone tells you something that you don't want to hear. Like at the farm when you shot Daryl – how many times did Dale tell you 'put the gun down, don't shoot'?"

"Is that what this is all about? You're still pissed because I shot Daryl?! He got over it, why can't you?"

"Not just that. On the highway when everyone was first searching the woods for Sophia, you had a fit because Shane said you couldn't carry a gun. Never mind that gunfire would attract walkers and you didn't have much experience with a pistol. He said 'no' so you pouted the rest of the day. Michonne said she told you about the Governor and you immediately decided she was wrong and stayed behind." She saw that Andrea was brewing for an explosion so she quickly added, "Don't confuse sex with love or even acceptance, Andrea. Just because Phillip shares his bed with you doesn't make you his confidante or trusted advisor. It didn't happen with Shane and it's not happening now. No one was ever going to replace Lori in Shane's mind and heart, and I don't believe this Governor is going to appoint you Woodbury's First Lady."

"You know nothing about Phillip or what goes on at Woodbury except for what you've heard from Michonne – "

"And Merle," Allison corrected her.

"And Merle," Andrea continued, the attorney in her rising to the fore, "and that's all hearsay."

"Fine, it's inadmissible in a court of law. Forget hearsay, then, and put the puzzle pieces together yourself, for God's sake. The Governor knew that Glenn and Maggie were friends of yours, but he never told you they were at Woodbury. You said you came here 'as soon as you could,' which means you are not free to come and go from Woodbury as you please. You let some man tell you what you can do and where you can go. A man who hosts gladiator contests for entertainment! Eventually you've got to see something wrong with the big picture!"

Andrea seemed to waver ever so slightly. "So much has happened in the past few days, I just don't know..." her voice trailed off. "I have to think everything over," she said finally. "I still think some sort of agreement is possible." Allison remained silent and Andrea felt the need to get away. Again. "Do you know where Carol is?" she asked.

"Upstairs with the baby, I think." Allison gestured toward the stairway.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ 

"You can't leave without meeting Little Ass-kicker," Carol smiled at the bundle in her arms as Andrea climbed the top step.
"Awww," Andrea cooed almost involuntarily. Tears sprang to her eyes as she looked down at the angelic little chubby face. "May I hold her?"

"Of course." Carol carefully passed the baby to Andrea, watching to make sure the blonde woman supported the infant's head. "You got her?"

"I've got her," Andrea replied. She'd never been particularly maternal, and certainly had never gone gooey over a baby back in her previous life, but there was something about this tiny being that enveloped her heart with a sudden feeling of warmth. Maybe it was some kind of subconscious thing – in such dire times an innocent, helpless, fledgling life was an affirmation of hope. Whatever the reason, she was now cuddling a tiny human that she'd formerly would have referred to as a "drool-weasel" and now was asking it, "How precious are you?" She began rocking the infant slightly and then she glanced up at Carol. "Let me guess – Daryl named her 'Ass-kicker'?"

Carol laughed in response. "Of course."

"But that's not her real name…." 

"Judith," Carol supplied.

"Judith," Andrea repeated, looking back down at the baby. "Hello, Judith! You are so beautiful, you know that?" She paused and then asked softly, "What happened to Lori?"

"We were overrun by walkers and spread out through the prison. It was just…panic. And Lori went into labor suddenly down in the boiler room. Allison had to do an emergency C-section, but obviously with no proper tools or anesthetic…." Carol looked downward grimly. "Carl had to…."

"Oh my God," Andrea gasped.

"T-Dog died that same day, leading me to safety."

"And Shane?"

"Rick killed him."

"What?!" Andrea almost dropped Judith.

"That night we left the farm. Shane had set up that whole Randall escaping thing. It was all a lie – he did it to lure Rick out into the woods to kill him."

"But Shane loved Rick!"

Carol shrugged. "Shane loved Lori more."

"Rick's become cold," Andrea shook her head, having second thoughts about the man who used to be her leader.

"He has his reasons," Carol told her. She lowered her voice and spoke to Andrea in an urgent, but confidential, tone. "The Governor. Andrea, you have to do something. You have to sleep with him, give him the greatest night of his life. Get him to drop his guard. Then, when he's sound asleep, you can end all this."

"Rick's not the only one who's gone cold," Andrea thought to herself with alarm. She silently handed Judith back to Carol and excused herself. 

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡
"Did I overhear correctly before?" Merle asked Allison later that night in the kitchen. She was warming up a bottle for Judith. Most of the rest of the group was gathered in front of the cells, some humming along as Beth sang softly. A nightly musical interlude was becoming something of a ritual for the group; it was a good stress reliever before retiring.

"I dunno," Allison replied, squirting a few drops of formula on her arm to test the temperature. Not warm enough yet. She returned the bottle to the pan of hot water. "What did you overhear?"

"Andrea shot my brother?"

"Yeah, back at Hershel's farm. Guess she forgot to mention that to you, eh? That was back when Sophia was missing and Daryl had spent all day searching for her and got thrown from a horse. He was in rough shape when he came stumbling out of the woods, and Andrea was all Annie Oakley on the roof of the Winnebago, just itchin' to shoot something." She turned the heat a bit higher. "I dunno how many times she was told that it was dangerous for everyone to be carrying while we were on the farm, especially someone who was so trigger-happy. Anyway, I guess she thought Daryl was a walker and she took a shot at him, even though all of us were calling out to her not to." Her face contorted in anger momentarily at the memory. "Daryl was very, very lucky – the bullet only grazed his temple. Had it been just half an inch more to the left….well, I get sick every time I think of what could have happened."

"Stupid bitch," Merle muttered under his breath. "She always had a hard-on to carry a gun at Woodbury, too. Was too good to help in the garden or with the cooking; she wanted to stand guard on the wall."

"I guess this is mean of me, but I really don't feel comfortable with Rick letting her take one of our cars. We need all the vehicles and fuel we can get. But I guess he couldn't let her walk back to Woodbury in the dark…"

"Not likely she'll return it, either. Not much chance the Governor will ever let Andrea out of Woodbury again," Merle said ominously.

Allison took the heated bottle over to Rick and handed it to him. He was finally starting to spend time each day with his daughter. Good thing, too, since right now she automatically smiled and gurgled every time Daryl picked her up. Rick needed to do some serious bonding before Judith learned to speak and started calling Daryl "Da-da."

"I'll take Michonne with me," Rick was saying to Hershel and Daryl.

"You sure that's a good idea?" Daryl asked.

"I'll find out," Rick sounded resigned. "And Carl, too. He's ready."

"Where're ya headed?" Allison couldn't help asking. Not for nothing did Daryl always accuse her of being nosy.

"Back to the town I used to live and work in," Rick explained. "We need weapons; I know who all applied for gun permits so I know where to look. I knew my neighbors and where they kept their rifles."

Hershel nodded as if he agreed that this was a good plan. Rick looked past him at Daryl. "You'll hold it down here…?"

"You got it," Daryl assured him gruffly with a slight nod.
"Be careful out there," Allison told Carl early the next morning as the boy was stowing a few empty bags in the trunk of the car. "Keep an eye on your dad for us, 'K?"

"I'd do better without her along," Carl replied in a quiet tone. He rolled his eyes in the direction of the open driver's door, where Michonne was leaning inside and arranging her katana. "I don't know why my dad wants to bring her."

"What's wrong with her?" Allison asked.

"I just don't trust her yet," Carl said warily.

Allison cocked her head slightly, confused. "She hasn't done anything hinky yet that I've noticed," trying to keep her voice low. "And she brought that formula here for Judith, remember." She gave Carl a playful punch. "Go with your gut, I guess, but give homegirl a chance." She turned to walk back to where Rick was talking to Daryl and Hershel.

"'Homegirl'?" Michonne stood up and gave Allison a dubious glance as she walked by.

Allison paused, slightly embarrassed to have been overheard.

"Um, yeah. You know me, always hip to the latest lingo. I'm all cool and down and that." She tried to muster up a convincing grin.

"Sure," Michonne drawled in that very controlled manner of speaking she always had. "I bet you were one freak bitch back in the day. Probably said 'yo dawg' to your pool cleaning guy and everything." She eyed Allison evenly for several seconds and then forgot herself and actually smiled. "Do me a favor, if you're headed over there, and see if Rick's ready to go."

"Will do," Allison returned her smile and began walking toward Rick and the others.

"They ready to roll?" Rick asked her as she approached.

"Yep, just waiting on you," Allison replied. She tried to keep her voice upbeat but she was worried about the journey that the trio was about to embark on. She could tell from the looks on their faces that Hershel and Daryl were equally concerned. They said their brief good-byes and Merle slid the gate open for the car to exit.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

"Hey," Beth greeted Allison with her usual warm smile when Allison walked into the kitchen with a stack of clean towels and rags of various sizes she'd taken down from the clothesline. Beth was heating a big pot of water on the stove.

Allison noticed three empty baby bottles on the counter and surmised that Beth was in the process of sterilizing them. "Hey," she returned the greeting. "Are you headed upstairs anytime soon? I've got some clean towels and stuff here that can be used for Judith – burp cloths, things like that…"

"Thanks," Beth replied. "Carol's upstairs with her now, but I'll be goin' up directly." She used a pair of large tongs to drop the empty bottles into the boiling pot. "It's amazing how much laundry a tiny baby can go through, isn't it?"
"That's the truth," Allison agreed. "Seems like they're always leaking out one end or the other." She placed a small pile of linens on the counter for Beth to take with her, and then walked over and placed the rest of the towels and various cloths in a cupboard. "It's kind of amazing, though, to see her grow and change…"

Beth looked at her with a confused expression on her face, as if she didn't quite understand what Allison meant.

Allison caught Beth's glance and hastened to explain. "I mean, it's one thing to read about baby development in textbooks, and to know intellectually that they grow a lot during the first three months…but it's another thing entirely to actually see it, to experience it first-hand. To see her start to recognize faces, to lift her head up all by herself, to reach for your finger or a toy…geez, I never thought I'd get all goofy excited over something so normal…"

Beth smiled knowingly as she removed the bottles from the pot and placed them upside-down in the drainer. "That's the power of a baby…that's what makes adults love them so much." She turned the stove burner off. "Do you think they'll have any luck finding guns and ammunition? Rick and Carl and Michonne, I mean. After all this time I hope every place hasn't been picked clean."

"I remember reading a few years ago that there were something like 300 million guns owned by civilians in the United States," Allison mused. "There are probably plenty of those still out there, but it's going to be a matter of finding them. I mean, if that means going door-to-door to find one pistol per house or something, that's going to take a lot of legwork."

"What's gonna take legwork?" Glenn asked as he came into the kitchen with a small bag in his hands.

"Finding guns, if the gun shops and Army surplus stores are cleaned out," Allison explained. She updated him on the conversation she'd been having with Beth.

"What we need," Glenn said, "are automatic weapons, not handguns. Military-grade and SWAT team stuff."

Allison almost blurted out that she had no experience with military weapons but stopped herself. Merle could teach her, but Merle was still a sore subject with Glenn, so she kept quiet. Instead she nodded to the bag he was holding and asked, "Whatcha got there?"

"Um," he began, "I forgot to bring this…er, Maggie and I, when we went out the other day…" He paused and decided to start from the beginning. "On our run the day before yesterday, we found this small Mexican market and I grabbed these things off the shelves. It was all that was left…I think it's food, but the labels are all in Spanish…." He looked up at Allison. "I heard Daryl say before that you speak or and, er… read…Spanish."

Allison took the bag from him and began removing the items. She understood Glenn's confusion – these were all Mexican delicacies that were definitely unfamiliar to the typical American palate. "Cuitlachoche," she read from the label of one can. "Corn fungus," she explained to Glenn and Beth, both of whom had scrunched up their faces in distaste at the picture on the label. "I've never tried it myself," Allison continued, "but I do remember some of my Latino patients raving about it back in the day. It's apparently a delicacy. And it's actually quite healthy – lots of amino acids and other essentials. But I could never get past the look of the stuff…..like canned smoker's lung." Beth audibly gagged. "Guess I shouldn't have said that, if we're going to eat it later…"

"What about these jars of… well, it says Nuevo Envase de Vidrio Reusable. But it looks like, I dunno, sliced pieces of flesh," Glenn remarked.
"Stop it!" Beth protested.

"Nuevo Envase de Vidrio Reusable means that it's packaged in a new reusable jar," Allison translated. "What we have here are pickled pork rinds." She pulled another can from the backpack. "Flor de Calabaza," she read the label aloud. "Zucchini flowers. Not sure how to prepare them, but I'm guessing they taste like squash...?"

"Eew, never liked squash... I'd even rather eat Brussels sprouts than zucchini. I'm taking these rags upstairs for the baby," Beth stated, suddenly anxious to get away. She clutched the small pile of towels to her bosom and beat a hasty retreat.

"However unappetizing some of this stuff might sound," Allison told Glenn, "it's still food and we don't have the luxury of being picky these days. Thanks for hauling it here."

"Um, can I ask you something? I mean, something just between us?"

"Sure," Allison replied, curious as to what dark secrets the Mexican food haul might be hiding.

Glenn looked all around the room, reassuring himself that he and Allison were alone. "Um, you're a woman, and you're... y'know, older..."

Allison was about to retort, "Speak up, Sonny, us old folk have trouble with our hearin'," but the earnest look on his face told her that this was a serious discussion.

He glanced down at his feet then back up at her eyes. "I want to ask Maggie to marry me," he blurted out.

Allison let out a big laugh of relief and embraced Glenn. "Oh, that's just... awesome! I'm so happy for you two!"

After he untangled himself from Allison's arms, Glenn stood back and continued his original line of questioning. "I wanted your opinion... I mean, I've seen in movies and stuff where before a man proposes to a woman he asks her father for her hand. But is that old-fashioned? Do you think Maggie would be upset that I talked to her dad first, like she, I dunno, 'belonged' to him? Like some sort of possession?"

"Well, I can't speak for all women, but I will say that I've noticed that even though Maggie is over 18 and pretty independent, she still places great store in her daddy's opinion. When you ask a father for his daughter's hand, I think it's more a sign of respect than some sort of indication that he 'owns' her." Her face grew dreamy as she thought back a few years. "I remember an older doctor I worked with back in Durham... he actually got tears in his eyes when he told me that his daughter's boyfriend -- and both his daughter and the boyfriend were in their late 20s -- came to his house and officially announced that he wanted to marry his daughter. I mean, I'm talking about this rigid, stony-faced man who never showed any sort of emotion when talking about terminal diagnoses and stuff, but it just melted his heart when his daughter's beau asked him for her hand...." She sighed and then collected herself. "I know that Mr. Hershel already thinks of you as a son, but I think it would really mean a lot to him, and to Maggie, if you talked to him about your intentions first."

Glenn seemed reassured by Allison's remarks. "But you'll keep this to yourself, right?" He asked her anxiously. "I mean, you won't even tell Daryl or anyone?"

"My lips are sealed," Allison assured him. "I mean, if it was me, I would hate for anyone else to know first. It seems to me that a big part of the excitement of getting engaged is being able to
announce it to everyone. Besides," she gave him a playful punch in the shoulder, "what if I blab and then you chicken out and don't ask her?"

"I won't change my mind," Glenn said, suddenly serious. A moment later he gave a quick smile, hesitated, then impulsively threw his arms around her and gave Allison a very quick hug before leaving. "Thanks," he said softly.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

Allison had just stepped into the shower area with a stack of clean towels in her arms when a gruff voice startled her.

"Gracie! Just the person I was looking for!"

"Merle, you scared the heck out of me. What are you doing creeping around back here?"

"Been lookin' around for a little recreation is all," he replied.

"I don't think there's a game parlor here," she told him, somewhat confused.

"Not that kind of recreation," he chuckled. "There's gotta be some whiskey or weed or something stashed around here. Hell, I'd even settle for vodka right now."

"I've been in most of the kitchen cupboards, I haven't seen any liquor," Allison replied.

"I'm talkin' about the kinda stuff they keep stashed," Merle explained. "Some of the best drugs I ever had were those smuggled into jail."

"Eew," Allison recalled the many True Crime books she'd read, "you do know how that stuff gets sneaked inside, right? Do the words 'body cavity search' ring a bell? Anyway, what does any of that have to do with me?"

"See that up there?" He pointed up to the ceiling. All she saw was a metal grate covering a heating duct.

"Yeah? So?"

"There are two screws missing," he explained. "Might mean someone used it as a hiding place."

Allison looked at him quizzically, still not comprehending.

"I need someone skinny that can fit inside there to take a look-see," he continued, as if he was proposing the most reasonable thing in the world.

"You're crazy," Allison replied succinctly.

"I've been told that before," he agreed. "Wait, come back here," he called as she turned to leave. "Hear me out. I can boost you up there, you take out those last two screws, hand the grating down to me and then just climb inside partway to see what's what up there."

"Oh, is that all?" She asked sarcastically. She squinted up at the ceiling. "Besides, those are Phillips-head screws. How am I supposed to remove them?"

"With your pocket knife."

"Sorry, but I left that at home along with my crescent wrench and ball-peen hammer."
"I've got one," he dug in his pocket and handed it to her. "And here's a flashlight," he added.

"This is just plain ridiculous," she continued to protest as she stuffed the flashlight in the waistband of her cargo pants. On the other hand, the longer she kept Merle occupied here, the less time he had to go cause trouble with someone else in the prison. He crouched down and indicated that she should stand on his shoulders. She wavered slightly as he stood up straight. "Hold on to my ankles!" She admonished anxiously.

Slowly, carefully, she used the blade of his knife to remove the two screws, and she handed them and the grate down to him. She stuffed the knife into her pants pocket and then poked her head inside the duct. "I dunno…" she hesitated. "There might be spiders up in here."

"So what?"

"I hate spiders!" She shone the flashlight cautiously around the opening and then stretched up so her entire upper body was inside the duct.

"You see anything?" Merle called up to her impatiently.

"Hold on, I'm looking…." There wasn't much to see, it was just a long passage leading upward. There didn't seem to be any place to hide drugs or liquor. "Wait a minute – there's something written here…" her voice echoed slightly as she stretched further up into the narrowing tunnel.

"What does it say?" Merle asked.

It took a minute for her eyes to adjust to the dim light and the graffiti that had faded over the years. She read aloud:

_In nineteen hundred and fifty-six_

_Frankie Martone laid these bricks._

_And now my friend I wish you luck_

'Cause if you're reading this – you're stuck!"

"Oh great," she groaned, "a construction worker with a sense of humor."

"What the Sam Scratch - - ?!" Daryl's voice startled Merle and he nearly dropped Allison.

"Hey! Hold still down there!" She yelled.

Daryl reached up and tapped Allison's foot. "Get down here! Now! And be careful! You're gonna fall and break your fool neck!" He stretched his hands up to help her down as Merle lowered her out of the duct.

"Hey, little brother, I was just lookin' – "

"I know what you were lookin' for," Daryl shouted in Merle's face. "If you wanna kill yourself, that's your own damned decision, but don't you dare involve anyone else ever again, y'hear me?!" Merle took several steps backward and held his hands up protectively, as if to surrender. Daryl eyed his brother for another moment while he collected himself and caught his breath. "Now get yer rifle and meet me outside, it's our turn for watch."

"I'm, um, er – I didn't mean to – I was just…" Allison was nonplussed by Daryl's outburst and was
stumbling over her words, trying to explain herself.

To her surprise, Daryl's face softened visibly and he gently placed a hand on her shoulder. "Are you OK?" he asked. When she nodded, he continued, "I'm not mad at you; Merle has a way of talkin' people into stuff, always has. You just need to learn how to say 'no' to him."

She nodded again.

"I'll get a ladder later and put that back up where it belongs," he gestured to the grille laying on the floor.

Meanwhile Merle was having mixed emotions as he collected his weapon and headed outside. He'd spent much of his life trying to make a man out of Daryl, telling him not to be a pussy. But now that Daryl was actually taking charge and giving orders, he wasn't sure how to handle it. In a way, he was pleased to see that some of his teaching had actually finally taken effect on his baby bro; but on the other hand, Merle Dixon wasn't used to taking orders from anyone. But on yet the other hand (he was running out of hands), Daryl was his kin, his blood, his only family left on this Earth. He wanted to be with his brother and if that meant conforming to this little society he had going… Oh, Jesus Christ. It was bad enough that this New World Order meant physically fighting for your life every day – did it have to fuck with your mind as well?
"Heckler and Koch," Merle commented, examining a menacing-looking gun.

"Sounds like an old Vaudeville comedy team," Allison remarked. Several of the group were standing around two long tables with a variety of weapons variously stacked and spread out. They were reviewing and categorizing the massive haul that Rick, Michonne and Carl had returned with after their trip into King County.

"No time for jokes, Gracie," the one-handed man chastised her, "these here are serious business. Y'all need to pay attention." Merle, Daryl, Rick – and to some extent, Hershel – were the only ones in the prison who knew anything about military weaponry, and right now Merle was the only one available to tutor the rest. Daryl and Hershel had accompanied Rick to his rendezvous with the Governor, a mission that had had Merle squawking like an angry mallard.

"He can't be trusted," Merle had protested when the meeting had been announced. "I'm tellin' ya, take me along, one easy shot, problem solved."

"This isn't an ambush," Rick had replied, "Andrea said that he's willing to negotiate."

"Andrea can go ahead and play Henry Kissinger, but she's foolin' herself," Merle said grimly. "She thinks she's got the Governor's ear, but all she is to him is a bed-warmer. There ain't nothin' that man is willing to negotiate. Y'all are walkin' into a trap."

"We'll be prepared," Rick assured him. Even though the trio was armed when they left, everyone at the prison was secretly worried about their safety.

"We need to arrange these logically," Merle was now saying, "rifles, shotguns, assault, sub-machines." He went into detail, describing each weapon individually and Maggie, Glenn and Allison took them from him and placed them in appropriate groupings on the tables. Carol and Carl were simultaneously organizing the ammunition according to Merle's instructions.

"Pineapples…MK2s, Christ, these haven't been used since Vietnam, mostly World War 2," Merle murmured looking at a small box filled with hand grenades.

After every weapon had been inspected and assigned to a spot on the table Merle went into Drill Instructor mode, spending the next two hours breaking down each gun and explaining the various parts and the appropriate ammunition and how to load it. He then hovered around the tables for an additional hour, watching as each of them practiced what he'd taught them. It wasn't the same as actually firing the weapons, but at least they were becoming familiar with the weight and feel of each gun, how to load them, and other intricacies. Finally Glenn piled several guns in a stack.

"Carl," he directed, "stash these at the loading dock, OK? Beth? Put more up on the catwalk. If anyone gets pinned down we need to make sure that they have plenty of ammo."

Merle started restlessly pacing again. "What we should be doing is loading some of this firepower into a truck and paying a visit to the Governor. We know where he is right now."

"Are you suggesting that we just go in and kill him?" Carol asked.

"Yeah, I am," Merle acknowledged, growing impatient with this group. After all that had happened, how could they still be reluctant to go and do what needed to be done?
"We told Rick and Daryl that we'd stay put," Maggie reminded him.

"I've changed my mind, sweetheart. Bein' here on the sideline with my brother out there ain't sittin' right with me." He moved toward the table and eyed the weapons. "The three of them are right in the middle of it. No idea we're coming. They could get taken hostage or killed. A thousand things could go wrong." He looked around at the group. "And they will," he added with emphasis.

"My dad can take care of himself," Carl stated.

Merle looked at the boy. "Sorry, son, but your dad's head could be on a pike real soon."

"Don't do that," Maggie stepped in between the two. "Don't say that to him."

"It's not the right move," Glenn said firmly. "Not now. Can't take the risk of putting them in the crossfire." He walked up the stairs and stopped on the top one. He turned to face the room. "That's my decision. It's final."

Merle walked briskly toward the stairs, as if Glenn hadn't spoken.

"Hey!" Glenn stood firm. "You're not going!"

"I don't need your permission," Merle barked, trying to push past Glenn.

"I can't let you."

"You can't stop me!"

"If you're gonna live here with us, it's gonna be on our terms. If Michonne can do it, why can't you?"

"Because that's my brother out there, that's why!" Merle turned and addressed the group. "What's the matter with y'all?!"

"I'm not gonna let you put them in danger," Glenn insisted.

"Nut up, boy," Merle taunted the young man. "This guy cops a feel of your woman and you pussy out like this? Get out of my way!"

"No."

"I said, get out of my way!"

"No!" Glenn yelled, stepping forward and grasping Merle, pinning his arms.

"Let go of me!"

The two began to tussle, and then Maggie joined the fray, protecting her man. Merle made a gagging sound and Allison saw that Maggie had him in a choke hold.

"Stop it, all of you!" she called out. Before she could say anything else, though, what sounded like an explosion erupted right behind her. She covered her ears and cried out, "Ow!!! Cripes, I'm deaf!" She turned around and saw Beth standing there, still pointing the pistol she'd fired up at the ceiling. Beth stood frozen a moment longer, staring sternly at the warring trio, then turned and wordlessly exited the room.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡
A little while later, Allison was in the cell she'd begun turning into a makeshift triage/treatment room. Her medical bags were in there, along with some supplies and linens she'd brought in from the infirmary and a gurney. The infirmary was so far back inside the prison; she thought it wise to be prepared closer to the front doors if one of their group got injured while on watch. She was inventorying some of the things they'd brought back from that hospital run they'd made so long ago when she heard a voice behind her.

"Where'd you get all that? Someone grab it from Woodbury?"

She turned around and saw Michonne standing in the doorway. "No, a couple of months ago Daryl, Carl and I found an old abandoned hospital. There was a surprising amount of supplies left behind."

"Would've thought everything would have been picked clean by now, 'specially in a hospital."

"Most of the obvious medications were gone – the Oxycontin, Xanax…painkillers that laymen recognize the names of, anyway."

"You mean junkies," Michonne corrected her.

"Them, too," Allison smiled. "But luckily there were some antibiotics, anticoagulants, IV fluids, stitches, things like that that wouldn't interest anyone other than medical personnel. We took everything we could carry."

Michonne stepped inside the cell and sat down on a bunk. "You know, all the time we were together, Andrea never mentioned that there was a doctor with her group. She'd said there was a farmer and a couple of cops and a pregnant lady… Did you come along after she'd left or something?"

"No, I've been with the group for a long while. Rick, Daryl and T-Dog found me back in Atlanta. I'd been on the road, trying to get home when everything first got bad and I ended up hiding out in an office building." She sighed and tried to calculate the time frame. "Seems like a hundred years ago," she finally said. She turned a penlight on quickly to make sure the battery was still good. "What about you?" she asked Michonne. "How did you get together with Andrea? And what did you do before all of this?"

"I'm an attorney," Michonne replied. "Found Andrea running around by herself in the woods, right after the farm burned down, from what she said."

"Interesting," Allison mused. "I thought maybe you'd been a fine arts dealer." She smiled at Michonne's questioning look. "I saw that lovely cat statue you brought back from King County when we were unpacking the car."

Michonne returned the smile. "Figured this place could use some sprucing up. And they were fresh out of Dogs Playing Poker paintings."

Allison chuckled. The mysterious katana lady had a sense of humor after all. "That's odd that Andrea never mentioned me, though."

"Not so odd, if you think about it," Merle's voice chimed in suddenly. He walked into the cell without waiting for an invitation.

"What do you mean?" Allison asked.

Michonne exchanged a look with Merle and suddenly understood what he was implying. Allison was younger, blonder, and maybe prettier than Andrea. And with her medical degree, she was
certainly more useful. Andrea probably saw her as potential competition for the Governor's favor. She remained silent and Merle ignored Allison's question. Instead he announced, "Y'all know I'm right."

"About what?" Allison was still confused, not realizing that Merle was changing the subject.

"About the Governor. About what needs to be done. These people here, they're strong. good fighters. But they ain't killers."

"Rick is," Michonne replied. "Maggie is."

"Carl put down his own mother," Allison added.

"Mercy killing," Merle scoffed. "That don't make him an assassin." He looked pointedly at Michonne. "But you are."

"When I have to be," she said quietly.

"My brother and I, we've got some calls we use when we hunt. I can give him a heads up, he can warn the others. You shogun the Governor's ass, I'll take care of the rest. We'll be home before you know it."

"No!" Allison stood up. "It's too dangerous. Daryl and Rick said for us all to stay here."

"I thought you cared something for my brother," Merle said to her. "You don't mind that he's walking smack into a trap?"

"I love your brother," Allison replied emphatically. "And that's why I don't want you running off willy-nilly and accidentally getting him killed."

"Willy-nilly?" Merle asked, somewhat offended that she seemed to think he didn't know what he was doing.

"Pell-mell. Helter-skelter. However you want to describe it."

"If I promise not to go would you please stop rhyming?" he asked, rolling his eyes.

"My point is," she ignored his barb, "Rick, Daryl and Hershel have some sort of plan in place, they're busy concentrating on whatever is going on at that meeting. If you show up unexpectedly and signal Daryl, you'll distract him, even if it's only for a split second, and that could have deadly consequences for all three of them."

"Besides," Michonne added, "you don't know how much back-up the Governor brought with him."

"Hmph," Merle snorted, "most likely just Martinez and Shumpert. Maybe Milton and his notebook. We can handle them easily."

"Milton?" Allison asked. The mention of the notebook made his name stand out.

"Milton Mengele," Michonne snorted.

"His last name is Mamet," Merle corrected her, in a tone that suggested her ignorance of Milton's surname showed just how much she didn't know about the entire situation. Allison, however, immediately caught the woman's reference. Dr. Josef Mengele had been Adolf Hitler's Chief of Staff, Nauseating Human Experiments division.
"What…wait a minute, are you saying that this Milton actually performed experiments on people at Woodbury?" Allison asked Michonne.

"He only experimented on walkers…so far as I know," Michonne answered quietly. The look on her face made it obvious that it wouldn't surprise her a bit if Milton eventually extended his research to live humans.

"The Governor set up a lab for Milton," Merle explained to Allison, "he was supposed to be working on finding a cure."

"So that's the Governor's big plan – find a cure and get his name in history books like Jonas Salk?" Allison was trying to comprehend their enemy's raison d'être...what driving force had turned him into such a madman.

"That would've been secondary - icing on the cake, so to speak," Merle said. "He mainly wanted make Penny all better."

"Penny?"

"His daughter," Michonne supplied. "She'd turned. He kept her chained up in a closet."

"Until our friend here sliced and diced her," Merle nodded toward Michonne.

Allison was trying to understand what the two of them were saying. "You mean the Governor seriously thought that a cure – if there was one to be found – would return his daughter to how she used to be? That even if this Milton discovered some magical way to re-install the functions of the brain, somehow her rotting flesh would also repair itself?"

"Well, yeah, when you put it that way it sounds stupid," Merle admitted, "but when you've got a safe place to sleep at night and regular meals and clean clothes you don't tell the emperor that he doesn't have any clothes."

"For heaven's sake, Andrea's so close to him, didn't she tell him about what we saw at the CDC?!

"She never said anything about the CDC," Merle and Michonne replied almost in unison. They looked at Allison with curiosity.

"Not long after we left that quarry outside of Atlanta," Allison told them, "we made our way to the CDC. It was all but abandoned, there was only one employee left – a Dr. Jenner. He let us in, gave us food and shelter for a night. But the next day he showed us this enhanced MRI of a patient…a volunteer who'd agreed to be studied from start to finish if she'd gotten infected. She shuddered involuntarily at the memory. "This disease, infection, sickness, whatever you want to call it… destroys almost the entire brain. Worse than any case of encephalitis I've ever seen. The only part of the brain that functioned, if you want to describe it that way, after the patient re-animated was the stem and a tiny part just above it. The cerebrum, the cerebellum, all the parts of the brain that contain memories, personality traits…those remained dark, destroyed. It was not that different that the MRI of an advanced Alzheimer's patient."

Both Michonne and Merle seemed genuinely surprised by this information.

"Andrea never told me anything about the CDC or any of what you just said," Michonne murmured.

"So you saw some actual scientific, bona fide evidence of what causes this?" Merle asked. "You
"Yes, we all did," Allison confirmed. "I'm not a neuropathologist, so I can't claim any sort of intricate knowledge as to how exactly this sickness affects the brain tissue. But I have seen my share of MRIs and CT scans, and based on what I've learned the only way forward here is preventing or combating the infection. Any cure that is eventually discovered will only help people while they're still people, still human. Just like the polio epidemic of the 1950s – eventually a way to prevent the disease was discovered, but as far as those who were already so devastated by the disease that they had to live in iron lungs, well...there was no turning back. No magic treatment that reversed everything and returned them to the way they used to be."

The three of them didn't speak for the next few minutes. Then Merle finally looked at Michonne and stated his case one last time.

"You comin' with me or not?"

"You're on your own," she told him. "You get people killed, it's on you."
The relief was palpable at the prison when Rick, Hershel and Daryl returned safely from their rendezvous with the Governor. Rick addressed the assemblage shortly after the trio returned.

"So, I met this Governor…" he drawled. "Sat with him for quite a while."

"Just the two of you?" Merle asked.

"Yeah."

"Should've gone when we had the chance," Merle mumbled loud enough for everyone who'd previously prevented him from leaving to hear.

"He wants the prison," Rick continued. "Wants us gone. Dead." He paused and eyed the crowd before him. "He wants us dead for what we did to Woodbury. We're going to war." With that he left the room and went back outside, with Hershel following close behind.

Merle confronted Daryl and repeated, "Should've gone when we had the chance, bro."

"Wasn't like that," Daryl replied. "Wasn't just Rick and the Governor, 'cept for inside for the meeting. Governor brought reinforcements with him, including Andrea."

"Blondie was there, huh? Doin' her peacekeeper thing?"

"Yeah…but she ended up being pretty pissed 'cause the Governor kicked her out of the building. Didn't let her in on whatever was going on between him and Rick."

"Interesting…" Merle mused. He'd long suspected that Andrea had had an inflated sense of her importance when it came to the Governor, and now this was concrete evidence. Hell, even back when he was the Governor's wingman he'd never felt completely secure in his position. He'd never admit it out loud to anyone, but deep down he'd been afraid during his tenure at Woodbury. Always afraid. Afraid that if he hadn't followed the Governor's orders, curried his favor, succumbed to his every whim, then he'd be out. And at Woodbury, being "out" didn't mean simply being expelled from the community…he was reminded of the old Eagles song "Hotel California" – ‘you can check out any time you like, but you can never leave’. Andrea had apparently thought she was different, that her opinion actually carried some weight with the Governor…and much of Woodbury had suddenly seemingly accepted her as their First Lady, but as it turned out, she was just as disposable as anyone else in the Governor's mind. Yeah, as much as it gnawed at his guts to admit that he was actually afraid of anyone, it irritated him even more that some skirt - one that *he* had collected for the Governor - thought she had some sort of magical golden pussy that allowed her to hop, skip and jump right into second place in the Woodbury hierarchy. Merle had believed from the get-go that Andrea was nothing more than the latest piece of ass as far as the Governor was concerned, and he was now enjoying some delicious self-satisfaction to see his suspicions confirmed – to hear that Miss So Important Blondie had been publicly expelled from the meeting that she'd arranged.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

Early the next morning, Rick found Merle in an unused upstairs cell, ripping the mattress to shreds. Merle glanced up at the lawman and explained, "Just lookin' for a little vacation. Some of the best dope I ever had was stashed inside a mattress."

Rick eyed Merle quietly for a few moments while Merle quickly ran the mattress stuffing between
his fingers. "Nothin'. This place must've been no fun at all."

"Do you even know **why** you do the things you do?" Rick asked him. "The choices you make?"

Merle didn't respond, he simply sat back and looked at Rick expectantly. It was obvious that the sheriff had something on his mind.

"I need your help," Rick continued in a non-comma'd rush. "If we give the Governor Michonne, then Woodbury stands down. I don't like it, but it's what needs to be done." He took a deep breath. "It needs to be quiet, and I need your help with that."

"You ain't told any of the others?" Merle asked.

"Just Hershel, Daryl and you."

"Huh. The Inner Circle. I'm honored." Merle snorted derisively. He studied Rick's face for a few minutes and then continued. "You know, when we'd go out on runs, he'd bash somebody's skull, slash somebody's throat, and he'd say, 'Never waste a bullet.' For a while I always thought it was just an excuse. But..." his voice drifted off and he averted his eyes for a moment. He returned his gaze to Rick and said evenly, "You go on. Give him that girl. He ain't gonna kill her, y'know. He's just gonna do... things to her. Probably take out one of her eyes. Both of 'em, most likely." He squared his shoulders and tilted his head. "You'd let that happen? For a shot?"

Rick remained silent.

"Whew," Merle shook his head slightly. "You're cold as ice, Officer Friendly." He studied Rick for a few moments, and then without further adieu informed the man, "You're gonna need wire, not rope. Wire. Nothin' she can chew through."

Rick nodded very slightly.

"You know something?" Merle continued. "You're right. I **don't** know why I do the things I do. Never did. I'm a damn mystery to me." He narrowed his eyes and leaned forward. "But I know you, Rick," he drawled. "Yeah, I thought a lot about you. You ain't got the spine for it." His mouth stretched into a mock-smile.

"We need to get her to the Governor by noon," was Rick's only response before he turned and walked away.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

Allison vaguely noticed Merle walking away from the area where Carol was sitting, loading bullets into cartridges. She'd been on her way to the bathroom when Maggie almost bumped into her as she approached from the other direction.

"Oh my gosh!" Allison's radar for pretty, shiny things immediately detected the diamond ring on Maggie's finger. She grasped Maggie's left hand and pulled it close for inspection. "How **beautiful**! Does this mean...?" She left the question open-ended and looked up at Maggie while still clasping her hand.

Maggie grinned widely before replying simply, "Yes." Then the two girls squealed simultaneously and embraced. Beth came down the stairs in a rush with Judith in her arms, alerted by the noise below, and Carol stood up and turned to see what the commotion was. Allison held Maggie's left hand up for display and the two women joined in the overall squeals of delight and then all four of them squeezed together for an enthusiastic group hug.
"When?" "How?" The questions regarding Maggie's engagement flew fast and furious. Maggie's face was glowing with delight as she tried to process all the remarks that were being thrown at her.

"Just now, out in the courtyard. I said 'yes', of course." She extended her arm with her fingers pointed heavenward and regarded the diamond solitaire critically. "It is pretty, isn't it?"

"Beautiful," Allison sighed. "Congratulations!"

"It's gorgeous!" Beth enthused. "I'm so happy for you two!"

"We all are," Carol affirmed, pulling Maggie close and kissing her forehead. Truly happy moments of excitement were so rare in their world…all four women stood silent for a few minutes, relishing the feeling.

"Daddy can probably perform the wedding ceremony," Beth suggested. "Have y'all talked to him about when you want to do it?"

"Haven't gotten that far yet," Maggie told her sister. "Glenn only proposed a little bit ago… With everything else going on, I don't know if there's time for any sort of official ceremony. I mean, just him asking is enough for me, really…"

"No, there will be an official ceremony," Carol was suddenly speaking very definitely. She had a solemn look on her face. "Whatever comes our way…we will prevail – we will survive. And we'll have a wedding."

Beth was the first to latch onto Carol's sudden burst of confidence. "You're right," she stated, hugging Judith closer. "We haven't come this far for nothing. I'm not gonna be cheated out my one opportunity to be a bridesmaid!"

"Maid of Honor," Maggie corrected her.

"I can't think of a better reason to defend this place other than to make the men get all involved in a wedding," Allison joined in the enthusiasm. "Make 'em actually clean up and everything!"

The women chatted a bit more, discussing the various things they could do to construct a proper wedding ceremony, and then they reluctantly dispersed to attend to their various chores/duties.

Merle also left the area to go and work on the assignment Rick had given him. His curiosity had been piqued when he’d heard Bright Eyes squeal, so he’d hovered nearby to hear what all the fuss was. So China had popped the question to Maggie… he tucked that knowledge away in the back of his mind as he headed off to find the tools he’d need for his mission.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

Allison wandered the prison in search of Daryl. She hadn't seen him since early that morning, which was unusual. She was still excited about Maggie and Glenn's engagement and wanted to share that news with him. But as she walked about, she was getting a strange feeling from her brief encounters with Rick and Hershel. They seemed edgy and uneasy beyond the threat of a Governor attack. She heard voices coming from the equipment room. When she entered it she found Merle alone, stuffing one of those old-fashioned desktop telephones into a small bag.

"Looking to make a long-distance call?" She asked him. "I don't think that'll work unless it's plugged in."

"What're you doin' down here?" Merle asked, ignoring her question.
"I was looking for Daryl. Thought I heard him."

"He was here a few minutes ago," Merle confirmed, not meeting her eyes. "I dunno where he went."

"Come to think of it, what are you doing down here?" Allison asked him.

"Nothin'..." he drawled. "Just lookin' for a little crystal meth."

"Is there something going on?" She asked him.

"What d'ya mean?"

"I mean I haven't seen Daryl since early this morning, and Rick is acting all hinky."

"'Hinky'? Someone's been watching too many Dragnet reruns," he grunted.


He turned and faced her. "What does it matter if I stay here or not? Most folks around here look at me like I'm the devil. You and my brother are maybe the only two who don't. Let's face it, I'm only here to handle the dirty work."

Allison regarded him with disdain. "Oh please, don't talk to me about dirty work. I've been vomited on and run bedpans for almost everyone in the group. And, quite frankly, it has occurred to me more than once that that's the only reason I'm tolerated around here....well, let's just say it's not because of my sparkling personality. Not everyone appreciates my sense of humor or font of trivial facts like Daryl does. I can handle a gun, I can skin and clean whatever game Daryl hunts for us, and I can provide medical assistance. That's it. I consider the folks in this group to be family, but to be honest, in the back of my mind, I can't help but sometimes wonder if they think of me in the same way, or do they just accept me, rather than embrace me."

Merle squirmed ever so slightly, as if Allison's words were hitting a nerve. "And during the time I've been with them I've often comforted myself by considering that there might be others who sometimes feel the same way," she continued. "Carol, for one, does her share of dirty work when it comes to laundry, not to mention cooking and cleaning up afterward. It took her a while to learn about guns and shooting, so I'm betting that she's sometimes wondered about her place in the group." She was still looking directly at Merle but her gaze seemed a bit wistful. "T-Dog was physically strong and could do a lot of the literal heavy lifting, plus he was an amazing chef and could create palatable meals out of the least likely ingredients... Ultimately, I guess there is some sort of reason why everyone is here, why they're a member of the group," she summed up her thoughts.

"And the baby? What is her 'reason'?"

"She's here because 'pulling out' isn't a reliable method of birth control," Allison replied with a small smile.

Merle gave a quick snort of laughter at her remark and then shook his head and returned to his packing.

Allison said quietly, "I don't know why you beat up Glenn like that, and ultimately that's between the two of you whether you can settle that matter and live together. But..." The tone of her voice caused Merle to look up at her face. "I love Daryl," she continued with quiet emphasis on each
word, "and by extension that makes you my family. And so I worry about you as much as I do him... because I know how important you are to him – you're blood... And he was so happy to find you after so long, and if you run off now - "

"Go on, get outta here," Merle interrupted her with a wince, unable to tolerate such a show of emotion. He turned his back to her, silently dismissing her.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

When Allison took a seat at the meeting Rick had called later that day the uneasy feeling she'd had in her gut all day now rose up into her throat and threatened to strangle her. She immediately noticed that Daryl, Merle and Michonne were absent from the gathering.

"When I met with the Governor," Rick addressed the assemblage, "He said...he said he'd leave us alone if I gave him Michonne. And I was gonna do that, to keep us safe..."

There was an audible gasp from several members of the group.

"I changed my mind," Rick continued. "But now Merle took Michonne to fulfill the deal and Daryl went to stop him and I don't know if it's too late."

"Wait a minute," Allison interrupted. She stood and approached Rick. "So you're saying that if you gave Michonne up to the Governor he'd call off whatever war he had in mind?" Rick nodded almost imperceptibly. "OK, you made the most logical choice, then," she said to him earnestly.

"You think so?" He whispered softly, nervously.

"Of course not!" Allison spat and wheeled around to return to her seat. "You can't tell when someone's lying right to your face, and you took the word of this psychopath?!"

"I was wrong," Rick closed his eyes momentarily. "I was wrong not to tell y'all. And I'm sorry." He scanned the group with a pleading glance.

Allison was breathing so hard her chest was heaving. Hershel placed a reassuring hand on her arm and said softly, "Hear the man out."

"What I said last year, that first night after the farm... " Rick continued hesitantly at first, "it can't be like that. It can't. What we do, what we're willing to do, who we are, it's not my call. It can't be. I couldn't sacrifice one of us for the greater good because we are the greater good." He stood straighter and spoke with conviction. "We're the reason we're still here, not me. This is life and death. How you live... how you die - it isn't up to me. I'm not your Governor. We choose to go. We choose to stay. We stick together. We vote. We can stay and we can fight or we can go."

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

Allison was too angry to even consider Rick's conciliatory speech; she simply went to the front gate and stood there, gazing into the distance, willing Daryl to appear. She didn't know how long she'd been standing there when a voice behind her said quietly, "A watched pot never boils."

She turned to see Hershel standing there.

"I understand your frustration," the old man continued, "and for what it's worth both Daryl and I were uncomfortable with Rick's decision about Michonne at the time."

"Y'all were 'uncomfortable' with sending a member of our group off to be tortured and who knows
what else, but that was it?! You didn't stand firm and refuse to cooperate?"

"Rick is our leader, and - - "

"Oh, my God," Allison shook her head in disbelief. She paced a few steps back and forth while she collected her thoughts. "OK," she said after taking a few deep breaths to calm herself, "I will definitely admit that Rick has been a good leader for the most part thus far… I mean, by rights a small group like ours should not have survived this long with the kind of odds that are out there… But all of those leadership decisions were based on food and shelter." Her eyes looked piercingly into Hershel's. "When a leader starts designating members of the group as bargaining chips…well, that's just a few steps away from becoming…I dunno…some sort of despot."

"Rick realizes his mistake now," Hershel said in that reasonable tone he was so masterful with. "He didn't necessarily make the most humane decision, but he was thinking of the overall safety of the group." He placed a hand on Allison's shoulder. "And before you start comparing him to Hitler, he has realized the mistake he made. He tried to stop the process before all the gears were in motion."

"Too little too late," Allison shrugged his comforting hand off. "Meanwhile Daryl, Michonne and Merle are…out there…" She returned her gaze to beyond the gates. Suddenly both of them perked up when they saw a familiar figure approaching. "Carl! Open the gate!" Allison called out as Michonne strode up closer.

"Are you OK?" Allison asked the woman while simultaneously grasping her and looking her over for any bites or bullet or knife wounds. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine," the woman replied quietly.

"Did you see Daryl…?" Allison was almost afraid to ask.

"Merle cut me loose," Michonne told her. "Went on to do whatever. I saw Daryl on my way back here. He said not to let anyone follow him."

"That's it, I'm going after him," Allison announced definitely. Michonne grabbed her arm as she started to impulsively run through the gate on foot, with no other weapon than the machete at her waist.

"Didn't you hear me?" Michonne asked. "He said not to follow him." In a rare show of intimacy, Michonne pushed Allison's hair back off of her forehead and gently stroked her scalp as she spoke, looking directly into her eyes. "They both know what they're doing. You know that Daryl would want you to stay here and be safe."

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

Michonne had convinced Allison to reluctantly stay at the prison, but she still maintained her vigil at the front gate, peering into the encroaching darkness. Other members of their group variously wandered the courtyard, keeping watch. It was still light enough hours later for Allison to recognize that the car that was suddenly racing up the driveway was an older model Chevy Caprice Classic that wasn't one of theirs. Before she could fully react to the approaching car she heard Daryl's voice crying out, "Help! Allison! Help! Allison, Hershel!" Glenn opened the gate and the car pulled inside.

Allison ran to meet the car and Daryl lunged out of the driver's side door and said, "Merle's been shot! Help!" She saw Merle half sitting/half laying in the front seat, blood pouring from a wound in his chest. Her relief in Daryl being alive and safe was immediately replaced with her medical
training, particularly when she saw the frantic look on his face. She went into ‘automatic’ mode.

"Carl!" She called out to the youngster, who was the fastest and most agile of their group. "Bring the gurney!" Carl ran off and Allison looked around to see who else was nearby. "Beth, please bring some basins of hot water (they kept a big kettle of water boiling on the prison stove at all times) to Cell 2. Carol, grab my blue bag and black satchel and also that big duffel from my room and take it to Cell 2."

Carl's long adolescent legs helped the youth bring the gurney to the car before Allison had finished barking out her initial orders. "On the count of three," she instructed Rick and Daryl, who were helping to lift Merle from the car to the mobile bed. "One, two, three! OK, get him back to Cell 2, stat! Hershel, will you assist?" She stripped off her sweatshirt (luckily she still had a T-shirt on underneath) as she ran alongside the gurney. She wadded it into a bundle and placed it on the bleeding wound. "Daryl," she gasped, taking one of his hands, "keep applying pressure on this. I'm going to run on ahead and prepare – "

Allison hastily washed her hands and was just putting gloves on when the group shoved the gurney into the "hospital cell." "OK, on my count again – Daryl keep that pressure on, though – one, two, three!" Merle was deftly transferred to the bunk. "Don't lay him all the way down," Allison directed. Rick propped Merle in a semi-sitting position. "Tuff cuts, Carol," Allison called out. Carol placed a pair of trauma scissors in Allison's outstretched palm and she began quickly cutting Merle's shirt off.

"Hey, my shirt..." the injured man protested weakly.

"Don't worry," Allison muttered as she discarded the bloody garment onto the floor, "I'm sure we'll be able to get you another one at Crunchy Sweat-Stained Shirts R Us." Daryl felt a smidgeon of relief. Allison's jokes even during serious medical emergencies were her way of trying to relax the patient, he knew. She took her sweatshirt bandage from Daryl and wiped Merle's chest as clean as possible for the moment so that she could see what was what. She lightly ran her fingers over the bullet wound, assessing it by sight and by touch. She lifted Merle's arm and looked up and down. "Hershel, do you see any exit wound in back there?" She asked.

"No, it's clean back here," the man replied.

"I'm not seeing one anywhere, either," she observed. "OK, let's lay him down, Carol – get the pressure cuff on him, please." Suddenly Merle started gasping violently and frothy blood bubbled up from his wound.

"Jesus," Daryl gasped under his breath, his face chalk white.

"Hershel, ACS stat!" Allison called.

The vet had an open bag on his lap but looked at her helplessly. "I don't know what that is- "

"Asherman Chest Seal, it's a flat white plastic package - "

"Pressure's dropping!" Carol announced.

"Got it," Hershel said, pressing the package into Allison's hand.

Her hands were a blur as she seemingly cleaned the gunshot wound, removed the backing from the seal and stuck it in place in one motion. A few seconds later the hissing and gurgling sounds stopped.
"80 over 60," Carol reported, "starting to go back up."

Another second and Merle started breathing comfortably again with no gasping or struggling. "Ninety over 65," Carol said. Hershel handed a stethoscope to Allison and she used it to listen to Merle's chest.

"No rasping or wheezing, I'm surprised," she commented softly to Hershel.

"No exit wound anywhere, no chest rattles," the elder man replied, "I'd venture to say that the slug is lodged in the lung."

"That's what I'm thinking," Allison agreed. "No way to tell for sure without an X-ray, though." She held out her hand and stood up to hover over the patient. "Light, please." Heshel placed a penlight in her hand and she gently pried open Merle's eyes (he'd been slipping in and out of consciousness for the past few minutes) to check his pupils. From the cuts and bruising on his face, it was obvious that he'd taken a few punches as well as a bullet.

"Equal and reactive, that's a good sign," she said.

"Why're his eyes so red?" Daryl asked. Allison looked up – she'd almost forgotten that he was still in the room, so intently had she been concentrating. She looked around and noticed that Rick had slipped out, but Carl and Beth were lingering in the doorway.

"Someone tried to strangle him," Allison explained. "Causes capillaries in the eyes to rupture, makes the whites look red. They'll heal by themselves in about three weeks."

"Pressure is 100 over 70," Carol stated. "Temperature 100.3"

"He's stabilizing," Hershel said. "I'm frankly surprised, considering what he's been through… "

"He's not out of the woods yet," Allison stated the obvious. "But it definitely helps that he was in very good physical condition to begin with. And maybe the bullet didn't do as much damage as it could have. We don't know. And there's the possibility of infection… "

"So just because he's stable don't mean he's gonna be OK," Daryl finished for her.

"It's just too early to tell anything yet," Allison told him gently. "I'll set him up with an IV of Ringer's lactate for now to help his body recover from that blood loss. I'll hold off on IV antibiotics for now; his temperature isn't too high, might not be an infection. And if he's awake in a few hours he can take oral antibiotics if necessary."

"Can I help?" Beth's tentative voice came from the doorway. "Is there anything I can get?"

"Yes, we could use a few more blankets…keep him warm so he won't go into shock. Thanks." Allison dug into another bag and removed a bottle of antiseptic. "In the meantime I'll clean these other cuts as best I can and then just we'll just have to play the waiting game and keep an eye on him."
Merle moaned slightly in pain; it appeared that he was now staying conscious and just drifting in and out of a troubled sleep. Hershel had sent Beth off to bed after she'd returned with a couple of blankets for the patient, and now it was just him, Allison and Daryl left in the hospital cell.

"Is your brother allergic to any medications?" Allison asked Daryl quietly. She recalled that Merle had had Oxycontin in his stash bag 'way back when, so it was apparently safe to give him a hydrocodone for pain. She had a small cache of various medications – from antibiotics to anti-inflammatories to anti-diarrheals to antihistamines - harvested not only from that hospital but also from houses and pharmacies that they'd browsed through over the past six months or so. But she tried to use them very sparingly nevertheless. If there was an outbreak of some sort in their group medicines could be used up very quickly. And she certainly didn't want Merle to find out she had bottles of pain killers on hand.

Daryl shrugged. "Not sure."

"Merle?" She spoke a bit louder this time. "Can you hear me?"

He groaned and his eyes slowly fluttered open. "Unhhh?"

She lifted up his head slightly with one hand and pressed a Tylenol-3 tablet to his lips with the other. "This should help your pain some." He swallowed the pill and then took a few sips from the straw in the cup of water she offered him. She then gently lowered his head back to the pillow.

"Pressure's still good," Hershel commented. "Color's good. Doesn't seem to be any internal bleeding." He looked up at Daryl. "It's probably too early to say that he's out of the woods, but I will say that so far he seems damned lucky."

"Toughest son of a gun I ever met," Daryl said very softly, gazing at his brother.

"That gadget, that chest seal, that's pretty handy," Hershel said to Allison. "Never saw one before, but then I haven't operated on that many human patients."

"It's a fairly recent innovation, if I recall," Allison replied. "Developed during the first Gulf War, I think. Something was needed out in the field for chest wounds when there was no time to transport the victim to the hospital."

"War is hell," Hershel assented, "but it does help to develop some helpful medical devices."

"If…" Daryl spoke hesitantly, "if he doesn't get an infection or something…is he – I mean, can a person be OK with a bullet left inside them like that?"

"You'd be surprised at how many people there are – or were - walking around in this world with slugs in their arms, legs, guts or even their brains, living normal lives," Allison told him. "Before I worked in the ER I believed what I used to see on TV – that every bullet needed to be dug out, removed. But after seeing a few thousand shooting victims, I learned that quite often it's safer to not risk surgery and just leave the slug where it is. Eventually the body forms protective tissue around it and it just stays put. When you start poking around with scalpels and such you not only risk infection but possibly nerve damage, things like that."

"A few thousand?" Daryl was visibly surprised.
"I did a six-week rotation at the Cook County Trauma Unit in Chicago," Allison explained. "If you plan to specialize in emergency medicine, it's about the best training you can get to work either there or at Detroit Receiving Hospital. We'd see, no exaggeration, 15 to 20 gunshot victims per night. And the number went even higher on weekends and holidays. And that's not counting the folks who were stabbed, hit with a baseball bat or who drove into a telephone pole."

"Wow." Even Hershel was amazed.

"We used to joke that the most dangerous place in America was your front porch," Allison went on. "And the most notorious felon was Some Dude. Because that was the story we heard more often than not… 'I was just sittin' on my front porch, mindin' my own business when some dude shot me…'"

Daryl and Hershel both chuckled at that, and for their sake Allison was happy. Daryl especially had been wound up tighter than watch spring ever since he'd brought Merle back to the prison. He needed to relax a bit so that he didn't make himself sick with worry.

"Merle is going to need someone watching over him at all times for the next day or so," she broached the topic gently, "so it makes sense for you two to go get some sleep now while I carry on with this shift." She saw that Daryl was about to protest so she bolstered her argument. "There's not much you can do in the next four hours while he sleeps that pain pill off, unless you want to hold the bed pan when Nature comes calling. Standing there worrying isn't going to change the situation yay or nay."

"And," Hershel chimed in, "until Merle is able to tell us what happened – what the Governor situation is – we'll need you to be alert and rested to help us plot out our defense strategy."

"OK," Daryl reluctantly took his leave after several minutes of contemplation. Once he was gone Allison turned to Hershel.

"You need some sleep as well," she admonished the old man. "Get some sack time now, so that you can relieve me tomorrow morning."

"You drive a hard bargain, young lady," he joked as he struggled to maneuver to a standing position on his crutches. He was a bit stiff after sitting down, hunched over, for so many hours.

As Hershel made his way back to his cell he encountered Rick, who was apparently just coming back from watch duty.

"How's he doing?" Rick asked.

"So far, so good," the older man told him. "He's been stable for over an hour, and that's a good sign."

"He doesn't need surgery?" Rick seemed very concerned and lowered his voice. "Man to man, tell me the truth, are you sure that she knows what she's doing?"

"Very sure," Hershel replied, not quite understanding Rick's agitation. "Gunshot wounds were her bread and butter, so to speak. What she specialized in."

"Then how come Carl needed surgery when he got shot? Special equipment …respirator tube or something and all that…?" The sheriff's face contorted in painful remembrance of his son's injury, how he'd gone into shock, how he had required blood transfusions…
Hershel very delicately placed a hand on Rick's shoulder. He was trying to figure out Rick's line of questioning. Was he truly concerned about Allison's expertise? Or was he somehow retroactively doubting his own handling of Carl's gunshot wound? Hershel quickly shrugged off that last thought – Rick had never been anything but grateful for what he'd done for Carl. He was exhausted, Rick was exhausted…no one was thinking one hundred percent logically these days.

"That was different," he explained, "Your boy was shot with a hunting rifle, with a frangible bullet that was designed to break into fragments upon impact. Unfortunately, one of those fragments nicked a vein and caused internal bleeding…” He squeezed Rick's shoulder and looked into his eyes. "It was very bad luck that Carl was hit with that type of rifle while Otis was aiming for a deer, and a perverse kind of good luck that Merle happened to be shot with a handgun. During a struggle. Where, thankfully, the shooter wasn't honed in on a target."

Rick heaved a sigh and seemed to be calmed and reassured by Hershel's explanation. The veterinarian released his grip of Rick's shoulder and continued, "Daryl said that, from what he saw, Merle managed to kill maybe a half dozen of the Governor's people. We'll know more tomorrow when Merle is awake and able to tell us exactly what happened."

"We need to have a meeting – to prepare. In a few hours. You need to get some sleep, Daryl needs to rest. But then you, me, Glenn, Daryl…all of us…we've got to plan for whatever may come."

As Hershel made his way back to his cell he replayed his conversation with Rick in his mind and suddenly a few remarks Allison had made earlier in the evening came back to him with startling clarity. Merle had been stabilized at the time and they were more or less just monitoring him. And, out of the blue, Allison had worried out loud about what Rick might think if Merle survived.

"What do you mean?" He had asked her, genuinely confused.

"I mean," she sighed, not taking her eyes off her patient, "Lori died. I couldn't save her. She was his wife, the mother of his children, a kind, gentle person who never physically harmed anyone in her whole life. And I couldn't help her; she died after I cut her open. And now Merle, the guy who beat Glenn to a pulp, who…well, who will never win a popularity contest with this group, gets a bullet to the lung and I treat him and he lives." She paused to place her stethoscope on Merle's chest to check his breathing. When she sat back down she commented flatly, as if thinking aloud, "I've seen it so many times in the ER…after a car accident or a shooting during a robbery, you name it…we were able to save the drunk driver, but not the soccer mom he killed. That look…when you have to tell a wife that her husband didn't survive, and she knows without you saying a word that the robber who shot him, and who was shot when the cops arrived on the scene, is still alive because the police are still hanging around, waiting to transport him to jail once he's stable… The look they give you for saving the life of a murderer, that's something you never forget. I mean, as a doctor you're bound by oath to treat each and every patient to the best of your ability, and sometimes the bad guy survives…” She rubbed her eyes and then shook her head slightly as if to clear it. "I'm sorry, I've been rambling…guess I'm just stressed or something…never mind, forget it."

At the time he'd simply silently agreed with her, thinking that she was overtired and worrying about nothing, but this conversation with Rick was giving him a new empathy for the inner worries that were apparently plaguing her. Rick's question about Carl's surgery was probably totally innocent and borne out of concern for Merle's situation, but for a fleeting moment Hershel had felt defensive, as if his expertise or loyalty was being questioned. He'd never had to deal with that type of situation back when he treated dogs and cattle. What a lousy job doctoring can be, he sleepily thought to himself as he settled into his bunk.
"You look exhausted," Carol cooed to Daryl when she passed him near the bathrooms. She had a rifle over her shoulder and was on her way to relieve Maggie on guard duty. "How's Merle doing? You must be worried sick."

"So far so good," Daryl mumbled, swiping a hand across his face, "thanks to Allison." He paused and then added, remembering Allison's constant refrain after Hershel's amputation - that he'd only survived because everyone had worked as a team, "And thanks to your help and Hershel's."

"Well, that used to be her job, that's what she went to school for," Carol told him, almost dismissing Allison's contribution to his brother's survival. But he was too tired to concentrate on what exactly the woman meant, if anything, by her comment.

"Yeah, well, a pilot is trained to land a plane, but that don't mean it ain't amazing when he lands one safely after an engine falls off." He shrugged. "Um, I'm gonna go wash up and then get some sleep. See ya later."

‡‡‡ ‡‡‡ ‡‡‡

Allison reluctantly awoke after a fitful few hours of sleep. She had stayed with Merle throughout the night while Hershel slept, and then the vet had come to relieve her early the next morning. But exhausted as she was, she was still a doctor and a gunshot patient with no proper monitoring equipment attached to him nagged at her consciousness. She took an ice-cold shower, changed into some clean clothes, and returned to the hospital cell. Daryl, Hershel and Rick were huddled together in the doorway talking.

"Everything OK?" she asked anxiously.

"Fine," Hershel assured her. "Merle's been alert for a while now and was able to give us some information on what happened."

She waited for him to continue.

"It was an ambush. The Governor had a contingent of armed people lying in wait." Hershel was speaking mater-of-factly, but his facial expression belied his concern. "Apparently his plan had been to kill whomever had shown up for the meeting. Merle killed, according to his recollection, about six or maybe more of the Governor's crew before he got shot."

"But the Governor is still alive," Rick stated flatly.

"And he'll most likely be lookin' for vengeance," Daryl commented.

"Your brother risked a lot, doing what he did," Hershel said quietly. "He set Michonne free and continued on what was more or less a suicide mission."

"Merle ain't done nothin' like that before in his whole life," Daryl seemed to be talking to himself.

"All right, we've got to make some serious plans," Rick announced.

"I've got to stay with my brother for a bit," Daryl excused himself. "Maybe later…"

"I'll come with you," Hershel told Rick, and the two strode off.

‡‡‡ ‡‡‡ ‡‡‡

Allison scooted the wheeled chair up close to Merle's bunk. "How are we feeling?" She asked
solicitously, anticipated Merle's reply. He didn't disappoint.

"'We'?!" He growled. "Did you get shot, too, Doctor Bright Eyes?"

Allison chuckled. "Don't you just love the medical plural?"

"For Christ's sake, I'm hurtin' here, Gracie, I don't need grammar lessons!"

"What hurts? Take a deep breath for me…" She placed her stethoscope on his chest.

"No, I can breathe OK," he complained, "I'm just sorta hurtin' all over, and I'm hungry and I hafta piss…"

"First things first," Allison replied, reaching underneath the bunk and emerging with a bedside urinal.

"No way!" Merle protested.

"Way," Allison countered him. "It's either this or you wet yourself and your bedding."

"Oh, geez," Daryl involuntarily muttered.

"You are free to step outside," Allison told him. He went and stood outside the cell, all the while mentally reminding himself that Allison was a doctor, and it was strictly just professional that she was handling his brother's junk.

A few minutes later she asked him to come back in and stay with Merle while she went to the communal restroom to empty the container and wash it out with bleach. When she returned she found Beth and Carl hovering outside of Merle's room.

"How is he?" Beth asked her. "Daddy said that he could probably have some broth or liquid Jell-o. Should I make some?"

"That's my Princess," Merle remarked smoothly from his bunk. "At least someone is concerned about my well-being."

"Shoot, Merle," Daryl piped up, somewhat agitated. "'Gracie'? 'Princess'? Folks here got real actual names, y'know."

"Oh, that's OK," Allison assured him, "we're all used to Merle's habit of christening everyone with a nickname." She looked up at Beth and Carl and added, "Maybe Merle needs a nickname of his own, so he feels like he's one of us, no?"

Beth giggled. "Like what?"

"Oh, I dunno," Allison thought for a moment.

"It should be something manly," Merle rasped, "before you get any cutesy ideas."

"I see…" Allison replied after serious consideration. "Like Crunch Hardtack? Or maybe Brick Mason."

"Bolt Upright?" Beth suggested before placing a hand to her mouth as if she'd spoken out of turn. But when Allison and Daryl both laughed she felt more emboldened.

"Fist Thickneck," Beth said. "Butch Ironstag."

Before Allison could react at Beth's suggestions Daryl grinned and added, "Crunch Squatthrust."

Everyone was doubled over with laughter and Merle protested, "Stop it, y'all, you're killin' me! I got stitches, y'know!"

"Biff Slamchest!" Allison squeaked out between giggles.

"Crash Bonemeal!" Beth shouted.

"Bill Williams!" Carl interjected, latching on peripherally to the spirit of the exchange, while not quite understanding the meaning.

The laughter slowly subsided and Allison said to Beth, "He could probably do with some soup, if you don't mind fixing it."

"No trouble," Beth smiled at Merle and lowered her eyelids almost coquettishly. Carl followed closely behind her as she headed toward the kitchen.

"Gracie," Merle grunted, "if you don't mind, I'd like to have a few private words with my brother."

"OK," Allison replied slowly, "I'll just be…um…in the kitchen for a few in case you need me…"

She was curious about Merle's sudden need for solitude.
"What's up? You feelin' OK?" Daryl asked his brother, somewhat anxious about his request for a private audience.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine… Calm your ass down, this ain't about me, I just wanna talk to you about Gracie…"

"Allison," Daryl automatically corrected him.

Merle ignored his brother's remark and continued with his train of thought. "A few days ago… before I took off with Michonne…I heard Bright Eyes and Maggie and the girls talkin'. They were all goin' apeshit over Maggie's new diamond ring." He paused and studied Daryl's face for a reaction. When none was forthcoming, he explained further. "Seems that Glenn popped the ol' question to Maggie." Another pause. "He gave her a ring and asked her to marry him," he finally explained very slowly, as if he was talking to a child. Which maybe his brother was when it came to women, Merle reflected. The poor naïve sap didn't know the first thing about the ways of romance…the only reason Daryl had managed to hook up with Bright Eyes is because she was just as clueless. From the conversations he'd had with her since they'd first met, Merle had determined that Allison had grown up kind of sheltered and innocent and eventually almost afraid of men, which made her the perfect match for his baby brother.

Merle looked up from his bunk at Daryl's questioning face and sighed. Merle was many things, most of them – by his own admission - bad, but he was above all else a Big Brother and his main concern had always been Daryl. His only kin. It had been just the two of them for so many years, and he'd done the best he could, the only way he knew how, to take care of Daryl. To make a man out of him, toughen him up and groom him to be able to hold his own and survive, because in this cruel world that's all there was; you couldn't rely on anyone else. Especially not some broad. Until now. Merle's mantra to Daryl had always been that no one would ever care for him like his big brother, but now he was slowly changing his mind, which was very rare for him at this stage of his life. By all rights he should staggering around that abandoned shack back at the Feed Mill feeding on the remnants of the Governor's gang. He'd looked Death square in the eye after the Governor had shot him and then run off. But in the same cruel irony that seemed to greet him at every turn in his whole cursed life, Death didn't take him immediately. No, he had time to lay on the ground and think. To wonder whether he would bleed to death or suffocate, and how long would it take? Or would one of those snarling walkers he heard shuffling outside make their way in and start munching on him? And would he feel anything when he finally turned? He wasn't quite sure Daryl was real and not a hallucination when he had dragged him into that Chevy and brought him back to the prison. And then Allison had stuck by his bedside for hours on end, somehow saving his life with that magic bag of tricks of hers. She had referred to him as "family" several times since the first time they'd met, but it never really hit home as much as it had when he'd regain consciousness every now and then and see her still sittin' there, frettin' over him and murmuring reassurances to Daryl.

"So what are you saying – that Glenn and Maggie are engaged to be married?" Daryl asked him, trying to understand his point. "So…? I mean, I guess that's good for them, but what does that have to do with me?"

"Jesus, little brother, do I need to draw you a picture? Glenn gave Maggie a ring. He asked her to be his wife. You think that ain't gonna get Gracie to thinkin'?!"

"Thinkin' about what? Allison don't care 'bout that kinda stuff."
"All women care about that stuff, 'specially when they're women livin' together in close quarters like this. You don't think broads got their own type of pissin' contests? Doncha think that it's gonna occur to her when all the other women are going all 'oooh' over Maggie's pretty diamond and sayin' how sweeeet (he managed to make that word sound extra-gooey) Glenn is to propose to her and all that you would do the same if you really loved her?"

Daryl was completely nonplussed not only by his brother's supposed insight into the minds of women, but also his concern over his relationship with Allison. Since when did Merle give a good goddamn about such things?

"She knows that I love her," Daryl mumbled, embarrassed to say the 'L word' out loud to anyone but Allison.

"She knows it, you and I know it, and we probably wouldn't even be havin' this discussion if China hadn't upped the ante – "

"Glenn's Korean," Daryl automatically corrected his brother.

"Whatever!" Merle huffed. His pain medication was starting to wear off and he was feeling both achy from his various injuries and also restless at being bedridden. "I'm just sayin' it don't look good, him makin' it public that he wants to marry Maggie, and you just sittin' there with your thumb up your ass not makin' an honest woman outta Gracie."

Daryl fidgeted, uncomfortable with this entire discussion. "I don't think stuff like that matters right now, when we don't know what's gonna happen from one day to the next. What with Governor out there probably planning some sort of attack…"

"Maybe that's exactly what makes it matter right now," Merle said quietly, unusually introspective. "Not knowin' what's gonna happen… It might mean a lot to her to make…things…official."

"She say somethin' to you?" Daryl was suddenly suspicious.

"No, no, she ain't said nothin' at all along those lines," Merle reassured his brother. "But like I said, I can read women, and I know that Gracie's got that competitive kinda nature and might feel slighted if she started thinking that, hey, Maggie's man loves her enough to propose to her…" He paused to leave that statement open-ended. After a moment he added, "Believe me, I'm the first to say 'throw her away and get a new one' when it comes to women, most women… But there are some who are different, who are 'keepers' and not to be played with. Just like the Princess there, Hershel's daughter, she's not…" He looked into the distance and his voice seemed almost wistful. "…not someone like Andrea. She's not an 'anybody's.' She's pure and innocent and deserves someone who is going to do right by her."

"Huh?" Daryl was confused. "Are you talking about Beth?! What does she have to do with anything…" He shook his head, trying to follow the sudden change in topic. "…is there something going on with you and – oh God, don't let there be, what the hell would her daddy think – "

"Calm your shorts down, I didn't say there's anything going on, I was just using her as a comparison. She's the same type of girl as Allison, one who should not be…what's the word?" Merle pondered for a second. "Who should not be trifled with."

"Trifled with?" Daryl snorted at his brother's choice of words.

"Woodbury had a damned good library," Merle responded. "Anyway, it's obviously up to you, but when I think about it, how damned cool would it be to actually have a doctor in the Dixon family?"
"Who woulda thunk it, huh?" He chuckled. "And I'd probably feel more comfortable asking her to do my laundry if she was officially my sister-in-law..." His voice trailed off as pain started to overtake him and make him feel both physically and mentally exhausted.

"Well, I'll think on it, I guess," Daryl muttered, feeling as if he'd been broadsided. Merle's topic of conversation had confounded him completely. "I think it's time for your medicine, let me go get Allison..." He rose to leave.

"One more thing," Merle's voice was getting raspier and his breathing more labored. "You gotta make sure that Gracie's ring is bigger and better than Maggie's." He saw that Daryl was about to question that statement and quickly added, "Trust me, I know her. And you know I'm right."

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

After asking Allison to check in on Merle, Daryl wandered outside to get some fresh air and to try to make sense of the chat he'd just had with his brother. Merle's words had left an uneasy feeling in his gut – almost a foreknowledge of impending disaster. Merle had never in his life involved himself in Daryl's business much more than ordering him to fetch a beer or a pack of cigarettes; certainly he'd never cared about his love life, or lack thereof. Except for the occasional inference that maybe Daryl was a queer or just a pussy who was afraid of girls. So why on Earth would his big brother suddenly get all...emotional like that, unless maybe he was more injured than he was letting on and was afraid that he was dying. But Merle had never been afraid of anything. And then there was the way he talked about Beth... A week ago his brother had had no use for anyone in the prison group, now he was describing a few of them in positively glowing terms. Maybe the lack of oxygen to his brain – that choking from the Governor that had made his eyes so blood red – had caused some sort of personality change, like amnesia? He couldn't help thinking that something was wrong with his brother; after all, when a wild animal suddenly acts unusually tame or social, it's a symptom of rabies.

He suddenly found himself by his Merle's motorcycle, and after a moment he unbuckled one of the saddle bags and dug around near the bottom. His hand finally felt the object he was searching for and he lifted it out. He'd picked up the small box with "HW" printed on the top of it back when they'd been at Mr. Charlie's; he'd found a double-locked cabinet underneath one of the counters that had intrigued him. He'd thought that perhaps there might be some pricey weapons inside. After trying a series of keys he'd finally gotten it open only to find a couple of small boxes and some legal-type papers. This particular box had caught his eye because it was dark purple, Allison's favorite color. When he'd opened it, he found a fancy diamond ring nestled in a cushion of velvet. He didn't know about cuts or carats, or even jewelry symbolism, but the band was silver like she preferred, and the stones were sparkly. He'd stashed it away, thinking maybe he'd give it to her for her birthday or Christmas or something, not understanding until now – after hearing about Glenn and Maggie – that this piece of jewelry was probably meant to be an engagement ring. Good thing he'd figured that out before he'd just handed it to her half-assed as just a birthday present, he thought to himself. He sighed and put the box in his pocket, unsure of what he would do, if anything.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

On his way back across the prison yard, Daryl encountered Glenn working at a long table, ripping up rags to use as wicks for Molotov cocktails. He set down his crossbow and picked up a cloth and tore it in half.

"Hey," he said to Glenn.

"Hey," Glenn replied, continuing his work.
"Um," Daryl shifted uncomfortably on his feet, "I heard about...you and Maggie. Congratulations."

"Thanks," Glenn glanced over at him and smiled briefly.

"Can I ask ya somethin' kinda personal?" Daryl said after a moment. Glenn looked at him quizzically and nodded for him to continue. "Why'd ya do it? Wait, that didn't come out right. I just mean, with the way things are and all..." He searched for some wording that wouldn't make him sound like a complete ass. "I guess, it's just that we don't know what's gonna happen from one day to the next, and y'all are already together, y'know, and everybody knows it..." He shrugged helplessly and busied himself with one of the bottles of gasoline.

"That's exactly why," Glenn replied softly. "We don't know what's going to happen, or if we're even going to be alive tomorrow or next week, but I do want her to know. To know how I feel, that I'm completely committed, and that even though this world has gone to hell we can still try to hold on to something from the old world. Something that was part of the traditional scheme of things once upon a time." He paused for a moment before continuing. A year ago he would never have laid his soul so bare to Daryl, the rough redneck who'd been so quick to distance himself from everyone. But all of them had changed so much in the months since they'd been camped out at that quarry. He felt a lump rise in his throat as he quickly reflected on how close and comfortable they'd all become with one another. "Our hearts have been united for a long time," he confessed to Daryl, who was listening intently, "but I think that making an official declaration somehow, I dunno, solidifies the deal. In front of her father and everyone else. If that makes any sense," he added.

Daryl seemed to be deep in thought as he nodded. "Yeah, it does..." He looked vaguely at the table filled with makeshift bombs and asked, "You good here for a bit?"

"Yeah," Glenn smiled, having an inkling as to why Daryl was rushing off suddenly.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

Daryl found Allison sitting on a bunk in their cell stashing some of her most basic medical supplies into a backpack. She looked up as he entered.

"Rick said we're having a group meeting later tonight, but in the meantime he suggested we get together stuff and things in case we have to move out of here in a hurry," she explained.

"Oh. Uh-huh." He didn't make a move to begin gathering his own belongings and instead just stood there looking at her.

"Merle's doing very well," she continued, "he'll probably be up and on his feet a little bit by tonight whether I give him permission or not. You men and your aversion to bed pans," she chuckled quietly, "you should only have to experience the stirrups once." She suddenly realized that he wasn't talking much and was still standing in place looking uneasily at her.

"Something wrong? Are you OK?" She asked. Before he could answer she jumped to conclusions. "Did Rick say something to you? Did he ask you to go off on some sort of mission again - " Her voice began to rise in panic.

"No, no," he shook his head and tried to sound reassuring. "Nothing like that. Everything's OK, I just wanted...to talk to you for a sec..." He saw her huge blue eyes looking into his with nothing but concern for him, and felt a tug on his heart. No one had ever cared for him and depended upon him and trusted him like she did, and no matter how uncertain he was about how to voice the actual words, he knew that he wanted her to be his forever. He took a deep breath. "I, um, I'm not
good with words like you… but…um, I've never felt for anyone the way I feel for you. I love you. And, um… will you marry me?" He blurted the last four words out in a one-syllable rush and closed his eyes and braced himself for her reply, hoping she wouldn't think this was lame or stupid or something. After a moment he opened his eyes and was startled by what he saw. Allison was crying.

In all the dark days that they'd endured since the world had turned – through all the deaths, the struggles for food, their hopes constantly dashed and turned to ashes – she had never outright cried. But now the tears poured unashamedly down her face, but they were warm and sweet, because they were tears of joy. With a gasp she leaped up from the bunk and grabbed Daryl, pulling him close to her.

"I didn't mean to upset you – " Her reaction had frightened him. He'd never seen her give way to such emotion before.

She looked up into his face and smiled through her tears. "I'm crying because I'm happy!" She hugged him again.

"Um, does that mean 'yes' then?" If he lived to be a million he'd never understand women.

"Of course!" She laughed and kissed him.

"Oh, I almost forgot," he disentangled himself from her embrace and reached into his pocket. "To make it official," he said, handing her the box.

She gasped again and her eyes positively bugged out, as if in shock. "Now what?" he asked, perplexed.

"Harry Winston!" she whispered in awe.

"Who?"

She gently took the purple container from him and ran her finger across the HW monogram. "Harry Winston. He's the jeweler to the stars. The Academy Awards? All those actresses on the red carpet always wore jewelry from Harry Winston." She almost reverently opened the box and then placed a hand over her mouth in awe. "Oh my God – " She couldn't believe her eyes.

"Don't you like it?" He asked anxiously.

She silently extended her left hand out, palm down, inviting him to slip the exquisite bauble on her finger. As he did so she wrapped her arms around him and whispered in his ear, "It's the most beautiful ring in the whole world!" She grasped his face in her hands and pressed her nose close to his. "I love you," she said with the utmost tenderness.
Allison took a step back and admired her ring yet again. "I can't believe it," she said softly, "I'm an officially engaged person!" She sniffled slightly, trying to staunch the few tears that still trickled down her face. "I mean, back in…the Old World, before all this… I'd never imagined something like this ever happening to me…" She looked up at Daryl, and her voice quavered – she was this close to bursting into a fresh round of tears. "I never knew what it was like to have feelings like this for another person. That it was even possible to for your heart to actually beat double-time when a man hugged or kissed you, like I'd read about in romance novels. I just…I…." She paused and then grasped his hands in hers. "In all my life, I've never been as happy as I have been since I met you."

Daryl fidgeted a bit on his feet and looked away from her eyes for a moment.

"What's wrong?" She asked anxiously.

"Um, nothin' really, 'cept…" he shifted position again and then gently placed the fingers of his right hand under her chin and tilted her face upward slightly. "That's probably the stuff I shoulda said when I asked you to marry me."

Allison chuckled and stretched up to kiss him. "It was implied," she assured him. "We both know I'm the overly talkative one in this relationship."

He smiled down at her and brushed her hair back from her face. "Maybe we shouldn't say anything to anyone for the time bein'." He saw her facial expression change and immediately read her thoughts. "I'm not embarrassed at havin' proposed or anything; I'm just sayin' that Glenn and Maggie only just got engaged, I don't want them to think we're stealing their thunder or anything."

"Yeah," Allison thought for a moment and saw his point. It wasn't a competition or anything, after all. Even if her Harry Winston ring was bigger and prettier than Maggie's. "You're right."

Late that afternoon the group gathered together in the kitchen area for the strategy meeting that Rick had scheduled. They'd been gathering weapons, preparing makeshift bombs and making other preparations, but this particular meeting was going to be crucial as far as setting specific plans in place. Who would do what, who would go where, et cetera, once the Governor and his crew attacked. Merle was in attendance as well, even though he was still not fully recovered from his injuries. But aside from his cantankerous attitude at being confined to his bunk, his input was vital when it came to not only the Governor and his resources but also his military training. Weapons, strategic placement of people, escape routes, that sort of thing.

Everyone found a seat and settled into place. Rick stood at the head of the room and seemed about to speak when Allison announced loudly, "Gee it's hot in here, maybe I should take my ring off!"

"Well, she lasted longer than I thought she would," Daryl sighed to Merle as all the women leaped up and rushed around Allison to embrace her and admire her stunning set of diamonds.

"Girlfriend!" Michonne exclaimed, holding Allison's left hand aloft for all to admire. "Mmmm-mmm! That is some serious bling!" She gave a sidelong glance at Daryl and couldn't hold back a grin. Who would've thought that the redneck hunter would present a girl with anything fancier than a beer can pull tab? From Glenn she expected such attention to sentiment – he was that sensitive male-type she used to read about in Cosmopolitan. But Daryl Dixon? A man who regularly licked
his fingers clean rather than bothering with a napkin? Just when she'd thought she'd had everyone in this group figured out...

"Have you ever seen anything like it?" Allison couldn't help but ask out loud, forgetting for a moment all of Granny's etiquette training. It was, after all, most unseemly to admire one's own possessions.

"Not outside of the Graceland gift shop," Carol remarked. The other women turned and looked at her. She then gave a somewhat frosty smile and said in a rush, "No really, it's beautiful. Congratulations." She walked over to Daryl, who was somewhat embarrassed by all the attention – Hershel and Glenn and Carl alternately smacking him on the back and shaking his hand - and gave him a hug.

"I guess congratulations are in order for Maggie and Glenn and Allison and Daryl," Rick said from his place at the front of the room, subtly calling the meeting back to order. "I'm thinking, once everything is...settled...a double wedding might make for a nice celebration all around." He smiled and then got down to business. The next few hours were spent in serious discussion that included charts and diagrams drawn out on large sheets of butcher paper torn from rolls in the supply room. Assignments were given, strategy was plotted out, and all plans of action were repeated and re-repeated, so that everyone knew their role, and their alternate role, automatically. No time for hesitation or second-guessing, everything had to be drilled into them - every possible scenario of the upcoming confrontation. Their best fighters were assigned to strategic stations, they had their bombs set up in the areas of the prison that would best subdue large groups of attackers. Merle had explained that while the Governor's crew might have numbers and weaponry, they didn't have very much training. Get big group of them packed into a narrow corridor and set off a flash-bang or Molotov cocktail, he suggested, and they'd kill half of their own themselves in a frightened stampede when they tried to escape. He also surmised that they most likely wouldn't attack at night, as any lights they'd use out of necessity to find their way through the woods would give their position away. The prison group was dressed out in full body armor and everyone was in their designated places at first light the next morning.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

Allison huddled in the woods with Hershel, Carl, Beth, Judith and Merle. Hershel and Merle were excellent shots, but neither were operating at their full physical potential due to their various health concerns. Allison was also a crack shot, but she knew that Rick had assigned both her and Beth to this group mainly so that whatever happened someone would be left to care for his infant daughter. Carl had developed into quite the soldier in recent months, and he had protested mightily when his father had deemed that he should be "banished" to the woods rather than fighting at the prison. To Allison's surprise it was Merle – crusty old Merle, who had never struck her as the child psychologist-type – who had convinced the boy that his skills were needed out in the field.

"Listen, kid," he had rasped at Carl off to the side, though Allison and a few others were close enough to overhear. "Normally I'd say fuck that shit, excuse my French, but I can take care of a couple of women and an old man. I don't need no help." He inclined his head to indicate that he was referring to Hershel, Allison and Beth. "But since I got shot, I ain't completely up to full speed yet, and I could use some back-up."

"Okay," Carl had finally agreed, seeing the logic in Merle's argument.

They were all crouched, weapons at the ready, listening to the explosions and bursts of gun fire in the distance. After a short while, though, there were no more noises to be heard. It was eerily silent. They eyed each other questioningly, wondering silently what do to next. Was it safe to go
back to the prison? Was anyone left at the prison? Before anyone could speak the sudden sound of rustling grass and underbrush put them all on point. A young man, maybe a teenager or a little older, stood pointing a rifle at them.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, don't shoot!" he called out, while still keeping his gun leveled at them.

"Drop the weapon, son," Hershel said calmly.

"Sure, here, take it," the boy said without making any move to lower his rifle.

"Put it on the ground!" Merle barked.

"OK, here, take it," the intruder repeated. He stood fast and didn't make any move to drop his weapon, but rather seemed to start extending it outward. Whether he was offering his gun to the group in surrender or trying to lure them into thinking so, no one would ever know because Carl suddenly raised his gun and fired. As the interloper fell to the ground, Merle stepped up and confiscated his weapon, hoisting hit over his shoulder.

"Good call, kid," he muttered to Carl as the group started back toward the prison.

"He was about to surrender," Hershel commented aloud, apparently having reservations about Carl's action.

"He was given more than one chance to drop his weapon and he didn't," Merle interjected. "Hell, he was that close to firing at us. Even if he had surrendered, what the hell would we do with him? We got no room or supplies to keep Prisoners of War." He began to get short of breath, and what with Beth carrying Judith and Hershel's crutches, it was a good excuse for the entire group to stop for a rest. While they stood still and regrouped, Merle added, "He was a part of the Governor's brainwashed Woodbury army. What makes you think he'd join us as a happy camper if we took him alive?" They all slowly started walking again. "And if we'd just taken his weapon and sent him off on his merry way unarmed," Merle continued, "he would've been as good as dead anyway."

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

When they arrived back at the prison, they were first embraced by an ecstatic Rick, who was relieved to find his children still alive. Maggie and Glenn, still dressed in body armor, were flush with success.

"We did it!"

"We drove them out! Did you see them hightail it outta here?!"

"They could regroup," Daryl warned.

"We can't take the chance. He's not gonna stop," Rick agreed.

"They're right, we can't keep living like this," Carol said. "It has to end once and for all."

"So we take the fight back to Woodbury," Michonne was thinking out loud.

"We barely made it out last time," Maggie pointed out.

"I don't care," Rick had a determined set to his jaw.

"Yeah," Daryl agreed.
"Let's go inside, check on everyone, get ready," Rick was speaking tersely.

Michonne and Daryl checked their weapons and prepared to leave. Rick finally took a moment to kiss Judith's head as Beth held her, and then give Carl a quick embrace. Carl pulled back and looked at his father intently.

"Dad, I'm coming to Woodbury."

"Carl – " His father began to protest.

"Dad," the boy said with emphasis, "I did my job out there, just like all of you. Took out one of the Governor's soldiers."

"One of his soldiers?"

"A kid, running away," Hershel explained. "He stumbled across us."

"No, he drew on us," Carl countered.

"I'm sorry you had to do that," Rick said, gently placing a hand on his son's shoulder.

"It's what I was there for," Carl replied.

"We can't afford to leave the prison too defenseless," Rick tried to placate the boy. "I want to take a minimum amount of people with me – leave most of the rest of us here to protect our home. To keep your sister safe," he added with emphasis.

Hershel followed Rick out into the courtyard where Daryl and Michonne were loading supplies into the SUV. "Rick!" He called. The sheriff turned to look at the vet, who was visibly agitated.

"That kid…the one that Carl…" He drew a breath and then said, "That kid was scared. He was handing his gun over."

"Carl said that he drew – that it was self-defense."

"I was there. He didn't have to shoot. He had every reason not to."

"Maybe it just looked that way to you," Rick suggested.

"I'm telling you he gunned that kid down!" Hershel was adamant.

"I - " Whatever response Rick had was interrupted by a gunning engine. He gave Hershel a look that indicated that the matter would be discussed later and he climbed into the SUV.

Daryl revved up his motorcycle and called out, "Y'all ready?" Allison gave him a quick kiss along with her usual whispered admonition to "be safe" and the tiny convoy drove through the gate.

Carl was up on the catwalk, keeping watch alongside Merle. He seemed unusually edgy, almost angry, as he paced back and forth.

"Your ol' man will be fine, kid," Merle tried to reassure the youngster, thinking that that's what was worrying the boy.

"I know that," Carl replied petulantly, almost physically shrugging off Merle's words of comfort.
"Well, if you're not worried about him, then what the hell crawled up your ass and died?"

Merle's choice of words when talking to a teen of Carl's age wasn't always appropriate, but it was effective. Carl appreciated Merle's lack of pretense – his "let's cut the bullshit and say what's what" attitude – and it made him feel comfortable opening up to him.

"I heard Hershel talking to my dad… Telling him that I shouldn't have shot that Woodbury guy."

He seemed to be not only second-guessing his action but also worrying about his father's view of the situation. "I did the right thing, didn't I? I mean, the guy had a gun drawn on us…"

Merle wasn't used to giving fatherly advice, but he figured that he could, at least be as truthful as possible to set the kid's mind at ease. Which was a hell of a lot more that his own father had ever done, Merle reflected ruefully.

"You did what you did, and there's no taking it back," Merle told him. "Was it the right decision? Maybe no one will ever know… What you have to do is consider your actions under the circumstances. What I'm sayin' is that in a war – which this is, when you think about it – sometimes hesitating costs lives. Hell, how many times have you seen on the TV news about some guy gettin' shot by the cops because he didn't comply, he didn't put his weapon down as directed."

He tried to consider his words for once in his life; to speak without inflicting his own point of view, without yelling at the kid to man up and not be a pussy. After all, when he'd been raising Daryl, there had been no one else to answer to. But this kid's pop was still around, and Hershel was always there hovering in the background playing Monday Morning Quarterback. Merle knew what he thought was the right decision, but he also knew that the kid needed to make it right in his own mind whether or not he was justified in firing.

"He drew on us," Carl said, as if looking for affirmation of his actions.

"Your pop assigned you to our group so you could protect your baby sister… and Beth and Allison. Hershel and I are good shots, but we're both limited physically right now. So you were our most able-bodied defenseman, and you had to make a split-second decision. That kind of thing happens all the time in combat situations." Merle paused and walked a few more steps, scanning the horizon. "You don't know what that guy would have done, what he was prepared to do… All you knew is that he did not comply with order to lay his weapon down."

"My dad hesitated before," Carl told Merle, apparently revealing something that had been weighing heavily on his young heart. "When we first took this prison… Some of the inmates were good guys, but there were others who weren't… My dad didn't put down this one inmate, Andrew, and he's the one who let all those walkers into the prison and then we got trapped… My mom – that was when she started having Judith," he choked back a sob. "And she – " He wiped his face with his fist, an oddly endearing gesture.

"I know," Merle said. "I heard about what happened to your ma."

"If dad had killed Andrew, maybe she would still be - "

"You can't saw sawdust, kid. You can't undo what's happened in the past, you can only learn from it." Merle was silent for a few minutes and then added, "I'm not sayin' that your pop or Hershel are right or wrong… I'm just sayin' that if you pull a trigger, make sure you mean it. Make sure it's for a righteous life-or-death purpose."
Chapter 82

Rick and Michonne sat in silence in the pick-up truck as they followed Daryl on his motorcycle. Rick's face was taut and he seemed troubled.

"I never thanked you," Michonne finally spoke.

"For what?" Her voice had startled him and her statement confused him.

"For taking me in that day. When I first showed up at the gate."

"Well, if you hadn't had that baby formula…" Rick tried to keep the conversation light.

"You could've just taken the formula," she pointed out with a sideways glance at him. They drove quietly for a few minutes and then she stated, looking straight ahead, "The deal the Governor offered about me…you had to think about it. Consider it. You had to. I get it."

Rick's face clouded over, as if in remembered shame. "Yeah." He sighed. "I'm sorry. I came real close… I'm…sorry."

"But you didn't," she reminded him.

"It was Carl," Rick seemed to be thinking aloud. "He was the one who made the call. He said you belonged here, you were one of us."

"He's a good kid," Michonne said. "He's –"

"I've never seen him this mad," Rick continued, seeming to have not heard her. "Even with Lori. It's like he just…shut down."

Michonne realized that he was still upset about conversation he'd had with his son while they'd been packing up the truck back at the prison. More specifically, Carl's apparent perception that his father wasn't stepping up enough to protect their group.

"It's easy to forget that he's still a kid," she commented. "Adolescence is hard enough, but Carl has had walkers and losing his mom and delivering his sister thrown at him on top of everything else." Her eyes grew distant. "It's even harder on the parents…" Her voice sounded unusually melancholy as it grew softer.

"It was Carl, you know," Rick told her again. "He made the call to let you in."

Michonne smiled ever so slightly. "He takes after you more than you realize."

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

"Something smells good," Glenn said, walking into the dining area.

"Unusually good," Maggie added with a grin, glancing at Carol, who was toiling over a boiling pot and smoking skillet on the stove. They'd been surviving on catch-as-catch-can cold rations for so many days that the aroma of actual simmering food was almost an assault to the senses, it smelled so heavenly.

"I thought we could all do with a good, home-cooked meal…um, to keep our strength up," Carol replied, keeping her gaze on the stovetop. She'd almost let slip that she was preparing this feast
because she wasn't sure whether or not they'd be able to all sit down to a hearty meal tomorrow, or ever again. Their future was so tenuous, so minute-to-minute, and she felt so helpless… Even if it was their Last Supper, she could at least fill everyone's tummies with something tasty for a change.

Glenn sat down at a table and said to Hershel, "One tower was pretty much destroyed, but as far as Maggie and I could tell, that was the only major structural damage."

"Other than that, there's nothing that can't eventually be repaired," Maggie agreed.

"So you think we might be able to stay here?" Beth's voice made everyone turn. She'd slipped into the room quietly, carrying Judith in her postal box-cum-craddle. "We might not have to leave?" She added hopefully, setting Judith down on the seat beside her.

"Sounds like a possibility," Hershel commented. He paused and then added, "Of course, a lot depends upon if Rick and the others, um… take care of the Governor and his crew." He tempered his words because despite everything that had happened, it still pained him to talk about killing another human, no matter how justified or necessary it was.

Allison entered the kitchen with Carl, who had reluctantly taken a break from guard duty. All had been quiet in the hours since the attack, so logic dictated that by now the Governor was either off re-grouping and re-plotting his strategy, or Rick, Daryl and Michonne had met up with him and taken care of business. In either case, Allison had convinced Carl that it was safe to leave his post and come in and eat dinner. Merle, on the other hand, had stationed himself at the gate, ready to open it as soon as their gang – or, more specifically, his brother - returned. "Can I help?" She asked Carol, looking over her shoulder at the pans on the stove.

"Nope, got it under control, thanks," Carol replied. "Should be ready in about five minutes, I'll let y'all know when you should grab your plates." She smiled thinly as she continued to stir. She didn't mind cooking, but she sure as heck wasn't going to play waitress. A few minutes later she announced, "Come and get it!" and everyone lined up and helped themselves to what turned out to be a mixture of breaded squirrel meat fried up with rice and diced tomatoes.

"Squirrel fricassee," Carol explained after everyone had re-seated themselves at various tables and began exclaiming about the delicious concoction she had prepared. "Merle gave me the recipe."

"Somehow I can't picture Merle Dixon doing a Martha Stewart," Maggie commented. "But I have to admit that this is delicious."

Carl, who was sitting at a different table with Allison, Hershel and Beth, giggled.

"What's so funny?" Allison asked him.

He lowered his voice, hoping Carol wouldn't overhear him. "It's just that..." He was consumed by another quick bout of snorting laughter. He composed himself and continued. "I was there when Merle gave Carol the, um, recipe."

"And that's funny how?" Allison was confused.

"Well, I can't tell you because I know you don't like curse words."

Allison mentally rolled her eyes. "Oh for heaven's sake, permission granted if you need to use them for quoting purposes." She paused and then added quietly, "But I do appreciate you asking first."

Carl grinned and leaned forward, speaking conspiratorially. "Merle and I were on our way to guard duty up on the catwalk and we cut through the kitchen. Carol was boiling a big ol' pot of oatmeal
and Merle took a look at it and kinda exploded. He said 'Goddamn, Mousy, all this good shit on the shelves and that's the best you can come up with? Horse feed?!' And she started to say that there was still some squirrel that hadn't been used, but everyone was sick of it and he said 'For Christ's sake there's hundreds of different things you can make with squirrel' and he started grabbing cans off the shelves. He said something about frying with the lard, and using the rice, and this and that, and then said something about he didn't know how the hell a housewife like her could be such a dumbass in the kitchen…” He started chuckling again at the memory.

"I guess he could've phrased it better, but I understand where he's coming from," Allison smiled. "I remember when I was a kid and my Daddy out of work for a while because he'd been hurt on the job…he got well enough to hunt before he could go back to climbing telephone poles, and we wouldn't have had meat if he hadn't gotten us some deer and rabbit. Mama had a hand-cranked meat grinder and she made all sorts of inventive dishes…I recall eating Hamburger Helper with ground venison instead of beef…"

"Merle said almost the same thing," Carl replied thoughtfully. "We were talking on guard duty, and he told me that lots of times his family had to hunt for their food."

Allison suddenly thought of that hot, humid night when she, Daryl and Andrea had been out searching the woods off the highway for Sophia. Andrea had asked him how he'd learned to hunt, and he'd replied brusquely, "Gotta eat." That seemed so long ago now. She'd barely known Daryl at the time, he was almost non-communicative back then…and Andrea was still part of their group. How quickly things changed these days, and how warped the concept of time seemed now… Back when she was working at the hospital, events that had happened to her five years ago in college seemed recent. Now five months in the past seemed like a lifetime ago.

"Can you watch Judith for a bit?" Beth's voice startled Allison from her reverie.

"Um, yeah, sure," Allison replied questioningly, not sure what Beth meant. She didn't have to wonder long.

The young blonde stood up and grabbed her empty dish. "If this meal was thanks to Merle's recipe, then he should at least have some before it's all gone. I'm going to take him a plate." She continued talking while scooping a portion of the fricassee onto the plate at the stove. "Lord knows he'll just go hungry otherwise…waiting out there for Daryl…" She turned and looked over her shoulder before leaving the room and told Allison, "I've already fed and changed her, so unless she starts fussing all you need to do is keep an eye on her." And before her father could so much as admonish her to be careful, she was off.

"Beth, Glenn can – " Allison began to call after her, but Hershel placed a hand on her forearm to stop her.

"Let her go," Hershel told her.

Allison was reluctant to articulate her concerns about what she'd perceived to be Beth's attraction to Merle. Maybe it was just a crush, but what bothered her a bit was Merle… He wasn't outright courting the girl, as far as she could tell, but there was just something about the way he acted around her, the way he talked about her… He had sarcastic or derogatory nicknames for just about every female she could think of, from Mousy (for Carol) to Love Bird (Maggie) to – well, not very flattering terms that described her tendency to hop from bed to bed with the frequency of a cheap AM radio for Andrea. But she'd only ever heard him refer to Beth as "Princess", and never in a nasty tone, which was the element that gave her pause. Whenever he called her that, he seemed sincere, almost reverent, which was totally out of character for Merle Dixon. Allison noted that even though she detected some level of respect in Merle's eyes when he called her "Gracie" –
whether it was because he was engaged to his brother, or because she had had to help him onto a bedpan – there was still an undertone of mocking. Of gently teasing her for her uptight and prissy (in his estimation) demeanor. And Beth seemed similarly taken with the gruff one-handed man; despite the fact that he'd brutalized her future brother-in-law, Allison had never heard Beth utter an unkind word about Merle. And none of the scenario that was forming in Allison's mind was right – Merle was so much older than Beth; she was just a kid, for heaven's sake! She was so innocent, he was so…so…so Merle. It just wasn't right.

Judith began fussing slightly in her carrier, squirming and uttering baby babble – not quite crying, more like a frustrated effort at trying to communicate.

"Carl," Hershel spoke, "if you're finished eating, why don't you walk your sister around a bit? She sounds like she wants to get out of that box and be up and about."

"Okay," Carl responded dutifully. He lifted the baby up and cradled her in his arms. She immediately snuggled against his chest and gurgled a happy series of pear-shaped vowel sounds. Carl hugged her a little tighter, smiled down at her and then looked at Hershel with a proud grin. "I think you're right – she wants to go for a walk with her big brother." He strolled off, cooing tiny noises to the bundle in his arms.

Hershel turned back to Allison. "I'm old and doddering, but I'm not blind and deaf. I see that Beth likes to hang around Merle, that she's taken by him."

"But that's not my concern," Allison interrupted. "It's, well, Merle… He's –"

"I know what Merle is. He's rough around the edges. Extremely rough," he added when he saw Allison's reaction to his statement. "But I also know his type. I've lived a long time and I've known men like him. He treats a lot of people, maybe most people, with disdain. With no respect. He's distrustful and doesn't get close to a lot of people. He's probably been with a lot of women, women whose names he doesn't remember or maybe even knew in the first place. And for better or worse, he has that skewed, old-school Southern male double standard lodged in his mind…a woman that gets around, who has sex with a lot of men is a 'whore' and is someone who doesn't deserve any respect. Never mind that he's a male who is doing the same exact thing. Again, it's that double-standard that so many men grew up with…" His eyes looked into the distance for a moment and he had a very slight smile when he continued. "I must confess that I was no saint before I settled down and married my Jo. And I think I got most of this white in my hair when Maggie was old enough to start dating. These young bucks showin' up on our doorstep, wanting to take her out for the evening. Well, I remember when I was 17, I was just one big huge walking hormone – there was no way in Hell I was going to let my daughter go out with a boy until she was at least thirty." His voice grew wistful. "That's probably part of why Maggie got so rebellious for a while. I was too strict. But I didn't learn my lesson, and I babyed Beth even more. Where Maggie was always a rough and tumble tomboy, Beth was the one who liked frilly dresses and dolls and such. And I indulged her, protected her, probably over-protected her. As a father, you think that you'll always be there to watch over your children…you don't plan on ever growing old, or for walkers to take over the world."

Allison reached across the table and grasped Hershel's two hands in hers. The old man almost seemed to be thinking aloud rather than talking to her. Her touch caused him to visibly collect himself and look into her eyes.

"In the past world, before The Change, I would say someone like Merle is way too old and coarse and uneducated and just plain all too wrong for my Bethy. He certainly wouldn't be in my top 100 choices for possible suitors for my youngest daughter…before… all this. But I have to face up to
the fact that I'm not going to be here forever. And while Beth has gotten stronger and more independent, she's still not cut out to go it alone. If something happens to me, I would rest easier in my grave knowing that someone like Merle Dixon was taking care of her. Protecting her. Respecting her and loving her like Daryl loves you. Merle is the type of man who puts certain women on a pedestal, and who places more value on family than anything else. And he's a survivor – he knows weapons, he’s a strong fighter, a good hunter. So while I'm not going to encourage any sort of relationship between the two of them, I'm not going to discourage it, either. If it's meant to be, I won't do anything to prevent it from happening. And I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't interfere, either."

Allison was stunned by the man's confession. If that's what he wanted, then she guessed she wouldn't continue trying to run interference between Beth and Merle, but… Wow. She was so sure that Hershel would’ve castrated Merle bare-handed if he had so much as looked at Beth. As if things couldn't get any weirder in their daily life…

"Carl! Glenn! Come quick! Merle saw headlights comin' up the road!" Beth burst into the kitchen, yelling breathlessly.

Carl handed Judith off to Allison in a quick motion and ran off with Beth to the gate, with Glenn and Maggie following close behind them.
Allison started to follow the others outside to see what was going on when she heard Carol's voice behind her.

"Here, hand her over if you're going outside," she said, reaching out for Judith. The baby was squiggling and reaching out her tiny hands and grasping with her fingers as if she was enjoying the sudden chaos. Carol clutched Judith tightly in her arms and lingered cautiously at the back of the group as they exited.

"What the…" Maggie muttered as Allison and the others stared anxiously into the dusk searching for Daryl's motorcycle. Instead some sort of military truck was leading the small string of vehicles that were approaching.

"That's the Woodbury bus," Merle called out, "but looks like Rick behind the wheel." He began pushing the gate open and Carl stepped forward to help him. As the truck pulled in, Allison now saw that Daryl was driving and that the motorcycle was stowed in the back, along with piles of… stuff. She couldn't tell what all was stacked in the truck bed, but before she could inquire Rick parked the bus and exited.

"What's going on?" Carl asked his father.

"You OK?" Allison rushed up to Daryl when he slid out of the driver's door of the truck.

"Yeah," he gave her shoulders a quick squeeze and then nodded to Merle. "Help me unload this stuff."

"They're joining us," Rick answered Carl as people began stepping out of the bus. Allison vaguely heard Rick explaining to Carl and Hershel something about the Governor shooting and killing most of his own people. She was about to grab a bundle of bedding from the back of Daryl's truck when she spied Michonne slowly alighting from the pick-up truck parked behind the bus. Her gaze was cast downward and her face was grim.

"Everything all right?" Allison walked up to her cautiously. "Can I help you…with anything?" As Michonne walked closer, Allison thought she saw tears in her eyes.

Michonne looked past her and shook her head slightly. "Gettin' dark now, I'll help dig in the morning," she murmured and continued walking toward the prison building. Confused, Allison went to the back of the pick-up to see what needed to be brought inside. She stopped short when she saw the telltale long bundle, wrapped in a blanket and sticking out just slightly over the tailgate.

"Andrea," a voice said softly behind her. She turned in surprise; she hadn't heard Rick walk up behind her. "I'll get Glenn to help me bring her inside for tonight. We'll have a… a service tomorrow." He paused, closed his eyes and swallowed hard. He opened his eyes after a moment and continued, "Can you get Beth and Maggie and go help Daryl unload the truck? We brought back as much bedding and food as we could carry in a hurry…"

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

Hershel was inside directing operations by the time Allison walked in with her first armful of sheets and afghans. "For now folks will have to double or triple-up in these cells for the night," he pronounced. "Make up beds on the floor if necessary. Tomorrow morning we'll pass out the mops
and buckets and they can help to clean up D Block enough for everyone to settle in there."

A giant of a man came inside carrying a large plastic storage bin. "Where does this go, Hershel? It's mainly canned goods and some other food."

"Kitchen's that way," Hershel pointed. He'd introduced the man to Allison earlier as Tyreese, and she then remembered that he and his sister had been at the prison previously, although she hadn't formally met them at the time. That seemed so long ago, that chaotic time… Rick had been behaving erratically, irrationally; Daryl had gone off with Merle and she didn't know whether she'd ever see him again… She shook her head and tried to get the mental pictures of those dark days out of her mind.

"Work'll go much faster if you actually do something besides stand there," Merle growled at her as he passed by lugging a large sack over his shoulder.

"Yeah, boss, I'm a-shakin' it, boss," she drawled sarcastically before returning outside to tote that barge and lift that bale.

The following two hours were pretty much chaos and confusion. This group of new people – mainly senior citizens and young kids – uprooted suddenly, being shown the bathroom area, the kitchen, the cells, all the while complaining about "this isn't like it was at Woodbury". It took some time for everyone to settle down enough for a woman named Karen to detail for them what she'd seen – that the Governor had personally shot and killed all of the people who'd gone on the prison mission. Some seemed skeptical at first, until she described hiding beneath the body of George Curtis, trying her hardest not to breathe so that the Governor wouldn't discover her. As she named the Woodbury residents she saw lying dead in the field beside the road when she took refuge in the bus, the others slowly seemed to absorb the gravity of the situation. That the leader they'd looked up to all this time was actually a madman and that it was not safe to remain in Woodbury.

Allison gratefully returned to her cell later that evening after everyone seemed settled in – or temporarily, at least. She stretched her arms overhead and yawned and then pulled her regular sleeping attire – sweatpants and a tank top – out of the stack of folded clothes that was a mixture of hers and Daryl's clean garments. What they could really use, she thought to herself, was some sort of dresser or cabinet with drawers in which to keep their clothes. It was odd how sometimes these little reminders of the Old Life struck you; who knew that one day you'd miss something as simple as having a separate drawer for socks and underwear and one for shirts and sweats. "Maybe now that we have more trucks and manpower we can scavenge some furniture stores…" she sleepily thought to herself as she unbuckled her holster belt.

"Don't get undressed yet," Daryl's voice from the doorway startled her.

"Why? What's up?"

"Rick's called a meeting, wants to discuss somethin'," he said.

"What's up?" she repeated. Even after all this time, being called to an audience with Rick reminded her of being summoned to the principal's office.

"Won't know 'til we get there," Daryl shrugged.

She followed him to the kitchen area and took a seat. Hershel was there, which was no big surprise, but Merle and Tyreese were also in attendance. Allison wondered what the topic of the meeting might be that such a motley group had been invited.
"Hershel, Merle and I have been talking," Rick began, "and we're thinking that it would be worthwhile to make a return trip to Woodbury to get more supplies. From the little I saw, the place was stocked with a lot of useful stuff, more than we could carry last night. And Merle knows the place pretty well – "

" – there's generators, solar panels - a power grid," Merle interrupted. "We could rig up this place with some lights."

"Only if someone knows how to wire it all up and connect it," Daryl remarked.

"That old black guy – " Merle seemed to pause slightly and sneak a glance at Tyreese, as if he was actually concerned about his phraseology for a change – "Jacobson. The guy with suspenders and that newsboy cap… He's a retired electrician. Used to go on and on all the time about graduating from Tuskegee… Anyway, he was the guy who helped to wire up Woodbury."

"Merle also says that Woodbury had something along the lines of a hospital ward," Hershel spoke up. "There could be some useful medications and tools in there."

"A hospital ward?" Allison was curious. "Why? Did you have a doctor there?"

"Dr. Stevens," Merle replied. "I didn't see her get off the bus, so I'm assuming she was one of those mowed down by the Governor that Karen was talkin' about."

"All of which brings me to my point," Rick interjected. "Based on what I saw, and what Merle says, Hershel and I think a trip to Woodbury is in order to collect anything useful. We've got the big trucks now and the bus to haul heavy equipment and furniture. But we'd need to do this pretty quick, like early tomorrow, in case the Governor is planning a return visit. From what Karen told me, he's either on his own now or with just a few people. So…” he finally got to the point of the meeting, "I'm thinking that we need to get in there and gather everything that's useful, load it into our vehicles and get out as quickly as possible. We also need someone to keep watch in case the Governor does show up."

There were murmurs of agreement from the rest of the group.

"Tyreese," Rick addressed the man, "You've spent some time in Woodbury, so I'm thinking that you know a little bit about the layout of the place? And, to be honest, you've got some muscle and we're going to need help carrying large pieces…” His voice trailed off questioningly.

"I'm willing to do anything I can to contribute," Tyreese replied earnestly.

"We all appreciate that," Rick nodded. "Allison, I would like you to go along so you can see what all is in the hospital area and decide what you could use here – medicines, instruments, whatever you call them. There might be equipment that needs to be dismantled before we transport it and you can supervise that."

"Of course," Allison readily agreed.

"So…” Rick was assessing the team and the plan out loud, "We've got Merle, Daryl, Tyreese and me to take care of the hauling and loading of stuff into the trucks. But we need at least one person to keep watch on top of that big gate at the entrance." He paused and gazed downward as he shuffled his feet nervously. "Glenn and Maggie are both excellent shots, but I hate to ask either one of them to come along, based on what happened to them there…before…”

"What about my sister?" Tyreese spoke up. "Sasha is very good with a gun, and she's worked guard duty on that wall before."
Allison saw Rick glance first at Hershel, then Daryl. Hershel replied, "If she's agreeable, I think that's a fine idea." Daryl apparently placed his trust with the veterinarian's opinion, because he gave Rick a very slight affirmative nod in response.

At sunrise the next morning the group stood near the vehicles getting last minute instructions from Rick. "Merle knows the way to Woodbury and he's driven that M35 truck before, so he'll take that. I'll follow behind in the Ram."

"Lemme go check it out, see how much fuel it's got," Merle mumbled, walking over to the front of the military truck and climbing up into the driver's seat.

"Allison," Rick motioned with his head for her to follow him a few steps away. "Would you mind riding with Merle? You seem to manage to keep him….well, I hate to phrase it this way, but he just seems to… behave better around you. We need everyone to focus on the task at hand while we're on this run - no arguments or fistfights."

Allison understood what Rick was hinting at. Merle had been "behaving" better of late; he'd actually learned to stop casually tossing ethnic slurs around, at least when Glenn or Michonne were within earshot. And he'd finally stopped using "bitch" as a synonym for female. But a lifetime of offensive behavior could not be unlearned overnight, and Merle still possessed a short fuse and a sharp tongue. He didn't hesitate to loudly and colorfully voice his dissent when he disagreed with an opinion or course of action. Especially when it came to his brother. It seemed to Allison that sometimes Merle seemed almost jealous of his younger brother – of the way Rick and Hershel regularly consulted Daryl for his opinion and advice. The elder Dixon frequently picked on his younger brother for no other reason other than to remind him that ol' Merle had raised him and was bigger than him and could still kick his ass.

"Sure, I'll ride with him, no problem," Allison told Rick. Merle had had fun teasing her at every opportunity since he'd first arrived at the prison, but he had never been actually cruel to her for some reason. She'd presumed that Daryl had warned him against such behavior. But ever since he'd been shot and she had treated him, Merle had been actually nice to her on occasion. He still poked fun at her, and made sure to mock her when she started sounding too (in his opinion) pompous, but it seemed like there was now an invisible line that he wouldn't cross when it came to Allison. She couldn't help but suppose that it was probably due to some sense of gratitude or obligation he felt for her nursing him back to health - a not uncommon reaction in many patients. If that was the case, though, the feeling would eventually wear off. Time will tell, she thought to herself as she opened the passenger door of the truck and was about to hoist herself inside.

"Got room for me?" Sasha's voice startled her. "Rick said I should ride with you two, and he'll take Tyreese and Daryl with him."

"Sure," Allison smiled, "grab a shoehorn and squeeze in."

A few minutes later and both trucks were on the road. They rode in silence at first, then Sasha made an attempt at conversation.

"That's a beautiful ring," she commented, glancing at Allison's left hand.

"Thank you," Allison replied with a serene smile, extending her fingers out slightly to admire the bauble herself. Every time she looked at it she was reminded of Daryl and her heart picked up pace a bit.

"To be honest, I don't know much about you two, other than your names," Sasha continued. "I remember seeing you," she quickly glanced at Allison, "in the room that day when Rick made us
"And vice versa," Allison replied. "I know your name, and I've gathered that you're Tyreese's sister, but that's about it." She hesitated before continuing, since Merle's previous brutality played a large part in the whole tumultuous situation that had been going on when Sasha and her group initially arrived at the prison. "That was a very...difficult and confusing time. Rick had just lost his wife, and he had a new baby to worry about... Anyway, Merle -- she pointed quickly at their driver with her thumb, "is Daryl's older brother. Daryl is the guy with the crossbow and the motorcycle...and my fiancé."

"Y'all seem like a close-knit group," Sasha commented. "How long have you been together?"

"Different times for different people, but overall quite a while... I met up with Rick and Daryl and Glenn and T-Dog back in Atlanta um...geez, I don't know how long ago now. Over a year, I think. We eventually ended up on Hershel's farm, that's where we met Maggie and Beth and Patricia and... Anyway, it's been a long time and we've been all over the place, and we've lost some very dear friends along the way." She paused and sighed. "I guess it's the same for you, and pretty much everyone else who's made it this long."

Sasha recognized some of the names that Allison had mentioned – Glenn, Rick, Hershel. She didn't ask about the names she didn't know, because of the way Allison's face clouded over when she mentioned T-Dog, she automatically assumed those unknowns were friends who had been lost. It was a very sad reality of the current way of life – how you could distinguish those dearly departed who had Died By Walker simply by a facial expression or vocal intonation.

"Yeah," Sasha agreed. "Tyreese and I started out with a much bigger group back in Florida, and by the time we'd made it to your prison, there were just five of us, and Donna had gotten bitten right when we found the place..."

"Jesus," Merle's barely audible interjection and his sudden foot on the brake interrupted Sasha's statement. The two women leaned forward to see what had caught the man's attention. The tableau visible through the windshield resembled some sort of Full Metal Jacket Vietnam killing field scene. Bodies scattered everywhere, on the pavement and in the grass along the roadside.

Rick pulled up behind their vehicle and he and Daryl and Tyreese exited to survey the scene. Merle hopped down from the driver's seat and stood silently for a moment. Rick seemed uncertain as to why Merle had stopped and he gestured for the others to fall into formation behind him. Weapons drawn, the group weaved in between the multitude of corpses. Merle paused beside one body and wordlessly retrieved the revolver holstered on its belt. The others fell into step likewise, collecting knives and guns. But when they were through, Merle's announcement indicated that this had not been strictly a weapon-collecting maneuver.

"I don't see Brownie or Shump anywhere," he said.

"What? Who?" Rick asked, confused.

"Martinez and Shumpert. Two of the Governor's main strong-arms, enforcers. That means the Governor ain't alone, wherever he is; he's got at least two of his loyal soldiers with him."

"That's good to know," Rick sighed. He peered through the driver's side window of the Ford Excursion parked on the shoulder of the road. "Keys are in the ignition," he announced. "We can use this." The van was outfitted with a battering ram, searchlights and a winch.

They regrouped and set off for Woodbury once again with Merle in the lead, Rick and Tyreese...
following behind him and Daryl bringing up the rear in their nearly acquired van. When they finally arrived at the compound Allison was momentarily in awe. All those buildings inside a man-made wall, it was like a little city. But then when Rick started giving orders as to who would go where and collect what, she realized that as cozy as this enclave looked, it was no longer safe.

"Hospital stuff is in here," Merle barked over his shoulder as he led her to a room in some building (the place was so big she couldn't keep track of where exactly they were). She followed him inside and saw at first glance a couple of exam tables, several IV stands, and a variety of implements on a rolling tray table.

"Lots of good stuff here," Allison announced appreciatively and then proceeded to inspect the room more closely. Bags were found and instruments were collected and packed. "This Dr. Stevens," Allison asked Merle when she encountered one particular tray of instruments, "what was her specialty?"

"What do you mean?" Merle grunted as he helped Tyreese fold one of the examination tables down into a compact shape for moving.

"I mean was she an OB-GYN?"

"An obie what?"

"An obstetrician or a gynecologist. A doctor that delivers babies or examines a woman's 'lady parts' ."

"Hell if I know. She was just a doctor. What the hell does it matter?" He held one end of the table as Tyreese walked backwards through the door holding the other end.

"No particular matter," Allison muttered quietly as he left the room. Since he apparently didn't know much about Dr. Stevens (whose body he had identified by the roadside earlier), nor about gynecology, he certainly wouldn't understand any questioning about the tools she had found laid out in one of the trays. A speculum and a uterine curette, to be specific. Yes, they would definitely be of help in a pinch if anyone at the prison ended up pregnant, but Allison couldn't help but wonder as she collected them why such implements were in this bare-bones makeshift emergency room to begin with.

Several hours later the vehicles were filled to overflowing with everything from bedding to solar panels to wiring to light bulbs to generators to hospital supplies. "This is a good haul," Rick commented as they prepared to leave, "but there is still enough left here to fill up all these vehicles at least one more time."

"Once we get unloaded at the prison, we can make another run tomorrow or maybe the day after," Daryl told Rick. "There's plenty of people at the prison that can start putting this stuff in place – stringing the wires and hooking up the light bulbs while the generators get set up."

"Lots of work to keep everyone busy," Tyreese agreed. "If they managed to set it all up at Woodbury, we can certainly do it at the prison if we all help."
Chapter 84

Allison hadn't returned to Woodbury with Rick, Tyreese and several other men when they went back two days later to fill their vehicles with pretty much everything that wasn't nailed down. She was still busy sorting through the medical supplies they'd collected on that first run and setting up something that resembled a bona fide, albeit primitive, medical ward in the prison infirmary. Thanks to all the extra people they'd collected from Woodbury, they were beginning to actually take advantage of the vast prison grounds, both interior and exterior. Previously their original small group had had to basically restrict all their waking hours to either keeping watch or finding and preparing food. Now there were now enough folks available to keep guard while others cleared out and cleaned previously unexplored areas of the prison, like the library and recreation room and other cell blocks. As she arranged instruments on shelves she marveled to herself the intricacies of the human brain – how it, unbidden, focused on the task at hand, shutting out unnecessary distractions when necessary. For example, how many times had she stepped into the library to check it for walkers or intruders as a matter of routine whenever a strange noise had been heard within the prison and everyone went into scouting mode? Only in the past week, though, had she actually seen the contents of the room. She'd never noticed that, among other things, there was a large globe of the world on a pedestal.

"We can look at all the other places that we could be instead of here," she thought wryly. Of course, judging from the age of some of the book titles she'd glanced at (CompuServe for Dummies?!), that globe might well still feature maps of East and West Germany…or even Mesopotamia. She removed some of the implements that had been soaking in a diluted hydrogen peroxide bath and placed them in a specific order on the shelves inside one of the cabinets.

"Looks like we have the makings of a real medical clinic here," Carol's voice from behind startled her. The older woman wandered over to the cabinet and glanced at the implements in place. "We'll have to set aside a time for you to train me in the use of all of this stuff," she added.

Allison repressed a grin at Carol's presumptuousness; true, she had served as a "nurse" to both her and Hershel in the most basic sense in recent months. She knew how to monitor vital signs like blood pressure, pulse and temperature, and she was now familiar with the names and purposes of some of the standard, most-used tools… But there was a reason it took four years of post-secondary education to become an actual Registered Nurse. Allison paused and then mentally dressed herself down. How much of her immediate negative reaction was based on her personal feelings toward Carol, she wondered. Shouldn't she be pleased that the woman was eager to learn and to assist? She'd managed to maintain her professional attitude with her patients thus far; she needed to do the same with anyone who worked with her in a medical setting. Even if that person was Carol.

"Yes," she replied aloud, "that's a very good idea. Especially since we not only have so much new equipment, but also new people."

"I recognize some of these," Carol told her, poking her head inside the cabinet. "These are all different types of forceps, right?" she said, gesturing to a shelf.

"Correct," Allison confirmed, frankly surprised that Carol hadn't described them as "tweezers."

Carol beamed with pride and continued to inspect the shiny assortment of gadgets. She gasped quite suddenly, and Allison turned to see what had startled her.

"Why…" She stopped to collect herself. Allison waited for her to continue, confused as to what
was so upsetting. "Where did that come from?" She pointed to the speculum on the bottom shelf.

"It was with the rest of the instruments we collected from Woodbury," Allison told her. She then returned her attention to cleaning and drying the tools in the basin. "Although, now that you mention it," she ruminated as she worked, "I thought it was unusual to have just a few random gynecological tools mixed in with all the more traditional exam equipment and I did comment on it at the time. Merle said something about seeing that speculum – of course, he didn't know what it was called or what it was for – on a tray of tools the Governor had set aside in another room. Not the hospital room, somewhere else, apparently. Guess the Governor didn't know what it was for, either." She patted a pair of stainless steel nippers dry. Could be of use for removing ticks, she thought to herself.

"He knew, alright," Carol said ominously. Her tone caused Allison to turn and look at her curiously. "Ed used to watch these movies…” Carol continued, almost in a monotone. "Disgusting, vile movies…I don't know where he found them, from somewhere on the Internet, I imagine. They were always about…torture. Sexual torture. The worst, degrading type, always with some strapped-down woman as the victim." Allison followed Carol's gaze, which was focused on the speculum. "He'd make me watch them with him…he really got off on that stuff."

"What are you saying?" She asked, not understanding.

"I'm saying that the Governor is a sick, depraved man. Thank God Merle cut Michonne loose when he did, but who knows what else…who else…was done there…"

"Geez…” Allison was trying to absorb what Carol was saying. She felt simultaneously repulsed and terribly naive. How many sexual assault victims had she seen in the ER back in the day? But nevertheless she'd never thought of anyone so precisely using actual examining room equipment for such a nefarious purpose. She closed her eyes and tried to swallow the bile that was rising in her throat.

"Hopefully out there on his own he won't have time to think about doing…things like that…anymore. He'll be too busy trying not to get eaten by walkers."

"Hopefully," Carol echoed. Then she clasped her hand to her mouth, her eyes wide with fright. "I wonder if…” She turned to look at Allison. "Andrea. Oh my God, do you think he …?"

"She was fully clothed when Michonne and Daryl found her at Woodbury, even had her jacket on, if that means anything," Allison told her. Of course, Andrea's face had also been bruised and covered with dried blood, so there had apparently been some sort of struggle before she'd been bitten. And now Allison's blood ran cold when she thought of that room at Woodbury – the one with, of all things, an old dental chair in it that had handcuffs attached to the armrests. Tyreese had mentioned in passing while they were collecting equipment that that had been the room where they'd found Andrea. This Governor sounded like a serious sicko.

"There you are, Carol," Maggie's voice made both of them turn to the doorway. "Do you think you can go restore some order in the kitchen? A lot of the new people are kind of getting into things they don't need to be… I think a Voice of Authority is needed, maybe tell them the meal schedule and such…?"

"Oh, of course! That's the last thing we need…” Carol tore off, muttering, obviously panicked at the thought of anyone making a mess in her domain.

"Actually," Maggie approached Allison, lowering her voice, "I really needed to talk to you privately."
"Sure, what's up?"

"It's Glenn." Maggie paused, as if she was having difficulty choosing her words. "Something happened on yesterday's run…"

Allison remained silent, waiting for her to continue. Glenn obviously hadn't been bitten, they all knew by now how to handle that particular situation, and Maggie certainly wouldn't have waited a day in that case.

"Last night he complained of a sharp pain in his…er…well…” She fidgeted and vaguely gestured due South.

"Manly parts?" Allison prompted as diplomatically as possible, sensing Maggie's unease.

"Yeah," Maggie sighed with relief. "He said it felt like a needle. I took a look, and it looks like he has a tick stuck to his…um, you know…” Her voice trailed away for a moment and then she added, "It's right on the tip!" Her eyes met with Allison's, and the two women suddenly burst out into laughter.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I shouldn't laugh," Allison apologized, covering her mouth and trying not to smile. "The poor guy…"

Maggie was also biting her lip, trying to control her mirth. "I know," she shook her head, "he's hurting, and I feel bad for him, but still… Of all the places to get a tick stuck!"

Allison glanced at one of the shelves and selected a pair of curved, fine-tipped forceps. "Let me grab some antibiotic ointment out of my bag and then I'll – "

"Oh, no!" Maggie's eyes went wide in horror. "You can't remove it! Glenn didn't even want me to tell you about it! He asked me to get some lighter fluid or Vaseline to help get it off, but I thought I should ask you what the best method was."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, do you know how much male genitalia I've seen in my line of work? I am a professional, you know."

"I know, I know, but Glenn's shy when it comes to… some stuff. He definitely doesn't want anyone else handling his – um, this problem."

Allison sighed. "OK, I'll leave it to you, then. But no lighter fluid or anything like that. That kind of stuff just irritates the tick and might cause it to regurgitate its stomach contents into the bite and that's what causes disease. You need to grasp it firmly with these," she handed the forceps to Maggie, "as close to the skin where it's attached as possible. Then pull upward steadily and evenly." She emphasized the last three words. "Don't twist or jerk as you pull. You don't want the head to break off. And don't squeeze too tightly – you don't want to crush or puncture the body of the tick."

"Damn, I didn't know it was this delicate of a procedure," Maggie commented with a concerned look on her face.

"I'm sure you'll do fine," Allison tried to calm the woman, since she'd need a steady hand for this procedure. "Pretend like you're removing a splinter – grab it close to the skin and pull, get it all out so you don't have poke around the sore spot. Oh, and here – " She handed Maggie an empty prescription bottle. "Drop the tick in here after you've removed it and bring it back to me. No," she added, reading the expression on Maggie's face, "It's not that I want to 'check your homework', so to speak… I just want to dispose of it properly, in this container – " she gestured toward a large
plastic box – "with the used sharps and other hazardous materials."

"OK, gotcha." Maggie looked uncertain but determined as she pocketed the tube of antibiotic ointment Allison handed her. "By the way," she added, "Even though it's obvious that I told you about this, since I've got these and all…" She held up the forceps. "But please don't let on to Glenn that you know… if you know what I mean."

"I know, and I won't," Allison nodded. A thought suddenly occurred to her. "Hasn't Glenn been washing with that peppermint soap?"

Maggie looked a bit sheepish. "No, he said he doesn't like the smell."

"Well, neither do the bugs, that's why we're all supposed to wash with it."

"I know, I know, maybe now he'll reconsider…" Maggie was about to leave when she paused. "One other thing…this may be a long shot, but the last run I was on I saw this place in a small strip mall…Southern Prosthetic Supply…?" She finished with a question mark.

"Sure, SPS," Allison was familiar with the chain. It was a medical supply store that carried artificial limbs and… a metaphorical light bulb went off over her head as she caught Maggie's meaning. "Oh, I get where you're going… But we'd have to take your dad there to get a proper fitting. How secure is the place? I mean, in case he'd have to leave in a hurry…"

"When we were there the only store we actually went through was the Dollar General, to get diapers and stuff. Killed off maybe half a dozen walkers, and that seemed like all that was there around the place."

"It sounds like it's safe," Allison reasoned aloud. "And if that's the case, then I'm sure your dad would appreciate the increased mobility…being able to get around without crutches… But I don't know, it still seems risky." Hershel was such an important member of their group…along with Rick, he was their Anchor, their Voice of Reason. She was loathe to put him in any sort of perilous situation.

"Glenn and I would go along with you for protection, and like I said, we killed all the walkers that were there at the time. There probably wouldn't be too many to handle. I mean, I don't think the place would be overrun or anything."

"Well, I'm game if your dad is," Allison smiled. She knew that she'd have to go along on this particular mission so that she could help to fit Hershel properly with an artificial limb. She wasn't worried about her own safety at all – she could handle walkers, and Glenn and Maggie were veteran warriors. She just hated to remove Hershel from the safety of the prison.

"I think it would make dad so happy to be more mobile," Maggie said somewhat wistfully. "He's been talking more and more lately about the different crops that could be planted, especially now that we've got all those gardening tools and seedlings from Woodbury. The look in his eyes when he goes on about staking tomato plants and where the best drainage is for butterbeans… well, it reminds me of the days back on our farm. He's never complained about being on crutches, but I know how much it would mean to him to be able to get down on his knees on his own and work the soil."

"Your dad has done so much for all of us, I'd love to be able to give him something back in exchange," Allison agreed. "Besides, the thought of having fresh vegetables to eat is too tempting to resist!"
Maggie grinned and said, "Let me get Glenn squared away and then we'll make plans to head out that way in the next day or two."

"There are already four of us in the car," Allison explained to Daryl very late the night before the SPS run. He was pacing their cell, half-undressed, running one hand across his face in agitation. She'd waited until the last minute to tell him about her plan to accompany Maggie and Glenn on this mission because she knew he'd have a hundred objections to her going out without him along to protect her. "There's not enough room, especially if we bring back any supplies."

"I can take my bike," he argued. "Won't take up any room in the car."

"And you'll use up extra gas that you don't necessarily need to waste," Allison tried to reason with him. "I'll be perfectly safe with Glenn and Maggie, there's no need for you to worry."

"Yeah, well," he was obviously mentally grasping at straws, "maybe I should bring Merle with me on the bike, and you can outfit him with some kind of artificial arm, one of those things with the pincers or claws, y'know, since you're gettin' Hershel a leg…"

She had been afraid of that particular issue coming up. She certainly didn't want it to appear that she was favoring one person's amputation over another's, and frankly that was partially why she'd waited until the eleventh hour to mention the mission to Daryl. She'd had a feeling it would sound…well, bad to volunteer to make a special trip to outfit Hershel with a prosthesis without offering to bring Merle along. Plus, even though he hadn't mentioned it since he'd been with them, she was sure that Rick and the handcuffs and the whole roof thing was still a sore spot in the back of Merle's mind.

"I'm not an orthotist, but I know a little bit about artificial limbs… Here's the thing about Merle… his particular situation is called a 'transradial amputation', which essentially means that he still has his elbow and most of his forearm. The kind of workable artificial limbs made for that type of amputation requires a lot of specialized fitting – casts made of the stump, things like that. And then the patient has to go through a lot of training and therapy to learn how to use the opposing shoulder muscles to coordinate with the amputated side to manipulate the prosthesis. Even if we happened to find an artificial hand that fit properly, do you think your brother has the patience to sit through however many hours of occupational therapy it would take for me to stumble my way through trial-and-error to teach him how to use it? Or would he prefer to continue using his personal bayonet that he's already mastered?" She saw Daryl wavering, so she continued. "In an ideal world, Hershel would have a cast made of his stump, too, to get properly fitted. But an artificial leg doesn't require as much precision as an arm…it's meant mainly to bear his weight so that he can stand and walk without assistance. Yeah, if we had the time and equipment necessary, he'd get something with a titanium ankle socket that moved in every direction, but right now Maggie just wants to get him something that would allow him to stand and walk and work in the garden. He won't be able to run marathons, or even stand for too many consecutive hours, but it will help him do something that he's always loved, something that he's missed for so long – to farm, to grow things." As she spoke that last sentence she sat down on the bed and gently pulled Daryl down with her so that his back was pressed against her chest. She began to gently massage his bare shoulders.

"You're so tense, you poor baby," she purred softly as she manipulated the tendons at the base of his neck. "You need to relax…"

"I know what you're doin'," Daryl mumbled drowsily. "I ain't stupid…using your womanly…" His voice drifted off into a combination sigh and moan as Allison dug deeply with her thumbs on either side of the upper tip of his spine. He leaned his head back against her left shoulder and made an
"Mmmm" sound when she began making lazy circles with her fingertips on his scalp.

"Why, I have no idea what you're talking about. You know me, I have no womanly wiles, no 'game'... I'm just sitting here, trying to make my man feel better..." She tried to sound innocent, but she was correct in one respect: she had no "game" when it came to trying to fool or coerce Daryl. Even when he wasn't looking directly at her, he still saw right through her. Allison didn't believe in psychics, but damn if it didn't seem like Daryl could always actually "see" what she was thinking.

"OK," his voice was so low she had to struggle to hear. He was just on the edge of dozing off to sleep. "You go on with them. But I'll have a word with Glenn before...." He mumbled a few more syllables and then Allison recognized the sound of Daryl's "asleep" breathing. She kissed the crown of his head and then squiggled and shifted around in the bunk as gently as she could to lay down into a communal sleeping position without disturbing him.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

"What is your major malfunction, you miserable maggots?!" A young boy with a mop of curls covering his head bellowed the best he could in his squeaky voice at the trio of kids working on a jigsaw puzzle at one of the tables in the kitchen area. "How many times has Mr. Merle told you to always make sure the door is tightly closed behind you?!!" He swung the gate leading to the kitchen back and forth several times accusingly.

"You tell 'em, Luke," Merle congratulated the boy. Luke's head snapped around quickly, surprised. He hadn't heard Merle walk up behind him. But that was another thing Mr. Merle always emphasized – stealth. Now, inside the safe haven of the prison, was the time to practice moving as quietly as possible. Because if you're outside someday, he'd lectured them, silence means survival. Walkers won't hear you, and neither will the prey you're trying to catch for food.

"Um, I'm sorry, I thought I closed the gate tight when I came in," Patrick apologized. He was chronologically older by a few years than the other kids, but emotionally he meshed better with Luke, Molly, and Mika. Bespectacled and bookish, he resembled a miniature Woody Allen, and he'd grown up home-schooled and over-protected by parents (now deceased) who'd always focused on what Merle called "book learnin'".

"Thinking and doing are two different things," Merle barked at the boy. "We ain't got the luxury of making mistakes these days, 'cause what happens when we make mistakes...?" He glanced at the kids at the table with upraised eyebrows.

"We die!!" They all chanted in unison.

"That's exactly right. So start usin' your head for something other than a hat rack," he admonished Patrick.

"Yes, sir," Patrick replied.

"Aye, aye," a female voice added. Merle smirked slightly, waiting to be dressed down by Carol, who had entered the kitchen from opposite door in the middle of his lecture. He knew that Mousy liked to coddle the kids who'd joined their group in drips and drabs during the past several months. He stood in place, waiting for her to rip into him for being so "mean" to the youngsters. To his surprise no reprimand was forthcoming, instead all Carol said was, "Merle, can you help me out with lunch? I need to fill a couple of these big stock pots with water and then put 'em on the fire to boil." One of the many additions that had been made to the prison since the first Woodburians had joined them was a large outdoor fireplace/grill that was used for cooking communal meals, weather permitting.
"Sure thing," Merle replied, pulling out one of the larger pots from the stack beneath the sink. "Big thing of water like this is too heavy for a frail lil' female like you to carry." He turned his head and winked at the kids at the table as he walked away. "That's man's work, am I right?"

"Right!" Luke shouted back, which provoked Mika to punch him in the shoulder.

"Girls are just as strong as boys," she informed him.

"Are not!" He retorted.

"Are too!" Lizzie and Molly chimed in with Mika.

Instead of interrupting the monotonous exchange that continued for several minutes, Carol simply smiled and then gathered a few more utensils to take outside. It made her happy to see Mika and the other little girls be strong and assertive…and then, just as quickly, a wave of melancholy washed over her… If only her Sophia had been like that. Sophia was a few years older than Lizzie when The Turn happened, but she had never in her life spoken up and shouted out like these girls just did. No, Sophia had grown up timid and frightened, always walking on eggshells, thanks to Ed. And, Carol thought ruefully, she was just as much at fault. Always coddling Ed and warning Sophia to not upset her daddy... Now and then when she had too much time to think, she wondered how Sophia would have been, right this minute, if the world hadn't Turned and they were still living in their tidy clapboard house. What truly tied her stomach into knots was the realization that Sophia had never really "lived", she simply existed. Every day of her life had been measured in minutes of safety; a good day being one when her father hadn't yelled at her and smashed a few of her meager possessions in a blind rage for some minor infraction, or when he didn't insist on her snuggling close to "keep him company." An involuntary shudder ran through her body. Truth was, Sophia probably would have grown up to be just like Old Carol - the Carol that she knew Merle still referred to as "Mousey" behind her back. Her daughter had been groomed to become a submissive, silent battered wife thanks to her. But that would never happen again, not on Carol's watch. She was determined to give these kids the knowledge and tools they needed to survive in this world. Unbeknownst to any of the other adults in the group, she had been secretly giving the kids weapons training lessons under the guise of "story hour" in the prison library. Everyone needed to be strong these days, despite their age or gender. No excuses.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

"Daryl's brought in another few strays, he's got one he wants you to meet," Merle told Allison one late afternoon when he'd caught her en route to her cell for a rare midday nap. She'd been working in the fields (the area where they were growing food had expanded too much to simply call it a "garden") with Hershel and Rick in the garden since dawn, and that was after a night of stitching up Lizzie who'd apparently somehow managed to sleepily stumble and fall arm-first against the one lone piece of exposed sharp metal somewhere in the bathroom area when she'd gone in there to pee. That girl always seemed to be getting into one misadventure or another.

"More people?" she mumbled, slightly irritated. Allison hated to sound like Merle (who frequently complained about his brother's "soft-heartedness" in bringing in any sad sack survivor he found wandering on the road), but sometimes she couldn't help but think that they were allowing too many new people into the prison. After all, their resources were finite, and eventually there could be a problem of overcrowding. On the other hand, she would hate to be that person wandering alone seeking shelter and being turned away. At least their group had determined certain protocols when it came to admitting newcomers. By mutual agreement Hershel, Daryl, Sasha, Glenn and Carol had formed a sort of Council, which set rules in place and made decisions when it came to the overall running of the prison.
"Yeah," Merle replied, leading her to the kitchen area. "One of ’em is a doctor, so he says."

When she entered the room she saw Hershel and Daryl chatting with a dark-skinned middle-aged man. Hershel spied her and smiled. He stepped toward her and presented her rather formally to the stranger, saying, "Allison, this is Dr. Caleb Subramanian. Caleb, this is Dr. Allison Harper, our long-time resident physician. She's saved many a life here; I'm afraid that sometimes we ask too much of her. Allison, maybe Caleb will be able to assist you, relieve some of your workload."

Allison smiled warmly at Hershel; she recognized that he was, in his typically benevolent manner, not only making introductions but also letting this Caleb person know that she was the senior and ranking physician in the community.

Caleb smiled and extended his hand. "How do you do," he said. "It's not often that I meet such a young and pretty colleague, even before the world changed."

"Why, thank you," Allison replied, shaking his hand. Her smile turned from warm to frosty at his condescending tone. "And may I say that that shirt really lights up your face. Brings out the color of your eyes." She heard Daryl attempt to stifle a soft snort of laughter.

"Ah, well, yes, thank you," Dr. Subramanian responded, a bit confused and taken aback. "If I may ask, what is your area of specialization?"

"Emergency medicine, Duke University, with a rotation in Chicago at the Cook County Trauma Unit. I was working at Durham Regional when The Turn started. You?"

"I'm a cardiologist. I did my undergrad at the Xavier School of Medicine –"

"In Aruba?" Allison clarified.

"Yes," he nodded, "and then I did my specialty training at St. George's University."

"In Grenada," Allison commented.

"Correct," he confirmed.

"Well, day-o tally me banana – an all-Caribbean education," she muttered semi-audibly.

"Excuse me?" Caleb hadn't quite heard her.

"Nothing, nothing…" she shook her head and then shook his hand with two of hers and said sincerely, "Very nice to have you aboard. I'm sure a lot of the men here will feel more comfortable being examined by a male doctor. Once you get settled, come find me and I'll show you around the infirmary."

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

"What the hell was that?" Merle asked her as he left the kitchen with Allison and Daryl.

"What was what?" she asked.

"He asks what kind of medicine it is you do, and you give him your whole resumé? I mean, I know you're a big ol' show-off, but –"

"I am not a show-off!" She automatically protested.

Daryl guffawed out loud and Merle hooted with laughter.
"All right, Gracie, I'm not gonna get into that argument with you, it's just that you seemed kinda harsh to that guy. And that's not usually how you are."

"That's the way doctors are," Daryl informed his brother. "They're like stray dogs, always have a pissing contest when they first meet."

"We are? We do?" Allison stopped in her tracks and turned to him. "And you know this how?"

"Oh, please, Angel," he gave her a lopsided grin. His smile only increased her agitation, so he hastened to explain. "Ever since we've been together, any time you talk about somebody you used to work with – I mean, even any casual 'one day at the hospital' story – you always mention what school the person went to or where he used to work. I don't know squat about once college or another, but just from the tone of your voice when you tell your stories I know that Harvard and Stanford and Johns Hopkins are good and the only reason people go to those offshore medical schools is because they couldn't cut it in a 'real' school."

She winced inwardly a bit; his words cut a bit too close to home. She still harbored a child-like fear of people not liking her, of not always being on her best behavior, and she really needed to learn to not verbalize her every thought, especially when they were particularly vicious. On the other hand, she was a little surprised to note that Daryl paid such strict attention when she sometimes rambled on. That man doesn't miss a thing, she thought to herself.

"...and then he paid you a compliment and you just shot him down," Merle was saying.

"Compliment?" Allison turned her attention to Merle's words. "You mean when described me as 'young and pretty'? I don't want to sound like a xenophobe, but it's been my unfortunate experience that a lot of male Asian Indian doctors who practice in the U.S. tend to be condescending to females. Maybe it's part of their culture, they think it's polite to always flatter a woman... But let me tell you, if I was a man he would never had greeted me with 'I've never met such a handsome colleague.' "

Merle started to say something about you can't win with women no matter what you say, but Allison interrupted him. "It's not just me. I treated many female patients who'd told me stories about their General Practitioners, who happened to be from India or Bangladesh or wherever, who never really seemed to take their health complaints seriously. They'd prescribe Valium or Xanax and tell them they were suffering from 'nerves.' She used her fingers to make air quotation marks. "But those women told me that the same doctors would order a series of X-Rays and CT scans for their husbands whenever they complained of the slightest ache or pain." The trio had arrived at Cell Block C. "I guess it's partly confirmation bias," Allison added before she retired to her cell. "There are no doubt just as many U.S.-trained male doctors who are similarly dismissive when it comes to female patients..." She leaned forward and gave Daryl a quick kiss. "I'm going to grab a quick nap."

"Confirmation' something? 'Similarly dismissive'?" Allison vaguely heard Merle repeating her words to Daryl as the pair departed. "Damn, she really does talk like that all the time..."
"You, you, you, and...you," Merle used his bloodied bayonet prosthesis to indicate who among the group of waiting available workers should replace those people finishing their shifts on Fence Duty. Even though he was officially in charge of Fence security – the boss, so to speak - he’d been in there working right alongside the team for most of the morning, killing walkers with speed and precision. "You two," he gestured to Patrick and a pretty-boy college puke named Zach, "are on Agriculture duty. Talk to Mr. Hershel about what needs to be done. The rest of you go report to Mr. Jacobson to help him with P & E."

There were a few muffled gripes among those assigned to the P & E – Power and Electricity – group, not only because Mr. Jacobson was a very strict taskmaster, but also because that work was far more physical and tedious than stabbing walkers through a fence. It meant not only hauling heavy containers of used cooking oil (that had been collected on various runs) in order to fuel the diesel generators, but also meticulously checking the strings of light bulbs and all the other wiring that had been hung around the prison over the months and many other tasks that seemed ridiculously nit-picky. Not to mention boring. But Mr. Jacobson was the man with the engineering know-how, and Merle was The Enforcer when it came to assigning daily nitty-gritty maintenance chores, so there was really no choice but to follow orders. Everyone was expected to carry their weight and contribute in whatever way necessary to maintain the prison.

"Excuse me," Jeanette squared her shoulders as she paused in front of Merle. "If it's all the same to you, I'd rather not work with...that man." She spoke those last two words as if they were a bad taste and even though Merle didn't like having his authority questioned, his curiosity was piqued.

"What man? Mr. J? Why? What's the problem?"

"He – he's made some inappropriate comments to me," she lowered her voice a notch; after all, everyone didn't need to know her business. "He calls me things like L'il Mama and Coco-Puff and once he even patted my behind!" The volume of her voice increased at the remembered indignity.

Merle tried to look concerned, but he was still Merle after all, so he couldn't control the smirk that spread across his face. "Really? Ol' Ralphie been puttin' the moves on you?" He noticed that Sasha was standing nearby – apparently waiting to speak to him – and she must've overheard Jeanette, since she was obviously trying to suppress a smile. "Ralph ever talk like that to you, young lady?"

"Ralph?" Sasha was confused, not having heard the beginning of the conversation.

"Mr. Jacobson," Jeanette clarified. "That old man who thinks he's all that."

"Oh, I know who Mr. J is, I just didn't know his first name. Anyway, no, he's never really talked to me other than to tell me about wiring and dictating a list of what tools and supplies I should be on the lookout for when I go on runs." She gave a small shrug, as if to apologize to Jeanette for not having been "hit on" by Mr. J. "Oh, and he has mentioned once or twice how we shouldn't complain about hard work...that back when he was at Tuskegee the students were responsible for every sort of building maintenance chore, even though they were paying tuition for the privilege." Jeanette smiled when Sasha imitated what everyone called Mr. J's "lecture voice".

"Well then, I could remind Mr. Jacobson about the rules we have in place... but it seems like he ain't botherin' all the women. It could be that he's got a l'il ol' crush on you, and that's just his way of showin' genuine affection." He paused a moment to let Jeanette consider his words. "Not
"Ohhh," Jeanette was now flustered instead of angry, and she waved a dismissive hand at Merle. "Don't bother sayin' anything to him... I'll just go help Carol in the kitchen. I'm a better cook than electrician, anyway...." She was still muttering as she walked away.

"Y'know," Merle said aloud as he watched Jeanette's departing back, "I gotta hand it to ol' Ralph... at his age... pretty impressive..." He nodded his head in admiration at the older man's apparent virility and started to make his way back to the prison – he needed to clean up a little and then check on the watch schedule, make sure everyone knew where they needed to be and when. Later, he made a mental note as he cut through the farm area, he'd better check all of the firearms stashed in the various weapon areas. He'd assigned several members of their group to clean and maintain all of the guns, but he knew from experience that you had to keep on top of folks every minute to make sure things got done the right way. People get lazy, complacent; they overlook small things like the routine cleaning of each and every weapon. Sure, it was a boring task only slightly less tedious than washing dishes, but it had to be done. Particularly when it came to the MP5 submachine guns; most of the ammo they'd stockpiled came from various military surplus stores, and that meant that it was Russian 7.62x54R ammunition bought on the cheap back when the Soviet Union collapsed. And those bullets are all covered with a primer that contained corrosive salts. Stuff that could rust your weapon and eventually make it misfire if not cleaned regularly.

"Damn good thing I'm here to take care of shit that matters," he thought as he traipsed gingerly around the sprouting plants in Hershel's garden. "Where the hell would they be without ol' Merle takin' charge of keepin' this place safe?" He glanced around as he walked and spied Hershel instructing Zach on how to properly stake tomato plants.

"Hey, Hershel, how's everything?" He asked as he approached the older man.

"Just fine," Hershel smiled as he rose from his kneeling position unaided. It hadn't taken him long to adjust to his prosthetic leg. He gestured subtly with his head at Merle, indicating that he should follow him a few steps away.

"I appreciate you sending these youngsters out to help me. I guess Rick spoke to you?"

Merle didn't quite understand Hershel's meaning, so he stalled.

"Yeah, of course, Rick's the boss..."

"I'm glad that Rick agreed with me that it would be good for some of these kids who've only ever seen vegetables at the Piggly-Wiggly to learn how to grow crops. Maggie and Beth, they grew up on a farm. Allison and Carol also have a lot of experience when it comes to gardening and canning and preserving. We need to train the next generation in agriculture so that they can fend for themselves and their families once the walkers eventually die out."

Before Merle could reply Tyrone stepped up with a large coil of chicken wire perched on his shoulder.

"Whereabouts you say you want this fence?" he asked Hershel. "Should we stake it out first?"

"Yes," Hershel replied, "Just set the wire down over there," he pointed in the distance, "and then you can help me place the stakes... Then we'll need to move a couple of those wooden pallets in there to make some flooring...."

"Sure thing," Tyrone said. He walked over to the area that Hershel had indicated and set the wire
down. As he returned to where Hershel was standing he overheard his conversation with Merle.

"...those feral pigs we've seen in the woods, it will be easy enough to catch a few and pen them and eventually breed 'em."

"Hell yes," Merle commented as he digested Hershel's plan. He thought about it for a few minutes and grew more enthusiastic. "Y'know, I built a smokehouse with my daddy a long time ago... We cured hams and bacon and made salt pork..." He grinned at Hershel and continued, "If we breed hogs here, we can have some meat besides rabbit and venison all through the winter!"

"That's just what I was thinking," Hershel concurred. "And maybe eventually we can catch a few chickens and have fresh eggs..." He smiled wistfully.

"I'll gladly build whatever pens and cages you need," Tyreese spoke up. "I only ask that you not include me in the... " He hesitated, lowered his eyes and was visibly squeamish. "I'm sorry, it took a long time for me to just wrap my mind around killing walkers. I know that I can't be any help when it comes to... butchering animals." He raised his gaze to meet Hershel's, as if he anticipated an argument. "I know where meat comes from, I'm no vegetarian... But I can't stomach the actual, y'know... I'm sorry."

"No need for apologies," Hershel assured him. "Everyone has their own comfort level. I remember Patricia telling me – you never met her, she and her husband were very good friends of mine," he paused and then swallowed, as if composing himself. "Anyway, she was a nurse and she used to tell me stories about this other nurse she worked with at the hospital who had a phobia about feet. She had no problem cleaning up blood or vomit or other such things, but the sight of a person's bare feet made her feel ill." He chuckled. "Sorry, I got off topic for a minute. I'm thinking about fencing in this area here...." His voice trailed off as he walked over to the area in question with Tyreese, pointing and gesturing his future plans for a livestock pen.

Merle continued on his route back to the cell block, shaking his head slightly. He mulled over the conversation between Tyreese and Hershel. Tyreese...the menacing muscular guy who looked like he would grind a man into hamburger just for looking at him the wrong way. Turns out he's a big ol' pussy. How did that saying go about judging a book by its cover? Oh well, the man never complained about doing heavy physical labor, so Merle had to give him that. Speaking of physical labor...the corners of his mouth slowly curled into a satisfied smile. Once they did get some pigs corralled up, who better to slop 'em and muck out their pen than the resident young Lothario, Zach? Like Hershel said, good for the citified folks to get their hands dirty, learn how to do some honest-to-goodness farm work. And then maybe Zach would be too tired to prowl after Beth.

Sweet, innocent Beth, who sure as hell didn't need some 19-year-old walking bundle of hormones following her around, chatting her up, trying to be her boyfriend, pretending to be sincere. Merle knew that Zach only had one thing on his filthy little mind.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

"These two shelves are bandages," Allison explained to Bob, a new guy that Daryl and Glenn had recently found on the side of the road. According to Daryl, Bob had some military medical training. "Gauze pads, butterflies, elastics, et cetera."

"Gotcha," Bob acknowledged, mentally taking notes and scanning the room with his eyes as Allison continued on and showed him the other equipment in the infirmary.

"If you don't mind me asking," Allison paused as she came to the cabinet containing their limited amount of surgical tools, "what is the extent of your training? I mean, I know Daryl mentioned that you were a combat medic...." Her voice trailed off questioningly. She'd seen every episode of
M*A*S*H multiple times, but that show was set during the Korean War and she didn't know exactly what today's Army taught their medics.

"I was a Sixty-eight Whiskey," Bob replied. He smiled at Allison's puzzled expression. "That's Army lingo for a 68W, the classification we get after 16 weeks of training at Fort Sam Houston. Part of that training is EMT certification, but I have to say that most of the rest of what they taught us was pretty specific to the current – or, well, what used to be the current – common battlefield injuries in Afghanistan and Iraq. Tourniquets, hemostatic agents, opening airways, administering IV fluids."

"Definitely some useful skills, especially these days," Allison commented. She gestured toward the cabinet with metal, rather than glass, doors. "We keep the medications locked in here, but per the council no one other than Dr. S, Hershel and me are allowed to take anything out of there or dispense any pills or medicines. And that means aspirin and cough syrup and everything." She turned to face him and explain further. "That policy is strictly a preventative measure. Not only do we have a limited supply of meds, we also need to professionally evaluate each case before we administer anything. We have to find out about allergies, ulcers, that sort of thing."

"Check," Bob confirmed her directive.

"We've collected quite a large stash of miscellaneous meds," she continued, "...a lot of folks tend to mix their prescription pills and capsules into other containers, I guess for the sake of convenience. To carry in their purse or whatever. Anyway, that's another reason the meds are not dispensed without permission – a lot of them are not what is listed on the bottle label." She picked up a very large, thick book labeled Physician's Desk Reference from the desk. "Michonne found this PDR on one of her runs. Whenever I get some spare time, I separate and identify all the anonymous miscellaneous medications we've collected."

"I understand," Bob said and then added, "In the meantime, until someone gets sick or injured, well….to be honest, I need something to do. I want to pull my weight around here."

"I'm not on top of the day-to-day work assignments," Allison admitted. "I believe Merle is in charge of organizing that schedule..."

"Merle's the one who sent me to you," Bob interrupted. "Once I got settled in and all, Daryl introduced me to Merle and told me to ask him about a work assignment. But once Daryl mentioned that I'd been a medic, well, then Merle said that I was to report directly to you. That you were in charge of all medical personnel."

Allison struggled to suppress a smile. She couldn't help but feel pleased that Merle deferred to her in such a way. And that he'd mentally put her in charge of medicine, rather than mentioning that that particular department was divided between her, Hershel and Caleb. "I guess these days anyone with a knowledge of medicine is an asset that needs to be protected, so Merle didn't want to risk you hurting yourself at the fence or hauling water."

"Just the same, ma'am, even in the Army we 68Ws had regular chores and duties. I'm not used to not being busy. I'm good at killing walkers and scavenging..."

"Maybe you should talk to some of the folks on the council," Allison suggested. "Glenn or Sasha." Was it her imagination, or did Bob's face light up ever so slightly when she mentioned Sasha's name? "They're the ones who organize the supply runs. I'm sure they'd welcome a volunteer with your skills."

"OK, thanks, I'll do that." He smiled and trotted off.
"I didn't know you could ride," Allison commented to Michonne, who'd turned up outside the prison gates earlier that day astride a beautiful chestnut mare, lagging slightly behind Daryl on Merle's motorcycle. Michonne had dismounted and turned the reins over to Rick and Carl, who removed the saddle and began brushing down the horse inside one of the several enclosures that had been built on the grounds in the past months. So many things had changed at the prison...the little vegetable garden had burgeoned into a full-grown mini-farm, with a variety of carefully tended crops that provided much-needed fresh food for the group. One of the pens now housed a sow who'd recently given birth to a litter of piglets – unbeknownst to Daryl, Carl, David and Henry, who'd found her in the woods and brought her back in one of the trucks, Violet (as Carl had christened her) was an expectant mother at the time of her capture.

"I always wanted to own my own horse," Michonne replied, "but it would've been too expensive, since we lived in the city...we would have had to board it out someplace. There was a riding stable about a 20 minute drive from our house, though, and I used to take the bus there almost every weekend when I was in the seventh grade and ride. Eventually my dad caved in and drove me there on Sundays, after church. My mom didn't like it much, said I'd get bow-legged like a cowboy from riding horses all the time." She paused and smiled at the memory. "When I was in high school Mr. Edgar gave me a job at his stable, grooming horses. He not only paid me money, but I also got to ride as much as I wanted for free. I was in heaven, let me tell you."

"Horses can be a pricey hobby," Allison acknowledged, wistfully recalling Granny denying her requests as a child to go riding at the many stables near their home. Waste of money, Granny had told her, always adding that that was the only reason farmers charged money for people to ride their horses – to help pay for their upkeep. Worthless animals, in this day of mechanized farming. They didn't provide milk or meat…. Allison closed her eyes and tried to shrug off Granny's penny-pinching diatribe. "Um," she strove to change the subject slightly, "How did you happen to find this one, complete with saddle and bridle?"

"Daryl and I were out on a run and he drove off the road onto a dirt trail. Just in case. We spotted her in a corral, right up against the fence. She wasn't scared off by the noise of the motorcycle engine, so I got off and approached her. I hopped the fence and walked over to the barn at the back of the corral. She just followed me there, like a puppy. The saddle and all the other tack was hanging right inside so I told Daryl to go on ahead and I rode her here."

"A very nice find," Allison replied. After hesitating a moment, she inquired, "Did y'all find anything else....of interest?" She knew that when Michonne went out with only Daryl on runs they weren't necessarily looking for supplies; they were searching for the Governor.

"No," Michonne's face immediately became somber. "Daryl thinks that the trail has gone cold, at least as far as a 20-mile perimeter." She glanced sideways toward Allison, as if asking her opinion. "I'm thinking that we should look south toward Jackson and then Macon."

"Macon? That's what, 70 miles or so from here? That's such a long drive... What does Daryl say?" As the words left her lips, she immediately felt conflicted at making such a remark. On one hand, she felt ashamed at suggesting that she had to rely on a man's opinion for something. But on the other hand, Daryl knew the surrounding area better than anyone else, and if there were any signs indicating that the Governor had passed a certain way, Daryl would have recognized them.

Michonne sighed in a not-too-contented way and replied, "He thinks we should give up the search. That the immediate area and beyond is clear, and anything further is wasting fuel...and could be dangerous."
"Anything beyond the gates is dangerous," Allison told her, trying to subtly change the topic, "but I do think it's good luck you found the horse. She won't use up any fuel other than grass and hay when you take her out on runs."

"Yeah, that's true," Michonne nodded, walking away, not completely convinced that they should give up the search for the Governor.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

"Tyreese, may I ask a favor of you?" Carol caught the man by the arm as he passed by the outdoor grill. She was busy stoking the fire in preparation for some venison steaks. Daryl had shot a nice-sized buck early that morning, and Allison had been busy field-dressing it since he'd hauled it back to the prison.

"Of course, what can I do?" Tyreese was always eager to be of assistance, particularly when Carol asked. She was so kind and gentle, especially when it came to the children in the prison.

"It's time for story hour in the library, but I won't be able to get there just yet…can you start things off and keep the kids busy until I get there?"

"Um, sure, I guess…what do you do, read from a book or something?"

Carol poked at the logs in the grill before answering. "Well, we just finished a book, so they're ready for a new story. Maybe just tell them something you know from memory… Any sort of story will do until I get there."

"OK," he agreed and set off for the library. He entered the room and was confronted with a semi-circle of kids of varying ages looking at him expectantly, as if they thought he'd pull a rabbit from a hat.

"Hello, children," he began, "sorry I'm late. Er, I mean, sorry I'm not Carol. She's going to be late. But I'll start you off with a story until she gets here. What type of story would you like to hear? Do you like scary stories with witches and ogres, like Hansel and Gretel or Jack and the Beanstalk?"

"We want to hear more about the two women in the candy factory," Lizzie piped up.

"Candy factory?" Tyreese pondered for a moment. "You mean Willy Wonka and Charlie?"

"No," Mika interjected. "The two women whose husbands made them get a job, so they worked in a candy factory."

"And the assembly line went too fast, and they stuffed chocolates in their mouths," Luke added.

"I'm not sure I know that story…"

"And meanwhile, the husbands were trying to cook dinner, and they put too much rice in the pot and it boiled over all over the kitchen floor," Patrick said.

"Sorry I'm late," Carol entered the room just in the nick of time, as far as Tyreese was concerned. She smiled at Tyreese and said, "Karen was nice enough to take over grill duty, so you are excused."

"Thank God," Tyreese sighed out loud as he stepped into the corridor.

"What's wrong?" Rick asked anxiously. Tyreese turned to see the sheriff and Daryl approaching in
"Oh, nothing major," he hastily explained. "Carol asked me to start story time, and the children were asking me about some story I've never heard of…. Two women in a candy factory, stuffing chocolates in their mouths off of the assembly line…”

"Oh, geez," Daryl shook his head slightly and gave a lopsided smile.

"What?" Rick and Tyreese asked in unison.

"Allison did story time yesterday when Carol was busy in the kitchen…”

"Oh." Tyreese remarked. After a beat he inquired, "Just for future reference, what book is that story from?"

Daryl almost actually chuckled out loud as he replied, "That's not from a book, that's from an episode of I Love Lucy."
"You got a hold of it?" Daryl asked.

"Yeah, all set here," Allison confirmed, holding tight to the rear hocks of the deer's carcass. Daryl had gone out hunting two days ago and had returned with an impressive 10-point buck. Tyreese had helped him hang the animal by its back legs from a tree branch within the prison grounds in order to drain the blood, but that spindly branch was already struggling with the weight of the buck. It wouldn't withstand any aggressive yanking or pulling, so Daryl enlisted Allison's help when it came time to butcher the carcass. They'd just spent the past 20 minutes carefully slitting the skin along the legs and belly and slicing the more stubborn pieces of membrane that held the fur to the meat.

"OK, One, two, three – " and with a grunt, his finely defined biceps straining with effort, Daryl gave a mighty tug and pulled the skin cleanly off the animal's shoulders and neck in one smooth piece. He spread the animal's fur out on the ground, white side up, to serve as a large tarpaulin on which to place the cuts of meat as they butchered the buck.

"Save the liver!" Allison exclaimed in a Julia Child-type voice.

"I know, I know," Daryl grumbled good-naturedly, placing both the liver and the heart in a bucket. He had teased Allison in the past about her love of organ meat. When he was growing up, he and Merle only ate offal out of necessity. But Allison actually enjoyed the flavor of that stuff, which still made him shake his head a bit in a "to each his own" way.

"Pretty good-sized rack," she commented, looking at the discarded antlers. "How old do you think he was?"

"Can't tell by the antlers," Daryl told her. He picked up the head slightly and his voice took on an authoritative tone. Prying open the deer's mouth, he peered inside and ran his finger along the lower jaw. "Judging by how his teeth are worn down, he's at least two years old. But lookee here," he dropped the head and walked back to where Allison was standing and holding the rear legs.

"See how the rump has all these muscles, and is about the same size as the shoulders? That don't happen 'til a deer is three, three-and-a-half years old."

"Pretty old for a deer outside of a petting zoo," Allison mused, mentally figuring the cause and effect. "Guess there's more food available... and less predators..." Her voice trailed off, because as she spoke she realized that hunters were the main predators of deer, and the food that was sustaining the deer was probably the untended crops of farmers. Farmers who previously been very aggressive about keeping deer off their property. Any way you sized it up, it was just another sobering indicator of how rapidly the human population was declining.

"Lot of meat on the neck," Daryl commented, returning his attention to the carcass. Sometimes all the neck was good for was stew, but this had been a fairly large buck and it looked like they'd be able to slice some roast-size cuts from its neck.

"Good thing," Allison replied, using her knife to cut around the vertebrae. "We've got a lot more people to feed these days."

"Speaking of people," Daryl said, "if you find a green stone in my pants pocket when you're doin' laundry, save it. Just in case I forget to take it out before you do the wash...."
"OK, will do," she assured him. "You starting a rock collection or something?"

"Nah, it's for Miz Richards. She's making some kind of somethin' for her ol' man and asked me to
keep an eye out for a jasper stone."

"Oh," Allison commented as she held one rear leg aloft while Daryl deftly removed a nice-size ball
roast with a few slices of his knife along the femur bone. Her thoughts were a jumble at the
moment, bouncing from one surprising fact to another. Daryl knew gemstones? Daryl was taking
gemstone retrieval requests? Daryl knew someone in the prison named Mrs. Richards? Truth be
told, Daryl's sudden vast knowledge of "Who's Who" confounded her, especially when she
compared it to the Daryl she knew back on Hershel's farm. Back when he was still teetering on the
"better off on his own" mindset, when he struggled to remember Jimmy and Patricia's names.

Allison had to admit to a having a pang of guilt or three in the past months, as the prison population
had progressively swelled and folks would greet her by name but she couldn't remember theirs. It
was easier for men to fake their way through those situations, she'd thought to herself. She'd
noticed many times in the past – before The Turn - how guys greeting one another at a gathering
easily employed a variety of generic nicknames to sound friendly enough to cover up the fact that
they couldn't remember that person's name. "What's new, Big Fella?" "How 'bout another beer,
Chief?" "Hey, Sports Fan, did you see that Falcons game?" Such banter just didn't work as well
with women, she thought. Plus, in the past she'd always prided herself on remembering names;
she'd always made a point of addressing the nurses and aides by name at the hospital – it not only
helped to relax the patient, but it was also a matter of courtesy. She'd always hated when power-
tripping senior residents barked out "Nurse!" or "You!" before dictating instructions in front of a
patient back when she was in med school. But these days every time a new person was introduced
to her instead of hearing their name her mind immediately started calculating how much food and
medicine was available and how much thinner their resources would be stretched.

"What's funny?" Daryl's question startled her from her reverie.

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"You were smilin' and I don't remember saying anything humorous."

"Oh, nothing was funny-'ha ha', just funny-'interesting'."

"What's so 'interesting', then?" He asked as he carefully removed a lymph gland from the fat
surrounding the rump roast. "Some of this would make a nice ribeye steak," he mused aloud, "but
with so many people here, I think we'll end up cutting most of it up into pieces for barbecue or
stew. Extend it, y'know?"

"I find it interesting how you remember everyone's names, and their likes, their dislikes, things like
that," Allison answered his previous question.

He shrugged. "You stay in one place more than a couple of hours you'd be surprised what you pick
up."

Allison held out her arms to catch the ham as he cut it from the hock. She then rotated it slowly for
him to trim the excess fat off of the meat. "Yeah, I guess it's hard not to learn about people when
you're living in close quarters," she agreed. But once again her thoughts were in a bit of a swirl.
She'd been this close to calling him out on this sudden "staying in one place and learning things"
logic of his. They'd been on the farm for – how long? – and he'd only grudgingly referred to a
select few people by their actual names back then. And he most certainly had never bothered to
learn anything about them, their likes, their - - Suddenly her mind came to a screeching halt. She
mentally flashed back on the farm, and recalled a variety of comments that Daryl had made to her when they were alone – insightful comments about members of their group that had surprised her. Now she suddenly recalled how she'd realized at the time that Daryl was always observing and absorbing. He'd been the true definition of still waters running deep. The difference between now and then was that back then he'd kept all that intel to himself; in fact, it seemed like he would have been embarrassed if anyone else found out exactly how much he knew about each member of the group. But now he didn't seem to care if people knew that he was conscientious, observant, compassionate. The only thing that had really changed about him was his openness. He'd shed a few of the many hardened protective layers he'd blanketed himself with since childhood and was becoming more comfortable with familiarity.

"Hey there, Daryl!" Zach called out as he and Beth passed by. "I think I've got it this time – forest ranger!"

Daryl paused from his work long enough to glance up at the young man and grunt, "Guess again."

"What?" Beth asked, cocking her head slightly in confusion.

"I've been trying to figure out what Daryl did before The Turn," Zach explained to her. "I take one guess per day, based on observing him and clues I get from other people who know him better 'n I do."

"Yeah, well, maybe you shouldn't put much too faith in some folks' clues," Daryl grumbled, giving Allison a quick glance. She smiled innocently in response.

"I'll get it right yet," Zach replied with certainty before leading Beth away.

"When will he give up?" Allison wondered aloud after the couple was out of earshot. "And what was that look you gave me?" She turned to Daryl innocently.

"I know who's been feedin' him these so-called hints." He made his usual dismissive "Psshht" sound and rolled his eyes to emphasize just how trivial this whole "Guess what Daryl used to do" business was. "Who else would tell him that I was a skater in the Ice Capades, and an Aluminum siding salesman, and a retired Secret Serviceman, and I forget what the heck else…"

Allison giggled. "You should've seen his face when I revealed that you used to be a fashion designer for the underwear division of Calvin Klein."

"Christ!" Daryl exploded.

"Well, he keeps coming to me every day, asking me 'No, really, what did Daryl used to do? Seriously. For reals.' and no matter how absurd the answer I give him, he just keeps coming back and asking again. I guess he figures that one of these days I'll slip and tell him the huge secret he's digging for. Sometimes he strikes me as being not too bright for a college 'puke', as Merle calls him."

"Merle?" Daryl repeated questioningly, running his knife along the backbone to cut out the backstraps and tenderloins.

"Yeah, he doesn't seem to like Zach much for some reason," Allison replied, collecting the tenderloins from Daryl. She stepped over to the tarp and set down the cuts of meat, arranging them to fit just so.

"Merle don't like most people," Daryl shrugged.
She was about to comment on her suspicions that Merle's dislike of Zach had to do with Beth. More specifically, that – in her opinion - Merle felt a bit possessive when it came to Beth. But she stopped short and reconsidered articulating her thoughts. When it came to his brother, Daryl seemed to have some sort of uneasy truce with Merle. She knew that Daryl was very happy that his brother was alive and safe, but she also sensed that he had mixed feelings about living in close quarters with him. Daryl had never spoken to her at length about his childhood, but from the occasional anecdote he'd shared here and there she'd gotten the impression that he'd spent much of his youth walking on eggshells, trying for the most part not to raise the ire of either his father or Merle. He'd tucked himself up under Merle's protective yet harsh wing because it was the less painful alternative. These days Daryl just seemed to be pleased that Merle had found himself a role within the group that kept him busy and out of trouble. For the first time in his life, Daryl was the Dixon who people looked up to, and who now worried how his brother's behavior might reflect on him.

"If Merle and his crew finish that smokehouse any time soon," Daryl's voice interrupted her reverie, "we can use some of this meat for deer jerky. Somethin' to keep everyone fed during the winter 'n case the hunting ain't so good then."

"Carol and Beth have been collecting jars," Allison agreed, "so that they can preserve some of the vegetables from the garden before the first frost." She smiled as Daryl sliced the remaining bits of meat from the buck's bones. "Takes me back to when I was a kid…late summer…huge pots of boiling water on the stove, dill seed, garlic cloves, peeling the skin from tomatoes…Granny had a regular assembly line set up when it came to putting up pickles and tomato sauce."

"Only thing we had in Mason jars when I was growin' up was the moonshine my old man made," Daryl remarked. He paused and stretched his back and arms slightly to relax after working so intently in a hunched-over position. Then he bent over the array of cut meat laid out on the skin and started stacking pieces. Allison did the same at the opposite end and as they progressed they pulled the edges of the hide up wrapped it around the meat to make a giant makeshift bundle.

"I found a Mason jar in a paper bag once in Granddad's bookcase," Allison commented as they worked. "I didn't know what it was, or why it was there instead of in the pantry or the cellar. I opened it and sniffed it and the top of my head about blew right off."

Daryl chuckled as he tied some rope around the huge package.

"I asked Granddad about it later, and after he was done yelling at me for nosing around where I shouldn't – " She caught Daryl's glance and cut him off before he could speak. "I'm not nosy! I was looking for a book and I found a jar. Anyone would be curious in that instance."

"Keep tellin' yourself that," Daryl grunted with a half smile. "Should we get some more help carrying this?"

He hoisted about three quarters of the bundle off the ground and Allison picked up the remaining portion and experimentally held it and then positioned it over her shoulder. "No, I'm good at this end, if you're OK back there."

As they carried their bounty of venison back to the kitchen area, Allison finished her story. "So, anyway, that stuff in the jar was something called Applejack, it was some sort of moonshine that a friend of his made every year, and Granddad said that if I was good and could keep a secret – meaning don't tell Granny – he'd let me try some of it on New Year's Eve. So there we were, watching the Peach Drop on TV…Granny had gone to bed around 11 o'clock and was sound asleep…. And at the stroke of midnight he gave me this tiny little paper Dixie cup full of Applejack. The cup was the size of the one the dentist gives you to rinse your mouth."
Daryl was already laughing out loud before she'd finished her story. "Did you sip it? Or did you throw it down, like a real shot?"

She turned and looked at him as if he'd been in on the conspiracy. "Funny thing – Granddad told me that I wasn't supposed to sip it – that the only way to drink Applejack was to down the whole cup in one swallow. And because I was young and I trusted my beloved Granddad who would certainly never trick me or steer me wrong, I listened to him. And a second later I thought I was dying. My throat was on fire, my gut was burning….I remember I was stomping one foot on the floor and pounding the arm of my chair with my fist." She shuddered slightly at the memory. "And Granddad was laughing his head off just like you are."

Daryl struggled to control his mirth. He'd had a similar experience as a youth with both Merle and his dad looking on and laughing, and he remembered the embarrassment and anger at being the butt of a joke. But he simultaneously kept picturing Allison reacting to that first taste of Applejack – face contorting in pain, eyes bugging out of her head, smoke coming out of her ears – it was almost like a cartoon and it was hard not to laugh.

"Let's hurry up and get this to the kitchen," he said, changing the subject as he bent down and grasped an edge of the deer skin, "and then I'll get Tyreese or someone to come back and help me dispose of these bones."

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

"Hi, Daryl!"

"Mornin', Mr. Dixon!"

"Hey Daryl!"

Allison noticed that Daryl seemed slightly embarrassed by the greetings called out to him as she strolled alongside of him through the outdoor barbecue area a few days after they'd butchered the buck. He grunted in response and occasionally gave a very slight wave of his hand. She tried hard not to feel slighted that no one seemed to acknowledge her presence and nobly resisted the urge to announce "Allow me to introduce myself, I am another person in the room."

Patrick shyly approached them as they passed the grill where Carol was cooking venison. "Um, Mr. Dixon?"

"Patrick?" Carol called out from her place behind the outdoor stove. "Do you mind taking over for a little while?"

"Sure, m'am," the bespectacled teen immediately agreed, eager to please as always.

Carol trotted up and gently grasped Daryl's elbow. "Do you mind if I borrow him for a second?" She asked Allison with a sweet smile.

Allison returned her saccharine grin and replied, "Well, he's not really mine to loan."
Carol chuckled and began guiding Daryl away. "We won't be very long," she said over her shoulder, "I just need to show him something...."

"I'll just bet you do," Allison thought to herself, mildly irritated. She was spared any further wondering as to what Carol needed to display to Daryl so privately by an urgent voice behind her.

"Allison?" Carl sounded worried.

"Yes? What's up?"

"I think Violet's sick," he stated, his face clouded with concern. "She just lays there and doesn't move much."

"Violet?" Allison silently wracked her brain to figure out whom Carl was talking about. The kids....there was Lizzie, and Mika, and Molly, and Luke... and... maybe someone she was forgetting? Maybe it wasn't a kid – Oh, geez, why couldn't she keep up with the people in the prison like Daryl did?! "OK, let me go fetch my bag...where is she now?"

Carl looked confused by her question. "Over in the pigpen," he replied slowly, as if Allison was brain-damaged.

"Wait – what?" Allison gave up any pretense and flat-out asked, "Who is Violet?"

"The pig," Carl sighed with exasperation. "You know, the mama pig that had the babies...."

"Ohhh," Allison said slowly, processing his information, then asked in a rush, "Hold on, you're naming our food? And have you told Hershel about this?"

"No, I haven't talked to him yet... " He glanced down at his feet momentarily. "I, um, didn't know if I should bother him... He's so busy with the garden and all..." He searched for an excuse to avoid telling her the truth – that he worried about Hershel, being so old and with only one leg and all. He didn't think the elderly man should have to wade through muck and pig poop unless it was absolutely necessary. He knew that Hershel wouldn't appreciate his pity, so he kept his fears to himself. It was just one other concern that weighed heavily on his young shoulders. He worried about his dad – how he wouldn't carry his gun and he just seemed to never discuss important things with him anymore, like security at the prison. All his dad seemed to care about these days was assigning him various farm chores. And he couldn't help but have his sister constantly in the back of his mind; her safety, the various things a baby needs as it grows.

"Well," Allison replied, sensing something was on the teen's mind by the way he avoided her eyes, "livestock is a little outside of my field of expertise, but I'll take a look at her." She grabbed her call bag as a reflex, despite the fact that it probably didn't contain anything handy for diagnosing porcine problems. As they entered the pen a previous thought reoccurred to her. "Maybe it's just me," she turned to Carl as he scooted up beside her, "but I don't know if I could eat bacon or ham if I knew it was previously called Violet. If you want to name the animals, fine, but don't tell me their names, OK?"

Carl nodded absent-mindedly, his attention focused on the sow that was lying very still on her side. Allison gingerly touched the pig's snout, wondering if it should be cool and moist like a dog's nose. Violet's nose was moist, but it was quite warm and Allison noticed streaks of dark red running from the inner corner of her eye down the side of her face. She pulled her stethoscope from her bag and listened for the pig's heartbeat. She didn't know a lot about farm animals, but she knew a fair bit about dogs and cats...and she recalled her colleague at Durham Regional going on and on every day during their shifts together about his precious Champion AKC Newfoundland, Misty Morning,
and how her heart rate had gone up to an alarming 120 once when she was sick. Newfoundlands were pretty huge dogs, maybe not as big as Violet, but if 120 was high for a big dog, then Violet's current resting rate of 150 was a definite signal that something was amiss.

She put her stethoscope back in her bag and stood up to face Carl. "I can't be sure, but it seems like she might be running a fever. I definitely think Hershel should examine her." Noticing the look of fear that widened the young man's eyes, she hastened to add, "It might be something as simple as heatstroke. This sun is pretty killer, as you well know, and pigs can get sunburn and heatstroke just like humans due to their fair skin and lack of fur." She placed her hand on his shoulder and gave it a quick squeeze. "Hershel will know what to do," she tried her best to sound reassuring.

"OK," Carl said. "I'll take care of it."

"He sounds like an old man sometimes rather than a teenager," Allison thought to herself as Carl strode away. She picked up her bag and headed back to the building, trying to remember what she'd been doing before she'd been called upon for pig-doctoring. Oh, that's right, Carol had spirited Daryl off to investigate something or other. She paused in the courtyard and gazed into the distance. She didn't see them anywhere. She mentally shrugged and continued on her way to the prison, anxious to get into a shower and wash all the pig pen slop off of her.
"And how is our Princess and the Little Princess today?" Merle inquired with an ingratiating smile. He'd been en route to Tower Three to survey the walker situation (in order to plot out fence duty) when he encountered Beth strolling outside with Judith in her arms.

Beth smiled widely first at the baby in her arms and then up at Merle. "We're both doin' fine, just getting a little bit of fresh air and sun." She fell into step beside him.

"Seems like every time I see you, you're caring for the baby," Merle said as they walked. "I've seen Rick hold her sometimes, and Carl, but as I recall Carol used to do a lot of diaper duty and other stuff." He spat out the side of his mouth before continuing. "Just sayin', haven't seen her help you out much lately."

"Carol's been busy with other things," Beth explained. "She's on the council, y'know, and she does story time with the kids…" She looked down at the bundle in her arms and cooed. Judith responded with a gummy smile and a series of babbling syllables. "I don't mind, y'know," she told Merle. "I always dreamed of having children of my own…"

Merle glanced into Beth's innocent, smiling blue eyes as she spoke and suddenly it felt as though an imaginary fist was clasping his heart. Damn it, he told himself, what was wrong with him, having these kind of feelings for such a young girl? But he also knew that there was no denying that he cared for Beth, in a way that that overgrown adolescent Zach never could. He could protect her and care for her and treat her like the precious princess – so open and loving and innocent - that she was.

"When you do have children of your own," he finally replied, "I know you'll be a great mama."

Beth grinned at his praise and lowered her eyes shyly. Before she could say anything, however, they spied Daryl and Carol just a few yards away and heard the tail end of their conversation. Specifically, they heard Carol call Daryl "Pookie."

Merle was momentarily taken aback, but then quickly regained his wits and called out to his brother. "Yo, what's your take on the walker situation here? I need to know how many people to schedule on fence duty."

Daryl pointed out the new surge of walkers explained the proposed outing scheduled for the next day. "Lemme know who you want on the fence," he told his brother, "'cause we'll need four or five people to go to the Big Spot."

"She shouldn't be out in this sun without a hat," Carol said to Beth, gently touching Judith's head. "Let's get her back inside."

Merle watched Carol as she walked away. What the hell was this "Pookie" stuff? Daryl was an officially engaged to be married person. Her callin' him pet names wasn't even remotely right. He'd have to speak to his brother about this later.
Chapter 87

Daryl was bent over, rooting around in the cargo area of the Hyundai Tucson. He was trying to arrange the bags of supplies and the empty bags in the most strategic, space-saving way. His hunter's ears, always attuned to the world around him no matter how much his concentration was diverted, heard Tyreese speaking. He pulled his head out of the tailgate and looked around. He spotted Tyreese several yards away, apparently engaged in some sort of serious conversation with Karen. Daryl glanced up at the sky, noting the position of the Sun and quickly calculated how much daylight they'd have for this run. They needed to hit the road soon.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

"You don't have to go, you know," Karen said, trying not to show her fear as she looked into Tyreese's eyes.

"I know, but I want to go. I feel the need to contribute, to help out wherever I can best."

Karen reached up and gently stroked the fuzzy beard on the right side of his face. "You help every day," she informed him. "You're always out there with me on the fence – "

Tyreese grasped her outstretched hand squeezed it in his own. He kissed her knuckles gently.

"To be honest," he smiled at her, "I only volunteered for fence duty so that I could be near you. Truthfully, I don't like killing them on the fence. I hate it. Face-to-face with them against the chain link…it's just…" He shuddered slightly. "I hate it," he repeated softly.

"But you might have to kill them out there," Karen pointed out, meaning when he was out on a run. While his compassion was one of the things she loved about him, she also worried that it was something that could get him killed when he was outside of the protective prison gates.

"When they're coming at you, it's different," he replied.

She kissed him and then leaned into his chest so that he could embrace her in a giant bear hug. "I hope so," she thought to herself.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

"They're shorthanded right now," Zach said to Beth as the pair walked toward the Hyundai. "The Council is putting more people on the fence," he added. When Beth didn't reply, he continued, "I figured I'd step up to help, y'know, go with them."

"OK," Beth replied.

Her placid acceptance was not exactly the reaction the young man expected. He pressed on as they continued walking. Maybe Beth didn't understand what he was risking. "I just – well, I thought…'cause y'know…it's dangerous going out there."

Beth stopped and turned to look at him. "I know," she said simply. She continued walking.

"OK, well, are you gonna say 'good-bye'?" Zach called hopefully to her departing back.

"Nope," she answered with a very slight smile that he couldn't see. Saying 'good-bye' was just a jinx in Beth's book. She'd stopped saying it a long time ago; surely if Zach knew anything about
her at all, he would've noticed that she always said "See ya soon" or something similar whenever someone departed the prison. Still, it was nice to have someone like Zach always handing around and trying to impress her. It reminded her of high school, which sometimes seemed like a hundred years ago. But now and then, when she was with Zach, she imagined herself back in her junior year at East Coweta High and how envious her friends would have been – her dating a college boy! Of course, her daddy would never have allowed such a thing back then…it had taken him a long time to accept Jimmy, and he was only a year older than her.

"Christ, it's like a damn romance novel 'round here," Daryl huffed as Zach placed a bag in the back of the car.

"I was going to kiss you good-bye," Allison's voice made him snap his head around abruptly, "but if that's too mushy for you, we can just shake hands."

"Pshhht," Daryl ducked his head shyly and nudged her with his elbow. He'd been so focused on the conversations around him that he was a little embarrassed that hadn't heard Allison approach from behind. On the other hand, she had some tracking experience, so she did know how to creep up on a person. "Anything in particular you want me to bring you back?" He asked her in an effort to hide his discomfort.

"Just the usual – yourself safely." She smiled and leaned over to kiss his temple. In a quick motion he wrapped his arm around her neck and rubbed her scalp with the knuckles of his other hand.

"Always do," he muttered, just barely audibly.

"Got room for one more?" Bob's voice piped up. The medic walked over to the car with a smile, with Sasha and Glenn following close behind.

"You sure, Bob?" Sasha asked. "You haven't been out on any runs, and besides, we need you here for medical support."

"I want to pull my weight," Bob replied, "and I'm eating meals and using resources without contributing. No one's been sick, I mean nothing that Dr. S and Allison haven't been able to handle. I need to be useful." He grinned at Sasha, flashing that broad smile that she'd tried hard to resist since he'd arrived.

"We're burnin' daylight, just everyone who's goin' get in and let's go," Daryl settled the matter.

"Damn, you're one hell of a tough sell, woman, you know that?" Bob said to Sasha as he scooted next to her in the back seat of the car.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

"Hey, Gracie! Wait up!" Merle called to Allison as she was walking back across the prison yard.

"What's up?" She inquired as he fell into step beside her.

"Has Ralph – Mr. Jacobson – talked to you yet?"

"About what? I haven't spoken with him lately, no."

"Damn, I knew it," Merle cussed under his breath.

"Why, what's wrong?"
"He seems to be coughing a lot lately. I was working with him in the generator room a couple days ago and noticed it, and then yesterday I was in the tool room with him and he kept coughing when he was showin' me a new wiring diagram he'd drawn up for A Block. I told him he should see you but he said it was just allergies."

"What is he allergic to, did he say?" Allison asked.

"Nah, I didn't think to ask. But I've been working with him and the electrical crew for months all through the bowels of this place, and nothin' seemed to bother his allergies before. I figured you could give him some cough drops or Claritin or whatever they used to advertise for hay fever."

"Maybe he talked to Dr. S," Allison mused. "Some men are uncomfortable talking to a female doctor….and then again, some men are just ornery and refuse to see a doctor unless they've got a broken bone protruding through their flesh…." She remembered how stubborn her Granddaddy had been when he'd been getting progressively sicker with what was eventually diagnosed as Pleural Mesothelioma. How he'd refused to go to the doctor, how he insisted it was "just a cough"… She mentally shook her head to clear it of those sad memories that she'd always tried so hard to keep buried. "I'll ask Caleb if he's examined Mr. Jacobson, and if not we'll take it from there."

She walked away, wondering where she might find Caleb at that time of day. She decided to try his cell first, all the while thinking that if Mr. Jacobson had sought help for his cough, Caleb probably would have mentioned it to her at some point. Especially if he'd required an antihistamine. Caleb's cell was empty when she got there, so she went back downstairs to search elsewhere. As she walked she mentally checked off the possible causes of Mr. J's sudden chronic cough: Asthma, COPD, respiratory infection, GERD.

"Got a second?" Maggie called to Allison as she walked past a cell. Allison stepped inside and couldn't help but smile at little Judith sitting on the floor. The baby held a raw carrot in one hand and a red Solo cup in the other. She was alternately gnawing on the peeled carrot (Nature's teething ring) she held in one hand and banging the cup she held in the other on the ground (in between knocking down the tiny pyramid of cups Maggie placed in front of her).

"Sure, what's up?"

Maggie gestured for Allison to sit down. "I just wondered…" She paused as if searching for the right words, "well, how accurate home pregnancy tests are after the expiration date."

"It depends," Allison replied calmly, noting Maggie's discomfort. She gave a small smile of reassurance. "The more expensive brands are usually reliable for three years after they've been packaged and put on the shelves; the off-brands are good for about two years."

"Oh," Maggie sighed. She was quiet for a moment, then stood up and rummaged through a bag that was on an overhead shelf. "I got a couple of boxes of these on a run a while back. The expiration date is September 2013, but I've kinda lost track of the months and years lately." She smiled slightly and added, "I mean, I know when it's autumn and winter and such, 'specially when my dad goes on about planting this and that at a specific time…."

Allison gently placed her hand on top of Maggie's. "I haven't been keeping an eye on the calendar, either," she admitted. "But I'm pretty sure these tests are still accurate." She was quiet for a moment, unsure of exactly why Maggie seemed to be upset – was it because the test had been positive or negative? She didn't want to say the wrong thing. "Do you want to talk about it?" She finally asked.
"I thought I might have been pregnant," Maggie admitted. "I hadn't gotten my period for almost 10 weeks, and I made the mistake of mentioning it to Glenn."

"Mistake?"

"Yeah," Maggie sighed. "He didn't say anything, but I could tell that he's been worried sick since I mentioned the possibility. But I guess it's a moot point now; I was either spotting or starting my period this morning, and I've taken two of these tests since then and both came up negative."

"Well, it sounds like you were just late due to the diet and overall stress we all live with here... I know that I haven't had any sort of regular cycle that I could track for a long time. But I would recommend waiting another week and testing again, just to be sure."

"No, I think deep down I know the tests are right," Maggie replied, her eyes downcast. "That's part of what's bothering me... I think deep down I wanted them to be positive." She stood up abruptly and started pacing in the small floor space of the cell. "I didn't have any other symptoms – no nausea, no breast tenderness – so I probably shouldn't have said anything to Glenn. But every day I see Judith and it tugs at something deep inside of me. And I was thinking that we're all safe now, we have a home. If we can raise one baby, why can't we raise two?" She stopped and stood in front of Allison. "Am I totally crazy to be thinking that way?"

"Of course not," Allison reassured her. "Many scientific papers that have been published about so-called 'baby fever' – " she made quotation marks with her fingers – "it is a bona fide biological phenomenon that frequently occurs in women during their 20s. It's part of the perpetuation of the species; when one woman in the "clan", as they used to call it in caveman days, has a baby that is successfully nurtured, the hormones of the other women kick in and encourage them to reproduce as well." She paused and then added, "I'm sorry, that sounded terribly cold and clinical, didn't it? I didn't mean to make you feel like a brood mare, I was just trying to explain....oh, jeez, I should really learn to shut up once in a while!"

Maggie smiled and sat beside Allison. She placed her arm around Allison's shoulders and gave a quick squeeze. "It's OK, I know what you're trying to say. And I appreciate it. It helps to know that it's...normal... that I'm not being selfish or delusional or something." Her posture slumped slightly as she sighed and then added, "I was thinking before of asking if you had some of those defibrillator paddles in your office. Just in case Glenn had a heart attack if the test was positive."

"Glenn's a lot like Daryl," Allison mused. "He feels responsible for everyone here – keeping us fed, keeping us protected. Obviously you're Glenn's number one priority, but by extension he also worries about keeping your dad and Beth safe, preserving your family. Not to mention the rest of us." She turned to look at Maggie. "I know that you and Glenn will be wonderful parents when the time comes. And when Glenn sees the look of absolute joy on your dad's face when he finds out he's going to be a grandfather, I'm sure you won't need any nitroglycerine pills for him."

Maggie smiled and gently squeezed both of Allison's hands. "Thank you," she said softly.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

"I know something's bothering you, what is it?" Allison asked Daryl. It was the morning after he and the others had returned from the Big Spot run – well, not all of them had returned. They'd lost Zach. Daryl had been naturally upset when the group returned, and had spent that night cuddled against Allison, wrapped in her arms. He hadn't said much, but he'd finally fallen asleep making tiny mewling sounds as she gently stroked his head.

He'd seemed restless ever since they'd awakened and dressed and now was semi-pacing around
their cell instead of immediately heading off to attend to his various daily chores as he usually did each morning.

"I'm sorry about Zach, and I know that no matter how many times it happens, we'll never get used to losing someone – "

"That's just it," Daryl interrupted her and then abruptly sat down beside her on their bunk. He momentarily lowered his head to rest on the hand that was propped up on his knee and closed his eyes. After a moment he sat back up and continued his thought while looking down at his feet. "I don't want to get used to losing people. I hate whenever it happens. But Beth…." His voice trailed off.

"Beth…what?" Allison gently prompted him.

"She didn't seem sad when I told her about Zach. I mean, she didn't show no emotion at all. She said that she doesn't cry anymore." He turned and looked at Allison. "I thought he was her boyfriend."

"I'm not sure how close they were," Allison replied. "You never know, maybe it was more serious in Zach's mind than Beth's, or maybe she just didn't want to cry in front of you. Everyone handles grief in their own way." Her mind flashed back to a time when Daryl handled grief by moving his tent away from the rest of the group. She reached around with her left hand and gently pulled his head toward her so that it nestled on her shoulder. She lightly stroked his sideburn and his outer ear with her fingers.

Daryl closed his eyes and sighed. "I dunno," he murmured, "it just don't seem right…Beth was always, y'know, emotional. Remember when she cut her wrist back at the farm? And now she hardly blinks when I tell her that her boyfriend's dead. I guess it kinda scares me. She acts all cold now, does that mean she's gonna go off by herself later and…do something? Or doesn't it really bother her?"

Allison slowly guided his head downward until it was just under her chin and over her heart. She noticed that he didn't resist as she wrapped him in her arms and rested her chin on the top of his scalp. She pulled him to her tightly and held him in a quiet hug for a few minutes. She struggled to find some words that might comfort Daryl, but it was an impossible task. Poor Daryl had grown up in an atmosphere of always having to "be a man" and "tough it out" thanks to Merle, and it was only since many months after The Turn that he'd started to allow himself to outwardly express his feelings. He was still very child-like emotionally in many ways, Allison knew. Some things were just black or white to him, like Beth's innocence and sensitivity. She'd always worn her heart on her sleeve, and to have her not react to Zach's death was, to Daryl, an anomaly. He would have been more comfortable (in his fidgety, arms-length way) if she'd broken down into a quivering mass of tears when she'd heard the news. Her stoicism worried him… He was able to deal with the unexpected when it came to Walkers, or strangers approaching the prison, but not when it came to his "family."

"I'm sure it bothers her; maybe she just held it in because she wanted to appear strong in front of you," Allison suggested. She felt Daryl's shoulders stiffen under her hands as she spoke. He sat upright and looked at her, his brows knitted with concern.

"You think maybe?" He asked. "She seems to hang around Merle an awful lot; I hope that he hasn't been putting her down for bein' a wuss….or, y'know, telling her to toughen up…?"

"Oh, dear," Allison thought to herself. She'd apparently said exactly the wrong thing when she mentioned Beth not wanting to cry in front of Daryl. She knew that Beth liked to keep company
with Merle sometimes while he was supervising the day-to-day workings of the prison, but she didn't realize that Daryl still had reservations about that situation. He hadn't articulated any concerns to her since….oh, months ago. Maybe it was because Allison hadn't disapproved of the friendship, especially since Hershel always seemed to feel that Beth was safe with Merle.

"No, it's not that," Allison tried to reassure him, "I think maybe she looks up to you and doesn't want to seem weak – "

She stopped short when suddenly a chorus of screams echoed in the distance. Instinctively she grabbed her machete, Daryl picked up his crossbow, and they both ran out into the corridor and followed the chaotic and panicked sounds.

"Walkers in D! Walkers in D!"

Allison heard a jumble of voices around her as she beheaded two walkers and then stomped on their heads after they hit the ground.

"Don't shoot!"

"Follow the plan!"

"Are you bit?!!"

"Get back in your cells and lock your doors!"

"It ain't a breach!" She recognized Merle's voice in the melee.

"Got you! Go! Watch out!"

"Daryl!!" Rick yelled, and Daryl immediately heard him, caught his meaning and scooped up young Luke, who was directly in the path of a Walker.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

After the last Walker was killed, perhaps 20 minutes after the first scream had been heard, the sudden quiet in Cell Block D was an abrupt contrast to the cacophony of sounds that had assaulted the ears during the attack. Now the screams, the growls, the gunshots had all subsided and the only sounds were some muffled sobs of surviving family members. Allison joined Rick, Bob, Daryl, Hershel and Dr. S as they walked from cell to cell to assess the situation. One of the Walkers they'd killed was Patrick – the nebbishy teenager who still liked to play with Legos. They'd found no bites or scratches on him, just bloody trails down his face.

As the group walked past the cells a Walker growled and pressed his face against the bars. Daryl swiftly withdrew his knife from its holster and plunged it into the creature's eye socket. It collapsed and died and Rick commented, "Lucky thing someone locked him in just in time."

"Nah," Daryl said, "That's Charlie. He used to sleepwalk. Saw him wanderin' a couple times when I had night watch. He started locking himself in when he slept so he didn't fall down the stairs."

"He came to me for some cough medicine the day before yesterday," Caleb commented. "He was complaining of a persistent cough that was keeping him awake at night."


"He was bringing up some milky sputum and was running a low-grade fever, about 100 degrees,"
Dr. S replied. "I gave him some Robitussin for the cough, aspirin for the fever, and advised him to drink plenty of water to help break up the congestion." He paused to recall the conversation he'd had with Charlie. "I told him to get some rest and to come see me again if the cough persisted. I didn't see him again after that…maybe I should have sought him out to check up on him…." He was starting to doubt himself, as if he'd missed something during Charlie's examination.

"How could someone die in a day just from a cold?" Daryl asked.

"Not 'just a cold,' Dr. S told him as he gently pulled down Charlie's lower eyelids and leaned forward to look closely, "pleurisy aspiration. Choked to death on his own blood."

"Those lines of blood on his face," Rick spoke up. "I've seen them before, on a walker outside the fence."

"The pig – Violet? - had them, too," Allison said. Her mind started racing, looking for a connection, an explanation. "Some type of swine flu?" She mused aloud.

"Seems to be pneumococcal," Caleb concurred.

"Pigs and birds," Hershel said. "That's how these things spread in the past."

"Maybe we got lucky," Rick said hopefully. "Maybe these two cases are it."

" Haven't seen anybody be lucky in a long time," Bob remarked, his eyes locked on Charlie's body. "Bugs like to run through close quarters. Don't get much closer than this."

"All of us in here, we've all been exposed," Hershel announced. "We need to formulate some sort of plan. Until we figure out what this sickness is and how it's spread, I think it's best that we isolate anyone who's been exposed, and anyone who is showing symptoms…" He looked around the room at the others. "We don't know how this is spread –is it airborne? Is it in the water? I don't want to cause a panic, but until we have more information, I think we should start moving folks – ones who aren't showing any symptoms - into another cell block."

"Why don't you get the Council together for an emergency meeting to decide how you'll proceed," Rick suggested.

"In the meantime," Allison said, "I think everyone should start wearing masks and gloves. And the floors and surfaces in this cell block need to be scrubbed down with bleach."

"Like I said," Hershel interjected, "I don't think we should cause a panic. Maybe just those of us who we know have been exposed should wear masks…"

"We'll take a vote at the Council meeting," Daryl declared. "I'll start rounding up the others. Let's meet in the library 30 minutes from now." He was about to exit the cell when he turned and looked at Allison. "You and Dr. S should be there, too," he said with a tone of Daryl In Charge authority that made Allison stifle a smile.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡
"Nausea," Caleb said out loud. "Did you notice if he was coughing? Or if he was pale? Did he say his throat was sore?"

"No, no, nothing like that," Carol shook her head and then closed her eyes, as if she was being attacked.

"No one's blaming you, Carol," Hershel said kindly, trying to soothe her, "Dr. S is just trying to pinpoint any symptoms Patrick had that you might have noticed."

Carol took a deep breath and then said evenly, "All he said to me was that he didn't feel well, and he asked to be excused because he didn't want to vomit on anyone. I didn't pay any particular attention to his overall appearance because I had a roomful of kids I was reading to at the time."

"Well, whatever this is – this sickness – it seems like it progresses quickly," Sasha remarked. "And it can be lethal."

"We don't know how quickly it spreads, or how exactly it spreads…" Hershel began when he was interrupted by Carol.

"We can't just wait and see," she announced, "because it's not just the illness, this flu or whatever. When people die, they become a threat. And there's children…" Her voice trailed off momentarily. "We need a place for them to go."

"Like Mr. Hershel said," Allison interjected, "it's hard to say right now what the cause of this flu or whatever you want to call it is, and how it's spread. The incubation times of some flus are 10 days or more, which means that anyone who'd been in close contact with Patrick or Charlie could also be infected. We need to start watching for people with similar symptoms as we know them….coughing, fever, nausea…"

"We should start moving people some place…they can't stay in D."

"We're going to have to scrub down D with bleach, as well as the other cell blocks…" Allison commented.

"What do you mean by 'we'?" Carol asked.

"I dunno," Allison replied, caught by surprise. "I guess anyone who we know has been exposed and is willing to put on a mask and some gloves and do it. I had an H1N1 vaccine back in 2009 – all of us working at the hospital got one. I don't know whether that will provide any protection against whatever this infection is, but I'll start scrubbing down D in case we need a 'sick' ward."

"Caleb, did you get an H1N1 shot by any chance?" Hershel asked.

"No," Dr. S shook his head, "I was working in private practice at that time."

"We can move them to Cell Block A," Carol said.

"'Death Row'?" Glenn asked. "I'm not sure that's much of an upgrade."

"It's clean, that's an upgrade," Daryl replied. He stood up and announced, "I'll go start diggin' the graves…" He deliberately didn't meet Allison's eyes as he spoke. The burying of bodies had been one of the few bones of contention between them. She'd always protested that it was a waste of both physical labor and land. She also worried all the time about germs or whatever invading the soil. After all, as she'd told him several times before she'd given up arguing the issue, before The Turn people were embalmed and then buried in caskets inside concrete vaults. Even if they'd died
of some contagious disease there was little chance of them contaminating the ground. But in Daryl's mind there was no difference between then and now; folks deserved some sort of proper burial after they died - they shouldn't be stacked and burned up like cordwood.

"Until we get a better handle on exactly what this sickness is," Allison told the room, "I think everyone should start wearing masks and gloves. I've got several huge boxes of disposable latex gloves in my office, as well as some face masks...." Her voice trailed off as she tried to recall the inventory of protective supplies. "Y'all can also use scarves or bandanas around your nose and mouth..." She noticed the quizzical faces around the table. "In case it's airborne," she explained, "everyone should wear some sort of facial protection, especially if you're around someone who's coughing or sneezing."

"Won't that unnecessarily frighten people....the children?" Carol asked.

"Better they be frightened than infected," Allison replied. "We all also need to be more conscientious when it comes to washing our hands. There is plenty of soap at the kitchen sink, in the bathroom, and in the storeroom. No more wiping hands on shirtfronts and calling them 'clean.'"

As the group got up to disperse, they all heard a harsh cough coming from the corridor. Almost in unison they dashed to the doorway.

"You OK?" Carol was the first to ask Karen, who was being helped along by Tyreese.

"Mmm-hmmm," the woman choked out in between coughs.

"You sure?" Carol persisted. "You don't sound so good."

"We're just taking her back to my cell so she can get some rest," Tyreese explained.

"Tyreese, I don't think that's such a good idea," Hershel said.

"Why? What's going on?"

"We think it's a flu or something," Glenn replied. "That's how Patrick died."

"Well, now that we know what killed Patrick we can treat it, right?" Tyreese asked, his voice rising. He tightened his grip around Karen's shoulders as he spoke.

"There's no need to panic," Hershel spoke calmly, "but in the meantime I think it's best if we separate you two...get Karen into A and then have Caleb or Allison take a look at her..."

"But you two are doctors, right?" Tyreese was becoming agitated. "Y'all can treat this, can't you?"

"We're just starting to get a handle on it," Allison told him. "It's just as new to us as it is to you. Right now our best defense is to isolate those who are showing symptoms from those who aren't." She stepped forward slowly and took Karen's left hand and gently pried her away from Tyreese's grasp. "We're setting up some clean beds in Cell Block A; we'll make Karen comfortable there and I'll be there very shortly to do a complete exam, OK?"

"I'll take her," Sasha told Allison. "You go ahead and get whatever supplies you'll need to examine her and meet us there."

"David from the Decatur group has been coughing, too," Allison heard Carol say as she headed off to grab her bag and some medications.
"It's just a cough," Karen insisted as Carol took her blood pressure. "I don't understand why we're being treated like lepers…isolated like this, and you two wearing hazmat gear…"

"Slip this under your tongue and I'll explain," Allison told her, inserting a thermometer into the woman's mouth. Karen was irritated and her agitation was contagious; David, in the bed beside her, was starting to gripe as well about being moved into "isolation". Allison reverted to her best doctor mode, trying to keep her patient calm without frightening her with the severity of the situation. "We don't know exactly what's going on yet, except that Patrick and Charlie both had a similar bad cough that quickly turned serious. We're hoping that if we catch it in time, whatever it is, we can treat it." She removed the thermometer and said to Carol, "One hundred and two point eight."

Carol jotted down the number in her steno pad, along with Karen's blood pressure: "BP 90 over 60," she informed Allison.

"I'm afraid that all I can tell you right now is that we don't know exactly what we're dealing with, so that's why we're taking every precaution, no matter how extreme it appears. We're going to be moving anyone with symptoms into this cell block along with you and David, and everyone is going to start wearing masks and gloves like we are," she nodded toward Carol. "A lot of it is strictly precautionary, and maybe overkill, but I feel like we can't be too careful, don't you agree?"

"I guess," Karen grumbled. She was suddenly consumed by a bout of coughing. She grabbed a handful of tissues from her bedside box and hacked into them. She fell back into her pillow after the cough subsided and Allison took the tissues from her and examined them before depositing them into the wastebasket.

"Thanks for your patience…we'll bring you two something that we'll hope will soothe your coughs enough so that you can get some rest…Carol?" Allison inclined her head to indicate she wanted the older woman to follow her out into the corridor.

"David's running a fever of 103 and Karen's not far behind. They both have low blood pressure and Karen's bringing up milky sputum." Carol jotted down notes as Allison spoke. "The fever, the low BP, the cloudy congestion…it's all very similar to the Swine flu outbreak a few years ago…"

"We've got some antibiotics on hand – tetracycline, erythromycin, Cipro..." Carol mentally reviewed the medicine cabinet in Allison's office. "Would any of those help?"

"I can't be sure, but I doubt it," Allison sighed. "All the signs point to a viral infection of some sort. Antibiotics don't work on viruses."

"Are you sure?" Carol asked.

"Antibiotics treat bacterial infections… Viruses are different – they invade healthy cells and sort of 'hijack' them; they make them reproduce similar viruses. " She closed her eyes and clenched her fist in frustration. "If we only had a lab where I could take samples and determine for sure if this is viral instead of bacterial…." She felt so helpless. She struggled to collect herself and focus on the problem at hand.

"Just to clarify," Carol interrupted her thoughts, "there is no treatment for a virus?"

"That's why vaccines were eventually developed – the best defense against viruses like measles, smallpox, diphtheria, was to prevent it in the first place. Just like rabies in dogs. Once the disease
hits, all you can do is treat the symptoms and hope for the best.” She paused and then ruminated, "If I could be sure that this is viral, Oseltamivir might help, but we don't have any on hand….

"So there's nothing we can do?" Carol pressed on.

"We can treat their symptoms in the meantime; keep them hydrated – pump the fluids… cold compresses and possibly aspirin for the fever, extra pillows to elevate their shoulders so they can breathe easier. I think we might have some Guaifenesin – Mucincex - in the medicine cabinet that could help to loosen the congestion. That's about all we can do right at the moment." She sighed again and continued, "Can you please make sure to make them drink their water, keep an eye on their temperature, and we'll talk more about it at the council meeting later this evening, OK?"

"I'll take care of everything," Carol assured her.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

Allison's next stop was Michonne's cell. She felt a pang of guilt at not taking a look at the woman's ankle sooner, but she had injured it at the same time that whole kerfuffle had occurred in Cell Block D. Allison couldn't help but smile suddenly, marveling that after all this time she still used Yiddish words even in her thoughts, thanks to all those exhausting hours working under Dr. Rosenthal.

"Mind if I have a look at that?" She asked Michonne, who was sitting on the edge of her bunk wrapping her ankle with a strip of cloth.

"It's fine," Michonne grumbled without looking up. Nevertheless she didn't object when Allison squatted down in front of her and gently took her foot into her hands.

"Did you see anything?" Allison looked up to see Beth suddenly standing in the doorway, with Judith in her arms.

"They just started taking out the dead," Michonne replied in a monotone.

"Can you wiggle your toes for me?" Allison asked Michonne. She applied pressure at different places surrounding Michonne's ankle and instructed her to alternately point her toes and flex her foot.

"I don't want to know who yet," Beth replied to Michonne's statement. "I'm just glad you came back safe."

"It was stupid," Michonne exploded suddenly. "I was stupid. So stupid. When I fell on my ass, they should have just left me out there."

"Now that's stupid," Beth admonished her. "We all care about you."

"They could've gotten hurt," Michonne murmured.

"When you care about people, hurt is kind of part of the package," Beth's voice assumed an authoritative, maternal tone. She patted Judith's back and then asked, "Were there any kids?"

Allison stood up, her examination – as best as she could do without X-Ray equipment - complete. "No," she replied. To Michonne she said, "It doesn't feel like anything's broken; how much weight are you able to put on it? And don't be a hero – take a few steps and be honest about how much pain there is."
As Michonne stood up and went through her paces, Beth mused aloud, "Got all these widows and orphans, but what do you call someone who lost a child? You'd think someone would've given that a name."

"Normally I'd tell you to keep that leg elevated for a day and do some range-of-motion exercises in the meantime," Allison said to Michonne. "But I doubt you'd sit still long enough for that. So all I can do is caution you to tread gently for a day and not go jogging or put any unnecessary strain on that ankle for at least 24 hours." She packed up her call bag and exited, intent on scrubbing down as much of the contaminated surfaces in D block as she could before the Council meeting.

Judith started squirming and getting fussy. She made a few sputtering noises and then spewed her lunch all over the front of Beth's shirt.

"Oh shoot," Beth said, lifting the baby away from her shoulder, "look what you did." She extended the child to Michonne and said, "Can you hold her for a minute?"

Michonne visibly winced at Judith's squawks. "Does she always cry like that?" she asked.

"I think she senses people's moods," Beth replied. "Maybe she knows I'm a little upset because I'm covered in carrots. Please…?" She almost forcibly placed the baby in Michonne's arms. "I'll be back in a jiff."

Michonne tentatively held the child as Beth went off to clean herself up. Judith continued to cry and Michonne closed her eyes and clutched the baby tightly to her chest, murmuring soothing syllables to her while tears streamed down her own face.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

"Make sure you wash your hands," Allison told the young man who was hovering over his sick roommate, wiping the perspiration from his brow. She felt like a tape loop, constantly repeating her "wash your hands" refrain to everyone. She'd lost count of how many cells she'd visited that afternoon. It was so frustrating, though, to see how regularly her instructions were ignored. People had dozens of excuses why they weren't wearing masks or gloves while attending their infected loved ones, and they were obviously not cognizant of the number of times they'd casually contaminated themselves.

She draped her stethoscope around her neck after listening to the man's chest and back. "We're running short on pillows," she commented to his friend, "so if you have any extra clothes or blankets or something that you can use pack under him to elevate his head and shoulders, that should help him to breathe a little easier."

"Don't you have any medicine you can give him?" The man pleaded. "Antibiotics or something?"

Allison stifled a sigh. Again, she felt like a recording, repeating the same information to each patient and caregiver. And she hated that she was unable to give them anything more concrete on which to pin their hopes. "I can't be sure without laboratory tests, but all the symptoms of this illness suggest a viral infection. Antibiotics do not have any effect on viruses." What she didn't explain was that, in her experience, aspirin and ibuprofen could be given to H1N1 patients to ease their fever and muscular aches, which would at least help the patient to get some much-needed sleep. But this particular illness was causing patients in the final stages to bleed from the eyes, so her instincts told her that any sort of anti-coagulant, or blood thinner, might be dangerous.

"I'm sorry, but right now our best treatment is to keep the patients hydrated – make sure they're drinking lots of water, whether they're thirsty or not. That will help to break up the lung congestion
as well as replace the electrolytes they're losing due to the fever." It would also be helpful, she thought to herself, if they had cots or chaise lounge chairs or something for the patients to lie on outside. The windows of the prison were un-openable by design, so in a way everyone was breathing recirculated air, just as if they were on an airplane. A few hours of fresh air wouldn't hurt them a bit.

"I want to see Dr. S!" the man demanded, unsatisfied with the answers Allison gave him. "There has to be something more that can be done!"

"You're entitled to a second opinion, particularly since we happen to have two doctors in house," Allison told him with a smile. "I'll find Dr. S and send him over. In the meantime, please wear a mask…" It looked to her like the rest of her speech fell on deaf ears. She left the cell and went in search of Dr. S. Before she got too far, however, she heard some voices yelling in the distance. Fearful of yet another patient-turned-walker attack, she ran in the direction of the voices, with one hand on the machete at her hip.

She stepped out into the inner courtyard to see a furious Tyreese shouting at Rick and Daryl. It took her a moment to take in the entire scene; two still-smoking charred bodies were lying on the pavement.

"Karen didn't deserve this!" Tyreese cried out, pacing the area, his hands wrapped around his head in anguish.

"What's going on?" Allison asked no one in particular.

"I came to see Karen," Tyreese walked up to her and spoke directly into her face. "And I saw blood on the floor. Then I smelled 'em." He pointed at the bodies. "Someone dragged them out here and set them on fire!" His voice got louder and more emotional. "They killed them and set them on fire!." His voice was raw with emotion.

"You found them like this?" Allison was trying to understand the situation. The last time she'd seen Karen and David they'd been in their beds in A block.

"They killed them!" Tyreese repeated. Allison didn't know who "they" was, but it seemed to her that it probably would have taken two people to drag those bodies outside. Suddenly she noticed Carol standing apart from them in the corner.

"You're a cop?" Tyreese approached Rick menacingly. It was almost an accusation rather than a question. "You find out who did this and you bring 'em to me, you understand?!" He took a step closer and pounded his chest as he spoke. "You bring 'em to me!"

"What the – wait a minute," Allison was taken aback by the sudden fury in Tyreese's face. The already large man suddenly looked twice his size as he hunkered over Rick. "We have to figure out what happened – " She looked at the huge blood trails on the ground and the scientific part of her brain automatically kicked in. Corpses could leak blood if turned a certain way, since liquid flows to the lowest point. But this much blood on the ground…to bleed out requires a pulse, a heartbeat.

"I know what you're feeling," Rick interrupted her thoughts, trying to calm the man down. "I've been there…"

"You bring 'em to ME!" Tyreese shouted again. "Do I have to say it again?"

Daryl stepped up behind Tyreese and gently placed a hand on his shoulder. Tyreese whirled around and shoved Daryl up against the fence, yelling incoherently.
"Hey!" Allison called out and ran forward as if it was a reflex. Which it was, really, seeing someone attack her man. She and Carol both took a step toward Tyreese's back, but Daryl held them off with a gesture. The women both stopped in place, but Allison added, "You leave him alone!"

"We're all on the same side, man," Daryl told Tyreese evenly.

"We've all lost someone," Rick approached Tyreese from behind. "I know what you're going through, but you're going to have to calm down."

Tyreese whirled around and pushed Rick backward. "You need to step the hell back!"

Rick paused and then replied, "She wouldn't want you being like this."

The mere hint of Karen inflamed Tyreese's ire and he lunged at Rick with a barrage of punches.

"Stop!" Carol cried, trying to insinuate herself between the two men.

Daryl grabbed Tyreese's arms from behind and pulled him back several steps from where Rick was crouched on the ground. Rick gasped for breath and rubbed his hand across his face. He looked down at the blood on his palm and staggered to his feet. He then growled and ran to Tyreese and laid into him with an almighty punch. Tyreese fell to the ground and Rick flailed away, with Daryl standing nearby trying to reason with him, repeating "Rick! Rick!" Daryl finally grasped Rick's arms as he had done Tyreese's just moments before, trying to stop the fight.

"Let go of me! Let go of me!" Rick yelled as he wrested himself free of Daryl's hold and then shoved him away. Rick hovered over Tyreese for a moment, poised to deliver yet another punch, but then he stopped and looked at his own bleeding knuckles.

Allison found her voice again and shouted out her confusion. "Have you all just completely lost your minds?!" Rick and Daryl turned and looked at her. "What in the world is going on here? Suddenly we're fighting each other?!" She paused to catch her breath. She looked at Tyreese, half-sitting, half-laying on the ground, his eye already starting to swell shut, and Rick, his eyes wild with fury and his hand bleeding. "Oh, for heaven's sake, I don't need this, I am out of here," she finally sputtered in disgust. She spun on her heel and exited the area.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

"The good news is that none of these cuts need stitches," Hershel told Rick as he wrapped gauze around the deputy's hand. "I wouldn't plan on doing much typing in the next few days, though," he joked, trying to lighten Rick's mood. The man's face was contorted with concern…something beyond his bloody knuckles was bothering him. Hershel placed a final strip of adhesive tape on the bandage and asked, "You okay?"

Rick flexed the fingers on his injured hand absent-mindedly and muttered, "Yeah…." He studied the older man's face for a moment and then decided that he would understand his current concern. "It's just… Allison sort of stormed off after the fight. Said something about leaving…?" He heaved a sigh and his shoulders slumped as if everything was suddenly crashing down on him. "I can't help but worry what happens if she does decide to leave? We've got Dr. S to handle any medical issues, but you know that Daryl will go where she goes… and probably Merle…" Hershel was confused.

"I dunno what she meant," Rick admitted. "She just seemed unusually upset." He heaved a sigh and his shoulders slumped as if everything was suddenly crashing down on him. "I can't help but worry what happens if she does decide to leave? We've got Dr. S to handle any medical issues, but you know that Daryl will go where she goes… and probably Merle…"
months ago if someone had told him that he would consider Merle Dixon to be a vital part of their personnel, but the ornery redneck had been responsible for maintaining the day-to-day drudgery workings of the prison for some months now. He was the one who kept track of who was available for X task and who had worked too many hours doing Y duty. And as for Daryl, well…Rick could not fathom life without the man who had become a brother to him. Daryl had had his back far more than Shane ever did.

Hershel sat back in his chair and gave Rick the composed look that was guaranteed to calm anyone down. He had to choose his words carefully, without giving too much away. He'd made a promise to Caleb.

"I don't think there's any reason to panic at the moment," he told Rick. "Allison isn't really the impetuous type, and even if she up and started packing I think that Daryl would convince her to stay…he's been outside more, he knows how dangerous it is out there." He waited for Rick to digest this information and then continued. "Council meeting later tonight, thought you should know." He hoped that Rick interpreted this statement as an invitation. There were many topics that needed to be covered at the meeting, many of which would benefit from Rick's input.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

"Dr. Allison! Wait up! Can I talk to you?"

Allison had her foot on the bottom step of the stairs leading to Tier 2 when she heard a woman's frantic voice calling her name. She looked behind her and saw Jeanette running toward her, waving her hand in the air.

"Sure, what's up?"

Jeanette caught up to her and paused to catch her breath. She reached out and grasped Allison's left hand and started babbling. "It's just allergies – hay fever – but she won't listen!"

"Huh? Who won't listen? Please, slow down….start from the beginning."

"That woman – Carol. She wants to put me in with all those sick people. I keep telling her I ain't sick with the fever or whatever it is. I always cough at this time of year. It's allergies. But she won't hear none of it." She squeezed Allison's hand for emphasis as she spoke.

"OK, OK, try to calm down…come with me to my office, let me check you out, see what's what. Alright?"

As they walked to Allison's office Jeanette continued to protest her innocence, disease-wise. "I've had allergies since I was a child, ragweed season was the worst…"

"Have a seat," Allison directed her when they got to her office. At a glance Jeanette didn't seem to exhibit the typical signs of this strain of flu. She unwrapped a tongue depressor and clicked her penlight on. "Open, please," she directed, then gazed at the back of Jeanette's throat. She observed some redness in the very back, which could possibly have been caused by coughing and clearing of the throat due to allergies. "Hold this under your tongue," Allison instructed, inserting a thermometer after removing the tongue depressor. "I'm going to ask you some questions, and I want you to be one hundred percent honest with your answers, OK? Just nod or shake your head, don't speak."

Jeanette nodded.

"Has your nose been stuffy lately?"
Jeanette paused as if to consider what the correct answer might be and then nodded her head.

"Have you been sneezing as well as coughing?"

Another nod.

Allison removed the thermometer and read it. "No fever," she commented, shaking it back down. She continued her inquisition while she nonchalantly cleaned the thermometer and returned it to its case.

"How do you feel overall? Any muscle pain or aches? Do you have that feels-like-you've-been-hit-by-a-truck type of fatigue? Any chills?"

"No, no," Jeanette shook her head adamantly.

Allison listened to Jeanette's chest and back and didn't find any evidence of congestion. "I can't be sure of anything without blood tests and a laboratory," she told the woman, "but right now the symptoms you're showing do point to allergic rhinitis rather than any type of flu." She went to the sink and washed her hands. "The lack of fever, the sneezing, clear chest – none of those typically present in cases of flu." Particularly H1N1 flu, she thought to herself.

"Well, will you please tell Carol that?" Jeanette pleaded. "I don't need to be isolated in some hospital ward – I may be coughing a little bit, but I'm not sick. I can still work, pull my weight around here."

"Yes, I'll tell Carol when I see her. And why don't you go find Merle and tell him that I've cleared you. He's the one who hands out work assignments. With so many people getting sick, I'm sure he needs all the help he can get."

"Thank you, Doctor Allison," Jeanette smiled and shook Allison's hand. She hopped down from the examining table and commented, "I know she's a friend of yours and all, but I think you really need to talk to Carol. About all the people she's isolating and such. She's just…well, she don't want to listen to anybody. It's like her word is law or something."

"I'll have a word with her, thanks for the information," Allison replied. She mentally added "have a talk with Carol" to her list of Things To Do and then continued on her previous mission to meet with Caleb. She needed to compare notes with him on the patients he'd seen and to formulate a plan on future treatment.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

Allison walked into Dr. S's cell babbling a stream-of-consciousness line of conversation while reading from the notebook in her hand, interspersed with an occasional question. The doctor was sitting on the edge of his bed, hunched over an IV bag that he was preparing.

"…and I've examined a couple of people downstairs who insist on a second opinion, so I told them you'd come examine them. Typical H1N1 symptoms – high fever, chest congestion, headache, muscular aches, coughing up milky sputum. But they don't believe me that a couple of penicillin pills won't make them better, so, when you get a chance…." She stopped abruptly when Caleb raised his head and met her glance. Her entire posture slumped sadly as she muttered, "Oh, geez Caleb, nooo….."

Dr. Subramanian's eyes were puffy, watery and red, and his face glistened with perspiration. His breathing was labored when he spoke. "One of the downfalls of working in a high-paying specialty in a private hospital…no exposure to the Swine Flu."
Allison felt a pang of guilt as she remembered mocking his course of study in the exotic Caribbean when she'd first met Caleb. Everyone in the ER department at her hospital in North Carolina, from doctors to nurses to aides, had received an H1N1 vaccine back in 2009 just because they'd been admitting so many contagious patients. But a heart specialist such as Dr. Subramanian wouldn't necessarily have felt the need to be vaccinated, since his clientele was so highly selective and limited.

"How long have you been – I mean, there has to be something…"

Caleb shook his head and smiled weakly. "You and I both know it's too late." His speech was interrupted by a bout of wracking coughs. Allison pulled a few sheets off the roll of paper towels that Dr. S had on his work area and wadded them up. She placed them over his mouth and he held it in place while she pushed him forward a bit and firmly clapped his back a few times with her cupped hand to help loosen the congestion. After his coughing had subsided she took the towels from him and noted bloody streaks in his sputum.

"There's a covered pail in the corner," he told her as he sat back to catch his breath. She stripped off her gloves and disposed of them and the paper towels in the bucket.

"I've been preparing IVs for use," Caleb said after a moment. "Don't waste any of them on me," he added to interrupt what he knew Allison was about to say. "As it is, we won't have enough and it seems like more people are presenting with symptoms every day."

"I wish there was something I could…." Allison's voice trailed off. She felt so helpless. Treating a terminal patient was one thing, but a colleague….someone who was well aware of his inevitable outcome… She had no words. "Does anyone else know?" She finally asked him.

"Only Hershel," Dr. S replied. "I asked him to keep it to himself." He was suddenly consumed by another bout of coughing. He waved Allison away when she leaned forward to assist him, since she was now not wearing protective gloves, and grabbed a paper towel on his own and covered his face. When the coughing subsided and he caught his breath he looked at her very earnestly. "I told him what I'm now telling you. I've got these – " He pulled a box out from underneath his desk that contained several shotguns. "When the sick start to turn, if you're caught unaware, these are loaded and ready to use…" He started coughing again.

"Thank you, Caleb," was all Allison could manage to say. She picked up four of the filled IV bags and told him, "I'll take these down to my office for now."

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

"Dr. S….Allison….?"

Allison turned toward the sound of the voice and saw an obviously feverish Sasha stumbling down the corridor. She quickly walked over to assist Sasha, placing one of the woman's arms around her shoulders.

"I'm gonna be okay…." Sasha gasped between labored breaths.

"Yes, you are, we just need to get you into bed right now," Allison tried to sound reassuring as she walked with Sasha to the nearest freshly made up bunk, which happened to be in Cell Block D, rather than the further away designated isolation Block A. She eased Sasha into bed and told her, "You're running a fever, you need fluids." Allison grabbed a towel from the rack and soaked it under the cold water faucet in the sink. She mopped Sasha's brow, face, the back of her neck and her chest as she spoke. "We've got some IV's ready, but I think you're up to drinking water right
now, aren't you?"

Sasha sighed and nodded her head without opening her eyes. As the water evaporated from her skin it had a cooling effect and it made her feel ever so slightly better.

"OK, just hang tight for a few and I'll be right back." Allison dashed to the kitchen area and rummaged in the cupboard where they'd amassed a collection of various colorful lidded sports cups with straws from many supply runs; "Adult Sippy Cups", as Allison called them. She plucked one from the shelf, filled it with cold water, and returned to Sasha's bedside.

"Drink this," she said as she handed the cup to Sasha. Sasha took a healthy swig from the straw and then rested her head back on her pillow. "I'm going to set this cup right here," Allison took Sasha's hand and guided it to the small bedside table. "I want you to keep drinking, even if you don't feel thirsty. It will help to keep you hydrated and will also help to break up some of that lung congestion. I have to go to the council meeting right now, but I'll be back to check on you in a bit, and I want to see most of that water gone, OK?"

"Mmm-hmmm", Sasha murmured sleepily.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

The council meeting was already underway when Allison finally made her way to the library. She'd been busy making room for the new patients as they presented and treating them as best she could for the moment – propping them up in bed, encouraging them to drink water, monitoring temperatures and blood pressure and murmuring the best bedside reassurances that she could muster.

"...there are precautions I think we need to take," Hershel was saying as Allison entered the room.

"Like what?" Carol asked.

"I think it makes sense to separate the most vulnerable and isolate them," Hershel replied. "We can use the Administration Building. Separate office, separate room."

"Who is the most vulnerable?" Glenn asked.

"The very young," Hershel told him.

"What about the very old?" Glenn inquired.

"From my experience," Allison spoke up, and all eyes turned to her, as if they'd just noticed her entrance into the room, "statistics have shown that age-wise, infants less than one year old were most likely to be infected, as were adults between the ages of 25 and 64. But at that time, and I mean before The Turn, when things were more or less status quo, over 70 percent of patients who were infected had some underlying medical condition, like asthma, diabetes, emphysema, et cetera."

"We've been through every pharmacy nearby, and then some," Daryl remarked.

"All we have on hand right now are some medicines to treat the symptoms," Allison told the group. "Anti-inflammatories to reduce fever, but I'm on the fence about using them. Aspirin is a blood-thinner, and some NSAIDS raise blood pressure. With the bleeding from the eyes we've seen, well... Anyway, we've got some guaifenesin to help break up the congestion..." Her voice trailed off. "Some people can fight off the symptoms and eventually recover, but ideally what we need are anti-viral drugs... Zanamivir or Oseltamivir," she looked down and shook her head in frustration.
"That veterinary college at West Peachtree Tech, that's one place people may not have thought to raid for medication," Hershel said.

"They'd have anti-virals in stock at an animal hospital?" Allison asked incredulously.

"Avian influenza has been infecting animals before humans ever heard of it," Hershel told her. "Granted, the Zanamivir might only be on the shelves in the form of intra-nasal sprays, but we can still use that. And they should most likely have some Oseltamivir in pill form."

"West Peachtree Tech? That's some 50 miles away," Carol said. "That's too big a risk."

"Too big a risk before," Daryl replied, standing up and throwing his crossbow over his shoulder. "Ain't now. I'm gonna take a group out. Best not waste any more time."

"I'm in," Michonne said.

"You haven't been exposed," Hershel pointed out. "Daryl has. You get in a car with him…"

"He's already given me fleas," Michonne joked. "I'm not worried."

"I can lead the way, then," Hershel continued. "I know where everything is kept."

Daryl looked at the vet and tried not to mince words. "Whenever we're out there, it's always the same. Sooner or later we have to run."

Hershel understood his meaning. "I can draw you a map, then."
"Allison!"

Allison turned at the sound of Merle's voice. He very rarely addressed her by her given name, so she knew something was wrong. She saw Merle trudging slowly along the corridor, supporting Mr. Jacobson who was dragging his feet beside him.

"Can you please help Ralph? He ain't doin' so good."

"Here, help me get him to a cot..." She wrapped Mr. J's other arm over her shoulders and the two of them walked the man to the nearest cell that had been scrubbed down and had a bed with clean sheets.

"I'm fine, don't need all this fuss..." Mr. J rasped in between bouts of coughing. His brow was covered with perspiration and his breathing was labored.

They eased him into bed and Allison propped up his head and shoulders. As she soaked a cloth in cool water from the sink she chastised Merle. "Why aren't you wearing a mask?!" She gently mopped Mr. Jacobson's brow, face, and arms. As the water evaporated it would make his fever a bit more bearable.

"Oh, hell," he scoffed, "I cut off my own hand and lived, for Christ's sake, and survived a bullet in the chest to boot. Ain't nothing pussy like some piss-ant flu bug gonna hurt ol' Merle."

"You rest for now, Mr. J," Allison told her patient, "I'll be back soon with some elderberry tea that will help soothe that cough enough so that you can get some sleep." Merle followed her out into the corridor.

"It's not enough that Mr. Hershel is wandering around outside the fence collecting berries, risking his life, but you won't listen to common sense and wear a darned mask? It's one thing to lose people to an infection, but to lose them to recklessness...? That's just totally inexcusable!"

"Don't get your panties in a bunch," Merle told her, deliberately using one of the words he knew she hated. He knew that she was not only worried about the sick folks in the prison, but also about his brother who'd gone out on a 50-plus mile risky mission. Deep down he was anxious, too, but somehow he felt more reassured when Gracie wasn't fretting, when she had her dander up. "If I was planning on spending more time in the sick ward maybe I'd wear a mask, but right now I don't have time to be bothered with that. I've got to get back to the fence....there's a big walker build-up and we're running short of people to put 'em down. Gotta figure a way to get ahead of 'em before the whole damned thing caves in on us."

"We're running that low on personnel?" Allison asked. She hadn't really taken the time to think of who was left to manage the day-to-day operations. She mainly knew that with Bob off with Daryl and the others, and Carol looking after the folks in A Block (as far as she knew), she was short two assistants.

"You're the doctor, you've seen how many new cases there are every day," Merle replied. "I've got Jeanette working overtime managing the kitchen and sometimes I have to use some of the kids from A Block – Mika, Luke and that oddball one, Lizzie – to run food out to the people working the fence." He sighed tiredly and then looked at her evenly. "Just like you, those of us who are still up and walking are all pullin' double and triple duty these days." He remembered from his time in
the Marines how some doctors had a "God complex" and could be dismissive, believing that their work was the only "hard" or important work. Well, he was here to cut Gracie down to size before she started copping any sort of attitude. Of course, he had shaved down his hours of sleep to three or four per night, and he was feeling the effects of exhaustion. Maybe that's why he was feeling a bit more puckish and irritable than usual.

Allison walked almost robotically to her office and Merle followed her. She stripped off her gloves and turned on the faucet in the sink. She squirted some antibacterial soap onto her hands and forearms and began scrubbing vigorously. She'd done this so many times lately that she felt as if she was running on autopilot. "What are we going to do?" She finally spoke again, looking down at her hands as she washed.

"What do you mean?" Merle wasn't quite sure who or what she was referring to.

"We, those of us who aren't sick yet…" She spoke while looking at her hands, afraid to meet his gaze. "What are we going to do if Daryl and the others don't make it back here? Even if this flu dies out on its own, who's going to hunt and manage the garden and get food for us? Who is going to buttress the fence? Who is…. I dunno, do all the hundreds of things required to keep this place safe." She sighed heavily as she dried her hands. "I haven't seen Carol or Beth or Maggie for a couple of days now… I don't know where they are or how they are… Glenn is running a fever but he won't rest, he's just as stubborn as you and Daryl…" Her voice trailed off as she momentarily allowed herself to feel overwhelmed.

She remained silent for a few minutes, composed herself, and finally turned and looked at Merle. When he saw her plaintive, huge blue eyes he suddenly felt a pang of guilt – an emotion that was very rare for him - for being sarcastic with her moments ago. Geez, no wonder his brother had been so taken with this woman. She was certainly tough, and sometimes her tongue cut sharper than any scalpel, but then there were these moments when she looked so vulnerable and trusting and fragile that he just wanted to do anything he could to reassure and comfort her.

"Maggie has been working the fence a lot," Merle told her in a calming voice, "and so far she hasn't shown any symptoms other than being dead-on-her-feet tired like the rest of us. Beth is in A Block, taking care of the baby. Rick took Carol out on a supply run earlier today."

"What? Daryl and Michonne and the others are already out there, why would he….unless he thought –"

"No, no, just calm down and catch your breath. From what Rick told me he was just goin' out locally, scouting around for whatever food and maybe medical supplies might be around. There's a shit load of little subdivisions not far from here…no one's had the time to go house to house on all those cul-de-sacs to see what canned goods all the soccer moms have stashed in their cupboards." He paused and then gave Allison a soft punch in her shoulder. "Bet you'd never have guessed that ol' backwards redneck Merle knew what a 'cul-de-sac' was," he teased.

"Much less use it in casual conversation," she added with a very slight smile. She pulled a fresh pair of gloves from the dispenser in preparation for checking on her next patient. She turned and looked at him and said softly, "I hope you know how much we all appreciate what you've done to keep this place up and running." His "cul-de-sac" jab had hit its mark; she knew that she'd been guilty of occasionally making pointed remarks to him when he occasionally showed his ignorance about a topic that seemed obvious to her. She'd never done that to Daryl, but then Daryl had never pretended to know everything like his brother did.

"I've gotta get back to the fence," Merle told her, slightly uncomfortable with her praise. "You go do what you need to do. Daryl and the others will be back directly with all that stuff you need," he
"Some council meeting, huh?" Hershel asked the assembled group later that afternoon. "We're two members short, so I asked Allison to sit in with us so that she can fill us in from the medical side, and we can update her with whatever strategy we come up with or decide on."

Glenn started to say something but was suddenly consumed with a bout of coughing. He covered his mouth with a paper towel with one hand and held up the other as if to assure everyone he was OK.

Hershel continued on in an effort to distract from Glenn's obvious flu symptoms. "I think we should make some new rules before the others get back. I hereby declare we have spaghetti Tuesdays every Wednesday." He paused and smiled slightly. "First we have to find some spaghetti."

"This isn't the north end of Boston, but I think Anthony would approve," Allison murmured tiredly. Hershel smiled, pleased that she'd recognized his reference. She was participating, whether voluntarily or involuntarily – via her history of TV addiction – in his attempt to lift the spirits of Sasha and Glenn, who were not only ill but seeming to be on the verge of despair. He knew that keeping things lighthearted when possible was sound medical practice. If the doctor still felt comfortable enough in such a situation to make jokes, the patients (whether they consciously realized it or not) would often perceive that perhaps the situation wasn't so dire. It gave them a tenuous thread to hold on to.

"Huh? What? Who's Anthony?" Glenn removed the paper towel from his face and cocked his head, his attention momentarily diverted from how absolutely lousy he felt to trying to understand the conversation.

"You used to deliver pizzas, I'm surprised that you're unfamiliar with traditional Italian cuisine," Hershel joshed.

"It was a TV commercial," Sasha said weakly, wavering slightly in her seat. "An old TV commercial…"

"I think that commercial must have aired for 20-some years," Allison reminisced. "This Italian woman leaned out of a window in an apartment building and kept yelling 'Anthony! Anthony!' And then the announcer said at the end that in the North End of Boston, Wednesday was Prince spaghetti day."

"Boxed pasta is not exactly Italian cuisine," Glenn told Hershel. He took a large sip of water and then asked, "Until the others return, what's the plan? I mean, we've got you, Allison and Dr. S doing what you can, but is that enough? We need people to not only treat the sick, but also to take care of the dead…"

Allison glanced furtively at Hershel when Glenn mentioned Caleb… so far no one else knew that he was infected and too sick to do anything other than prepare IV bags for patients. "I know that this is a delicate topic," she began hesitantly. "but with the current mortality rate, I think that we should reconsider our position on burying the dead." Glenn started to protest, so she held up a hand to interrupt him and continued, "Hear me out, please. We're stretching our able-bodied personnel to the limit as it is, from fence duty to cooking and serving food to scrubbing linens and cleaning cells. I know it sounds callous, but I think it would be best to not expend manpower on digging
graves…. That is energy that could be better used elsewhere."

"So what should we do?" Glenn asked with a look of outrage on his face. "Just stack our friends up like cordwood after they've passed and then just… burn them?"

"Yes," Sasha replied in a low voice. "I've always been in favor of burying our friends, but we not only are running short of people, we also have limited land here." She was consumed suddenly by a wracking cough, and then continued after a few minutes. "When this is all over," she made a vague, sweeping gesture with her hand, "we'll need what land we have for growing crops, maybe raising more animals. To support the living."

Hershel smiled, pleased that despite all the sickness and obstacles confronting them, some of them were looking past this epidemic to the future, holding out hope. "I agree with Sasha and Allison," he said, "but I also think that we should try and keep any deaths as quiet or low-key as possible."

"What do you mean?" Glenn was confused.

"Not everyone who gets this sickness will die," Hershel told him. "It's the law of averages….that's how vaccines were eventually created for certain diseases in the past – a select few got sick and then got better. Their bodies had the ability to fight off the disease, so their blood samples were used to make vaccines, but that's neither here nor there right now. My point is that we need to keep everyone's spirits up, all the sick people, because sometimes hope is the best treatment. If they see us removing dead bodies daily they might subconsciously give up the fight and get worse."

"I get it," Sasha replied, "keep the deaths on the down-low. Kill them quietly in their cells – if that's where we find them – and just wheel them away on the gurney. If anyone asks, we say they're being taken to the hospital ward."

Allison smiled slightly, appreciative of Sasha's ability to conjure up a quick lie. There was no real "hospital ward", but the sicker patients wouldn't know that, having been confined to their beds for the past week or so.

"Anything else?" Hershel asked.

"Just one thing," Allison said, somewhat cautiously. "I think that Sasha and Glenn should be resting rather than working for the time being." The two started to protest simultaneously and Allison interrupted them by saying, "I know you're both sick. You know you're both sick. Maggie is outside defending the gate and Tyreese is miles away picking up medicine and both of them are expecting to find you two alive when the quarantine is lifted and they get back here to see you."

"Who's going to help you and Hershel and Dr. S if we take to our beds?" Glenn asked.

He had a valid point, Allison had to admit to herself. But still, was saving some extra work worth the price of seeing Maggie's face if Glenn succumbed to the flu? There was no guarantee that some bed rest would save him, but it would certainly help.

"Maybe you and Sasha could curtail your activities a bit," Hershel suggested gently. "Take shifts, one rests while the other works….and both of you confine your work to the lower level. Let me and Allison climb those stairs."

"And Dr. S…?" Sasha asked weakly.

"He has an office of sorts established in his cell upstairs," Hershel answered quickly, "preparing IVs and monitoring the patients who are up there."
Glenn sat back in his chair without replying, while Sasha mumbled a weak, "OK."

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

Ralph Jacobson's eyes were glassy, gazing at nothing, as he struggled to gasp for his last breath. A few minutes later it was all over. Hershel was standing at his head with a defeated look on his face. Their only resuscitator was currently being used on Henry, another patient, with Glenn meticulously handling "squeezing" duty.

Allison paused moment before drawing her knife. She noticed the look on Hershel's face and stated more than asked, "You haven't had to do this yet, have you?"

"No," he lowered his head and murmured. "There was one late last night…Sasha did it…"

"Look away if you need to," Allison said before plunging her knife through Mr. J's eye socket into his brain. She removed the blade, wiped it clean, and then quietly asked Hershel while keeping her eyes on Ralph Jacobson's face, "Would you say a prayer for Mr. J?"

Hershel bowed his head and murmured, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all. Please welcome in your loving embrace the spirit of our dear friend, Ralph Jacobson. He has helped all of us so much during his time here on Earth, and we shall never forget his wisdom and his kindness."

Allison joined him in an "Amen" and then the two of them lifted Ralph's body onto a gurney and covered it with a sheet. "I'll take him outside…" Hershel began to say when he was interrupted suddenly by a small voice.

"What are you doing?" Lizzie asked. She had apparently escaped from the quarantined area and was wandering around the cells that housed the sick and the dying.

"What are you doing here?" Allison asked.

"We're taking Mr. Jacobson to a quieter place, the hospital ward," Hershel spoke over her. "Go get my copy of Tom Sawyer from my room. I want you to read it by tonight."

"I won't finish it," she said defiantly.

"Why not?" Hershel asked as Allison scooted the gurney away.

"'Cause it's gonna get too dark."

"Well, give it your best try," Hershel told her. "We all have jobs to do. That one's yours." He said it with enough authority to send the young girl scurrying back to the quarantine area.

"I dunno, I hate to speak ill of children," Allison said to Hershel later as they placed Ralph's body on the "burn" pile outside, "but I have to say that that kid is kind of weird. Truth be told, she gives me the creeps."

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

Hours later, although it felt like days later, Allison was climbing up the stairs yet again to bring tea, tissues, clean linens and whatever else she could carry to help the patients on the second level. She paused to catch her breath and thought to herself (not for the first time) "One more trip up these stairs and I'm just gonna sit down on the top step and never move again." She felt like a pick-up truck operating with only one spark plug, she was so exhausted. But every time she was winding
herself up for a good ol' fashioned bout of self-pity she'd see Hershel rushing by, with more energy than a man half his age, not to mention walking on one prosthetic leg. She'd feel a wave of shame wash over her and then would mentally regroup and push on. Today was no different; as she rested at the top of the stairs she saw Hershel walking slowly toward her with a bloody knife in his hand and his head bowed down.

"Are you OK?" she asked hesitantly as he got closer.

Hershel looked up and she saw a look of sadness in his eyes that sent icy tingles of fear throughout her limbs.

"Caleb?" She asked quietly.

"He's got some filled IV bags in his cell that we can use," Hershel said distractedly. "Give me a few minutes and I'll help you…move him…" He walked away without further comment.

Twenty minutes later Allison helped Hershel carry a gurney up the stairs to Dr. Subramanian's cell. She wordlessly helped him move Caleb's body off of his bed. As Hershel wrapped a sheet over Dr. S he told her, "There's a case under his bed with some guns and ammunition…we'll come back and collect it with the IVs…after…" His voice quivered ever so slightly as he spoke, and he seemed so overcome with emotion that Allison didn't ask him to say some prayerful words before they moved the body.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

Merle was bone-tired but he still had to make one more stop before hitting his bunk for a few hours' rest. He went to the glass door separating the Administration Building from the corridor leading to the rest of the prison and knocked gently. Beth approached the glass with baby Judith in her arms. She started babbling when she saw Merle.

"How is everything? How's my dad? And Maggie?" Her questions poured out in a rush.

"Your dad and Maggie are OK," Merle assured her, "except that your dad is working too hard. Won't take a rest like Allison tells him to."

Beth smiled knowingly. "That's my dad," she said, alternately looking down at the baby in her arms and up through her eyelashes at Merle. "He's always told us that everyone has a job to do. That things will get better if we all work hard."

Merle couldn't help but feel a tug at his heart when the guileless Beth spoke to him with such confidence and innocence. In all the time he'd been at the prison, she'd never judged him and had always looked at him and spoke to him the same way – as if she truly liked him and trusted him. It had been many years since anyone had treated him that way, much less a female. Hell, even before The Turn, the only women he'd dated (if you could call it that) or bedded had been girls who'd been "around the block", as they say, many, many times. But Beth was different. He knew that he didn't have the good looks or soft heart of his younger brother, and that he'd beat the shit out of Glenn back at Woodbury. But yet Beth seemed to see past all of that. She was the one who'd taken the time to compliment him on his work at the prison, like getting the place wired for electricity and his knowledge of all the military-grade weapons that were scavenged and brought back. What bothered him, though, was the other feelings she evoked in him. Deep down he knew it was wrong – he was so much older than her – but he definitely felt some more-than-platonic feelings for this girl.

"Your ol' man's right," he told Beth through the glass. "As long as everyone keeps workin' hard and
“Doin' their jobs, we'll beat this flu bug and everything will get back to normal.”

“You look like you could use some sleep,” Beth admonished him.

“You're probably right, Princess,” he replied. “But you just take care of the Little Princess and let Ol' Merle worry about himself.”

As he turned and walked away, he silently vowed in his heart that he would do whatever was necessary to protect Beth.
"Carl? Judith?" Rick asked anxiously as he exited the car and Maggie closed the gate behind him. "Are they okay?"

"Yeah," Maggie replied as she peered through the driver's side window into the back seat. "Where's Carol?"

"Glenn? Hershel? Sasha? Allison?" Rick ignored her question and continued pressing her for information.

"Yeah, it's bad but they're all fighting it. Daryl and Michonne and that group aren't back yet."

Rick nodded and started to walk toward the prison building.

"Rick!" Maggie called out sharply to him. He stopped and turned to look at her. "Where's Carol?"

Rick sighed and walked back to where Maggie stood. "It was her," he said softly.

"What?" Maggie didn't understand what he was trying to tell her.

"She killed Karen and David. She was trying to keep it from spreading." He paused a moment to let Maggie digest this information. "Tyreese is going to be back here soon," he continued, "so I didn't think that she should be here." He ran his hand through his hair while he searched for the right words, and Maggie noticed the cuts and bruises on his face that remained from the fight she'd heard about between Tyreese and Rick when Karen and David's charred bodies had originally been discovered. "And I couldn't have her here," he added.

Maggie saw pain in Rick's eyes, as well as something else. A questioning look, perhaps, or a searching for approval that he'd made the right decision.

"She has a car, supplies, she'll figure it out," he said resignedly. "I'll tell your dad, don't tell anyone else yet."

"Okay," Maggie agreed.

Rick eyed her evenly and then asked, "Would you have brought her back?"

"She came right out and said she did it?"

"Yeah."

"Then you were right to send her away," Maggie told him. "Don't doubt yourself, Rick," she added. "We don't get to do that anymore."

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

"Carl? Carl!" Rick called out as he entered the Administration Building.

"You're back," the youngster said simply as he emerged from a corridor and approached his father. But despite his lack of emphasis, those two words spoke volumes as to the relief he felt seeing his father returned safe and sound. "You OK?"

"I was gonna ask you that," Rick replied with a smile.
"We're all fine, no one's sick," Carl assured him.

"You didn't have to ….

"Nothing happened, haven't had to use my gun, Dad," Carl reiterated.

"Judith?"

"She's with Beth."

"OK," Rick finally exhaled in relief. "Found some food on the run." He tossed a bag to Carl. "Bunch of fruit leather in there. Make sure everyone brushes their teeth after."

Carl nodded with a slight smile. He knew that one thing Allison always collected on runs, and reminded others to look for while out on runs, was toothbrushes and toothpaste. He'd originally thought that with everything else they had going on, a big ol' Crest White Strips smile should be the least of their worries. But when he happened to voice that opinion out loud to Allison one evening she had asked him, "Have you ever had a really bad toothache?" He'd thought for a moment and then said "No." And that set Allison off on one of her lectures.

"Well, that's good. Your mom probably took you to the dentist every year to check for cavities and such. But sometimes people don't take care of their teeth and then a cavity develops and gets worse and eventually affects the nerve in the tooth. There's this movie, Marathon Man, where an evil dentist….. Um, never mind that, but trust me when I say that a severe toothache can hurt worse than a headache, sore throat and upset stomach combined. And we don't have a dentist here in the prison and even if we did, without electricity and the proper equipment, there's no way of taking dental X-rays or filling a cavity. And there's also the risk of bacterial endocarditis for anyone who's had heart valve surgery…"

"I get it," Carl had assured her at the time, his mind spinning from information overload, "we have to keep our teeth clean." He'd been Scared Straight when it came to oral hygiene.

"Dad?" Carl stopped Rick as the man turned to leave.

"Yeah?"

"Can't I come out and help? Somehow?" Rick started to protest but Carl interrupted him. "I was around Patrick and he got sick and I didn't. I'm not doing much here; I think I could be more useful outside."

Rick paused for several moments as he stared at the son who had grown up so suddenly in the past few months. He had trouble believing that this young man who was almost as tall as him and whose voice was rapidly deepening was the same Carl who had run up to and hugged him with such childish glee back at the quarry when he'd first arrived there. How long ago was that? Sometimes it seemed like just a few months back, but at other times, like when he saw this self-confident teenager who not only took charge of his baby sister but also an entire segment of the prison, he was amazed at how much time had passed. He had a fleeting thought of Lori, had the world not Turned, insisting on taking photos and videos of Carl at every event large and small, reminding him that "they grow up so fast."

"Merle could use some help out on the fence," Rick finally told his son. "There's a pretty big walker build-up. Why don't you go and check in with him to see how you can help."

"I'm on my way just as soon as I drop off this food!" Carl responded with a wide grin.
Rick found Hershel just as the older man plunged a knife through the eye socket of another flu victim. Hershel hung his head in grief and took several moments to collect himself before he pulled the sheet over the patient’s head. He braced his hands on the edge of the gurney and stood hunched over in silent prayer.

"Hershel?" Rick called out softly.

The exhausted veterinarian turned his head slightly to look at Rick. He then returned his gaze to the patient he'd just killed and sighed heavily before he spoke.

"Third one we've lost today," he said. "We're burning them behind the blocks. Burning them. That's what it's come to." His voice was choked with anguish. He took a moment to compose himself and then added, "I still think there's a plan… I still believe there's a reason…"

"You think this is all a test?" Rick asked.

"All of life is a test, Rick," Hershel replied.

"I have to talk to you about Carol," Rick told him slowly. "She confessed to me that she was the one who killed Karen and David…" Hershel remained silent as Rick explained both his reasoning and his leaving Carol to fend for herself.

"We've come too far for me to question your judgment, Rick," Hershel replied. "I understand your reasoning…certainly some loose cannon playing Dr. Kevorkian during this time would add unnecessary extra stress to an already serious situation." He didn't say it aloud, but apart from Rick's concern about his own children and Carol's apparent dispassion when it came to eliminating possible threats within their community, he was also thinking of Tyreese. Tyreese had been very adamant about finding and punishing Karen's killer to the point of beating up on Rick and Daryl… if the truth ever came out, could they actually expect him to co-exist happily with the woman who was in his mind a murderer?

"I have to look in on Sasha," he finally said, excusing himself from the conversation.

"Welcome back," Hershel smiled down at Sasha as she slowly regained consciousness. He'd had her on IV fluids ever since she'd collapsed hours earlier fighting the walkers who'd turned and emerged from their cells.

"What..?" She blinked her eyes and looked at him in confusion. "I passed out…?"

"You were dehydrated," the old man told her in a soothing voice. "Being a hero takes a lot out of you."

"You should know," she replied slowly, her breathing labored. "Y'know," she added, "I thought you were an idiot to come in here… I mean, I thought you were just gonna end up some dead foolish man."

"I can't tell if that's a compliment," Hershel replied.

"Truth be told," Sasha gasped with difficulty, "I dunno what I'm really saying. I must've hit my head. But y'know what? My mind is clear enough to remember that I don't believe in magic or luck. Never have." She paused to catch her breath. "What I'm saying is that I don't know if I'd be here
right now if you weren't so damned stupid."

"You know what?" Hershel gently wiped her brow, "I'm going to take that as a compliment."

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

Allison was just finishing cleaning the cell of a recently deceased flu victim on the second tier when she heard her name called.

"All…" there was a pause as he gasped for air, "Allison?"

She looked up to see Glenn staggering toward her, his chest heaving with the congested effort of trying to breathe, his face dripping with perspiration. "Oh geez," she exclaimed before she could check herself, "get over here!"

She tried to guide him to the bunk in the cell, but he collapsed in a heap just inside the doorway. She made one attempt to lift him back up to his feet, but he was almost completely limp like a rag doll and she didn't have the strength to carry him. She positioned him on his back on the floor and then grabbed the pillow from the bunk and placed it vertically beneath his head and shoulders. She closed her eyes for the briefest moment and collected herself.

"OK," she said in her Official Doctor Voice in an effort to calm her patient, "Just try to relax for a minute, and I'll be right back with something that will help you breathe."

She walked briskly out of the cell and turned down the corridor in search of Hershel. Her mind immediately flashed back to her days in the ER and she kept picturing herself calling out to her team "Bag him!" if Glenn had been rushed into the room on a gurney by paramedics presenting his current symptoms. She recalled that the last patient who'd been "bagged" was Henry, so … Her thoughts were interrupted by a burst of activity at the far end of corridor.

"Daddy!" Maggie shouted from the lower level. "Stand back!"

"No!" Her father replied, trying to grab a hold of Walker Henry from behind, "you might hit the bag! We need it for Glenn!"

The mention of Glenn's name seemed to make Maggie even more resolute. She aimed her gun and squeezed the trigger, expertly hitting Henry just above his left eyebrow. Walker Henry collapsed and Hershel wasted no time in ripping the resuscitator off of his face. Maggie scrambled up the stairs and asked breathlessly, "Where is he?"

"Over here," Allison called to her. Hershel and Maggie hadn't noticed Allison until she spoke, but now they both rushed to follow her to the cell where Glenn lay, struggling for breath.

"Oh my God, his lips are turning blue!" Maggie gasped.

"Hershel, there's a bottle of hydrogen peroxide in my bag there," she inclined her head, "would you please rinse and sterilize the resuscitator?" While Hershel prepared the bag, Allison turned Glenn onto his side and gave him several solid whacks between his shoulder blades with the side of her hand.

"What are you doing to him?!" Maggie cried in fright, tears springing to her eyes.

"Just trying to loosen some of the congestion in his lungs," Allison replied evenly in an effort to keep Maggie calm. She was going to need to woman's help with the next step, and there was no room for hysteria.
"Ready," Hershel said as he returned to Glenn's side, holding the resuscitator.

"OK," Allison spoke clearly and succinctly, "there's a reason that patients are usually sedated when this is done – it hurts. It is uncomfortable, and it is the body's natural reaction to fight something being forced down the windpipe. I need you both to hold him down – and I mean forcibly - while I insert this… Ready?"

Without giving them time to answer, Allison pushed the resuscitating bag into Glenn's mouth while Maggie and Hershel positioned themselves over each of Glenn's shoulders and tried to restrain him. Maggie kept an encouraging and assured tone to her voice as she murmured, "Hang in there, Glenn, you can do this, baby, it's all gonna be OK…" despite the fact that there were tears running down her cheeks.

Glenn squirmed and bucked and resisted as was to be expected during such an invasive and painful procedure, but Hershel leaned forward across Glenn's chest and applied most of his body weight to hold the young man as still as possible. Allison adjusted the apparatus slightly and gave an almighty push and then sat back on her heels. She squeezed the bag, released, and repeated the procedure four more times when Maggie whispered, "His lips!" They were returning to their normal color.

"We've established an airway," Allison replied with a momentary sense of relief. She kept squeezing the bag rhythmically. She thought of Henry, who'd died despite being resuscitated. She hoped that Glenn was stronger, that he was not as far gone with the fever…

"Hang in there, baby," Maggie murmured, grasping Glenn's hand. "You're doing great, you're already looking better," she gently encouraged him. She'd heard it from both her father while growing up and also Allison in more recent times that a positive attitude played a big part in patient recovery. Her mind flashed back to that dark time when her dad's leg had been amputated and he laid in his bunk hovering between life and death. She now regretted telling him that it was OK to let go… she wished she could have been more like Beth, who had never doubted for a minute that daddy would recover. It had occurred to her more than once after Hershel was back up on his feet – er, foot – that it was Beth's smiling face and eternal optimism that had spurred his recovery. She would not make that same mistake twice; she was going to be Glenn's personal cheerleader, no matter what his odds or the outcome.

"You are doing much better," Allison smiled down at Glenn, trying to maintain the atmosphere of calm that Maggie was presenting. She continued to squeeze the bag and then expanded on her statement with some medical facts in order to reassure him. "It's a good sign that your lips are back to their normal color," she explained in the modulated tone she'd used so many times to encourage "borderline" patients in her past. "You didn't have a mirror handy, but just a few minutes ago, your lips were blue. And while that's sometimes considered an attractive color on your goth or emo type of hipsters….geez, I feel ancient, is Marilyn Manson even cool anymore?... in your case it meant that you were not getting enough oxygen in your blood. But now your lip color is back to normal, so for the moment this uncomfortable tube down your throat is doing the trick. And Daryl and Michonne will be back very soon with the meds we need so that you won't have to lay here and roll your eyes at Maggie, telling her that I'm boring you to death with my chatter."

Hershel reached over and grasped the bag, and Allison relinquished her grip. "I'll take over for a bit," he said kindly, knowing that her hand was getting tired. "Why don't you go down and check in on Sasha, see how she's doing?"

"OK, good idea," she agreed standing up and stretching for a moment. "I'll be back directly."
Allison was so exhausted and sleep-deprived that it took a few minutes for the tableau before her to sink in. As she entered Sasha's cell she saw a figure hovering over her, sticking a needle into her arm…

"Bob!" She realized who the figure was. "You're back!"

Bob didn't immediately reply; he was too focused on hooking Sasha up to the hastily-made IV pouch of emptied Tamiflu capsules he'd prepared. Once the needle was properly inserted he turned to Allison and said, "We're all back," knowing that she'd been worried about Daryl. "Here," he handed her the Large Economy Size bottle of Oseltamivir Phosphate his group had brought back from the veterinary hospital. "You can have Carol start preparing some IVs, and I'll be around to help her in just a few minutes."

"I haven't seen Carol in a few days," Allison told him. "I think she's busy taking care of folks over in the isolation ward. But as soon as you're free here, I could use some help with Glenn upstairs…"

She paused long enough for Bob to nod at her in acknowledgement before she almost stumbled over her own feet running back upstairs. Her adrenaline had kicked in some thousand-fold now that she had both the flu drug in hand and the knowledge that Daryl was safely back home.

"Maggie! Can you give me a quick hand?" Allison called out as she ascended the top stair.

"Go ahead, I'll take over," Hershel told his daughter, who'd been on squeezing duty for the past 20 minutes.

Maggie followed Allison's voice into an empty cell two doors down where they'd been stockpiling the IV fluid bags that Dr. S had prepared and some other medical supplies.

"Daryl and the others are back," Allison said without looking up as she prepped to mix some Tamiflu into a saline bag. "Your dad was right, they found the medicine we need…. hold this, please…. " The two of them prepared several IV bags with the anti-viral as quickly as they could, and then rushed back to Glenn's cell.

"Daddy was right, Glenn," Maggie leaned over her fiancé with a big smile, "that medicine we needed was right there at that veterinary hospital." Hershel sat back on his haunches and sighed with relief while still carefully maintaining Glenn's oxygen flow.

Allison quickly swabbed some disinfectant on Glenn's arm and then inserted the needle. "Can you hold this up," she handed the bag to Maggie, "until I find some sort of pole or support?"

"No problem," Maggie replied, her gaze never leaving Glenn's eyes.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

A little less than 48 hours later, Glenn was breathing on his own and was well enough to stand up for brief periods and walk the distance necessary to take himself to the bathroom. Sasha was also back on her feet, and itching to get back to work, whether it be assisting with other patients or helping out on the fence.

"Are you crazy, girl?" Bob chastised her when he saw her strapping an assault rifle over her shoulder. "What the heck do you think you're going to do?"

"I've been a liability too long, Bob," she replied. Her voice was much stronger than it had been for days, but her body still weak from the flu. "I can't just sit here on my ass, I need to get out there…"

"Are you trippin'?!" He asked. "You are in no shape to do anything but rest and recover. Have you
ever been sick in the past – had something like strep throat or maybe a urinary tract infection, something that required antibiotics? Did you bother to read the instructions that said to keep taking the pills even if you start to feel better?" She started to interrupt, but he continued, with a slight grin, "No, I can see looking at your stubborn face that you never follow instructions. My point is that your body has been sick for a long time, and it needs time to recover. Just because the medicine suddenly makes you feel better doesn't mean that you're all better. You need to continue resting and taking your medication for however long the doctor prescribes."

Sasha was torn between a feeling of automatic rebelliousness against someone telling her what to do and some long-forgotten soft spot that Bob was nudging. She was so accustomed to being the strong one…even growing up, she tended to mother her older brother because he was so soft and tender-hearted. She'd had boyfriends before The Turn, but none who had actually taken care of her when she was sick, much less worried about her overall health.

She reluctantly shrugged the rifle from her shoulder and set it down against her bunk. "OK, Doctor Bob, - or should I call you 'Mama'? – I will rest like a good girl for the rest of today." She sat down on the edge of her bed and gave him a very slight smile.

"I'm not trying to bring you down, I'm just trying to do what's best for you," Bob explained gently. "You got a book or something to keep you occupied while you're on bed rest?" He glanced around her cell.

"No," once she finally sat down she was overcome with a wave of exhaustion, "I think I'll just take a nap for now…"

"OK, then, I'll bring you your pills later and you'd better still be here or Ima gonna come lookin' for you," he told her with a smile.

"Yes, Sir," she murmured, already feeling drowsy.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

Allison's reunion with Daryl was brief once they finally found each other. He pulled her tightly to his chest and she sighed, "I'm so happy you're back, so happy…" several times. He didn't speak, but simply wrapped one hand around the back of her head as she snuggled under his chin and kissed her gently on the top of her head. After a few minutes she stood back and looked up at him. He noticed the deep, dark circles under her eyes.

"You need to get some rest," he admonished her.

"You don't look all that well-rested yourself," she replied.

"I slept in the car some," he reassured her, "and I'll turn in after I talk to Rick, and take care of some other stuff…"

Allison knew from experience that "other stuff" meant a whole roster of duties that Daryl would undertake, from checking on the fence security to helping to burn the deceased patients and everything in between.

"Well, I'll turn in, too, in a little bit, after I check on my patients and all that 'stuff'…" She flashed him a quick grin.

"Make sure it's sooner rather than later," he said brusquely. "We don't need you gettin' sick on top of everything else." He struggled to maintain a lighthearted attitude and not reveal how concerned he was at her appearance. He knew that Allison rarely looked in the mirror, so she was probably
not aware of how gaunt she looked. Her normally large eyes looked even bigger due to the weight she'd lost since the beginning of the flu epidemic, and they stood out like huge blue gemstones in sunken hollows against the prison pallor skin tone her face reflected after weeks without sun exposure.

"I'll be fine," she reassured him and then reached up and gave him a quick kiss. "I love you," she said with a smile.

"Love you, too," he grunted, ruffling his knuckles across the top of her scalp in an affectionate noogie.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

"There you are!" Maggie exclaimed when she found Allison scrubbing down the cell of a recently deceased patient. "I've been looking all over for you."

"What's up? Is it Glenn…?" Allison stood up with a look of concern on her face.

"It's Glenn, but he's fine," Maggie assured her. "He just….well, he has an idea he wants to run past you…and Daryl…." Her voice trailed off.

"Huh? What kind of idea?" Allison stripped off her gloves and tossed them into the wastebasket.

"Come with me," Maggie said, grasping Allison's hand and pulling her along as she dashed out of the cell. Minutes later they were in Glenn's cell. He was sitting upright and looking much better than he'd been five days ago, but Allison could tell that he was still not one hundred percent.

"I want to do something," Glenn told Allison, "and before I went ahead with it, I figured I'd ask you if you and Daryl wanted to do it, too."

"Do what?" Allison was confused.

"Get married," Glenn said. "You two are engaged, Maggie and I are engaged, I want to make it official before anything else happens." He paused a moment to allow Allison time to digest what he was proposing. "For the longest time, I thought Walkers were our biggest threat, but now I know something as simple as a flu virus can attack us just the same. For whatever it's worth, I want to make Maggie officially my wife right now, as soon as possible, just for….for whatever. I just want it. Hershel said he'd perform the ceremony, and I thought I'd ask if you and Daryl want to make it a double wedding. Just for…whatever."

"Wow," was the first word that came to Allison's lips. She thought it over for a few moments and then slowly said, "Actually, it sounds like a good idea. Let me find Daryl and see if he's game."

"We're thinking of doing it tomorrow morning," Maggie said. "That's not a lot of time to prepare a huge ceremony, but just for the sake of tradition Beth will be my maid of honor, and Glenn is going to ask Rick to be his best man." She left her statement somewhat open-ended, as if suggesting to Allison that she'd better get her own bridal party in order pronto.

"OK," Allison agreed, "let me talk to Daryl….and then….I dunno…." In her mind as she wandered off she was thinking of who should be her maid of honor and there was an immediate hot debate in the back of her brain cells arguing about Carol versus Anyone Else…
Chapter 91

Allison went back to the cell she shared with Daryl to collect her thoughts. She gazed down at the spectacular engagement ring on her finger and smiled. A few moments later she pulled out one of the many bags that she'd kept packed with assorted sundry items (“necessities” in her rat-packing hoarder’s mind) and dug deep to the bottom. She fished around and found the beautiful Harry Winston box that had contained her engagement ring and which still housed the elaborate channel-set baguette-cut diamond white gold wedding band nestled in purple velvet below the slot that once held her engagement ring. She smiled as she imagined Daryl slipping the band onto her finger while Hershel recited the traditional wedding vows and then suddenly a thought slapped her upside her head – she didn't have a wedding band to put on Daryl's finger!

She tucked the Harry Winston box into her pocket and set out on a mission to find a ring for Daryl. She couldn't exactly go jewelry shopping, so her best option was to find a Walker at the fence wearing a wedding band. But what if it wasn't the right size? Not to mention the right color and design to match hers….in a perfect world, she imagined a wide white gold band with a satin-finished center and grooved edges. Um, not that she'd spent a lot of time pondering it or anything. She was headed toward the door to the outside when she crossed paths with Beth. The young blonde girl grasped her hands in excitement.

"What did Daryl say? Is he on board with this? I can't wait! It's going to be so romantic...."

"Well, I haven't talked to him yet," Allison admitted. "To be honest, this is all so sudden, I can't really get my thoughts in order. I was going to go out and find a wedding ring that I can give to Daryl..."

"Before you even asked him about the ceremony?" Beth's blue eyes widened in incredulity. "I think that you should talk to him first, and worry about a ring later. If he agrees to getting married tomorrow, there's always time later to find him a ring. What's important right now," she smiled and squeezed Allison's hands in excitement, "is to have your two hearts united through the spirit of God's love."

Beth looked so earnest that Allison couldn't bring herself to question the "officialness" of a ceremony presided over by Hershel. For that matter, a ring was just as much a symbol as was an officiant reciting scripture and witnessing their vows. After all, these days there was no such thing as a marriage license or a City Hall in which to register it. "You're right," she replied, "before I do anything, I should ask Daryl if he's prepared to go through with this."

"And don't forget to ask someone to be your maid of honor," Beth added before she dashed off.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

It took a bit of searching, but Allison finally found Daryl in what she thought of as the "bowels" of the prison, chatting with Rick. It was one of those dank corridors that was illuminated with a string of bare light bulbs, thanks to Mr. Jacobson's expertise, that would have been the perfect setting for a Hitchcock movie as far as she was concerned. The two men seemed to be engaged in an earnest conversation and didn't notice her as she approached.

"Hey," she greeted them a bit cautiously, hesitant to interrupt.

"You OK?" Daryl asked immediately. "Why ain't you resting?"
"I'm fine," she assured him. "Just wanted to talk to you about something…maybe in private…for a minute?" Her voice ended on a questioning tone.

Daryl stepped about six paces away from Rick and waited for Allison to state what was on her mind. She glanced furtively at Rick in the background and then said quietly, in staccato phrases, "Glenn wants to marry Maggie tomorrow. Hershel will perform the ceremony. She thought that maybe we could make it a double ceremony. That is, you and I could get married, too. Tomorrow morning. If that's OK with you."

"Yeah, that's fine with me," Daryl replied without hesitation, as if it was just one more chore on his daily checklist. Of course, in his mind, he had been more or less "married" to Allison since the first time they'd made love back at Hershel's farm. He'd never regarded any of the other women they'd encountered since that time as anything other than fellow "camp-mates"; they were just survivors who needed a safe place to stay.

"Cool, great, OK," Allison's words tumbled out in a surprised reaction to his nonchalance. "Um, you'll need to ask someone to be your best man…"

"Has to be Merle, if you don't mind," Daryl said. "He's – "

"Your brother, your blood kin, I understand," Allison interjected. "I need a maid of honor…" She hesitated. Carol was not her closest friend, nor her favorite person, but she had been with the group back since their Atlanta days. Plus she knew that Daryl had some sort of special kinship with the woman. Perhaps it would be a symbolic extending of an olive branch if she asked Carol to be her maid of honor.

"I was thinking of asking Carol to be my maid of honor," Allison said out loud, "she's been such a good friend to us for so long…."

"I don't think that's a good idea," Rick said, walking toward the pair. "Sorry for eavesdropping, but I know all about the ceremony tomorrow…Glenn asked me about being his best man….and Carol is, um, very busy with the kids in the isolation ward…" He paused and then added, "We still don't know what caused this epidemic, and it might be best if she stayed in isolation…"

Daryl shot a glance at Rick, then looked down at his feet and said, "Yeah, probably best you ask someone else."

"Oohkay," Allison drawled, sensing something amiss. She didn't know exactly what, but something was going on. She decided she'd ask Daryl about it later. As she started to leave she was halted by Daryl's gruff voice calling "Hey!" She turned around and looked at him questioningly.

"Don't spend a lot of time on preparations and what not," he told her. "I ain't against a wedding or whatever, but what you need more than anything right now is some sleep. You look like hel – um, heck." He knew that Allison had been too busy to look in a mirror since the flu outbreak, so she probably wouldn't have noticed how very pale and gaunt she looked these days. Daryl didn't care, appearance-wise, about how sunken her large eyes now looked, circled by deep, dark shadows, or how her cheekbones were a bit more prominent… She was always beautiful in his eyes, but he'd been living with a doctor long enough to recognize the signs of severe sleep deprivation. "Last thing we need is for you to get sick."

"Message received," she reassured him. "By the way, what size tuxedo do you wear?" She giggled playfully and scooted away as he made a "get outta here" wave and uttered a classic Daryl "Pshaw!" at her departing back.
Daryl waited a few moments until Allison was out of hearing range and then turned back to Rick. "Man, you couldn't have waited till we got back? Until Tyreese got back? I could've handled that."

"Could you? You saw how he was before – how crazy mad he was when he found Karen and David's bodies? He wanted vengeance. He was blind with rage."

Daryl shook his head as if to clear his mind as he paced back and forth. He pounded one fist into his other palm in agitation as he tried to arrange his thoughts and control his emotions.

"Hey," Rick spoke in measured tones, "she killed two of our own. She couldn't be here." He paused to let those words sink in. When Daryl finally stopped pacing he added, "She's gonna be alright. She has a car, supplies, weapons… She's a survivor."

"Stop sayin' that like you don't believe it!" Daryl growled at Rick.

"She did it," Rick repeated. "She said it was for us. She wasn't sorry."

"Man, that's her but it ain't her," Daryl muttered as he tried to mentally process the situation. "What are we supposed to do about those two girls?" He knew that Carol had a special affinity with Mika and Lizzie, and wondered on top of everything else that was going on now they were going to explain Carol's absence to the two youngsters.

"I told her we'd look after them," Rick replied, leaving the matter somewhat open-ended. "I haven't told Tyreese yet," he added. "I don't know how he's going to take it."

"Let's go find out," Daryl replied. He took a step but Rick restrained him with a hand on his arm.

"Why don't we wait a bit before talking to him," he suggested. "He's been worried about his sister, and she's getting better… Let him visit with her and unwind and enjoy some good news before we bring up Karen's death."

Daryl thought about Rick's words before nodding slightly and saying "OK" very quietly.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

"This is one fine kettle of fish," Allison thought to herself as she walked back to Cell Block C. "I was all mentally prepared to ask Carol to be my Maid of Honor, and she's suddenly unavailable. Sasha needs to rest; she just barely survived the flu; heck, she can barely take a few steps without getting wobbly… Maggie and Beth are obviously out of the running…" She had a sinking feeling that if she asked Michonne, she'd instinctively know that she was a third or fourth choice. Allison was certainly friendly enough with Michonne, and the two had hung out and gossiped about superficial things at times, but there was always something a bit stand-offish – almost intimidating – about the katana-wielding woman. Almost like she was friendly to a certain point, but then she closed herself off. Still, Michonne had been on several runs with Daryl, and the two seemed to have a mutual respect for one another's survival skills, so maybe Allison's request wouldn't seem too out of the blue. She hoped.

She found the woman in the bathroom scrubbing blood from her hands and forearms. "What's all that? Everything OK?" she asked.

Michonne smiled and continued rinsing. "Just a little residue. Been helping Hershel stack some walker corpses on the cart to haul to the burn pile later."

"Um, I hate to bother you when you're so busy," Allison suddenly felt like a slacker for not helping with the "grunt" work – the lifting and toting and digging and burying. She'd been at best saving
lives and at least keeping the dying comfortable in their last hours, but sometimes that didn't seem like "work" to her when she saw the others around her stabbing walkers at the fence or cleaning up after a communal meal.

"What's on your mind?" Michonne asked as she toweled off.

"Well, this is all sort of sudden, but long story short Glenn and Maggie and Daryl and I are getting married tomorrow morning." She chuckled in spite of herself. "That didn't come out right; we're not polygamists...." 

"I already heard about it through the grapevine," Michonne assured her.

"I knew there was something of a grapevine here, but it reaches all the way out to the burn pile?" Allison was frankly surprised.

"Let's just say that Beth gets around, especially when she's excited." Michonne chuckled. "She caught up with me earlier and invited me to the ceremony."

"Oh, OK, I gotcha." Allison hesitated for a moment and then her words sort of tumbled out in a rush. "I wondered if you wouldn't mind being my maid of honor? I was a bridesmaid once, just once, and it was a nightmare, but in this case you won't have to wear a dress with so many pink ruffles that you look like a Macy's parade float."

"I'd be honored to be your maid of honor," Michonne said as she gently touched Allison's arm and smiled. "And I'll counter your pink ruffles with the turquoise satin mermaid dress my cousin made me squeeze into. I felt and looked like a tube of toothpaste." The two women laughed as they walked together out of the bathroom.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

The small group gathered together at the appointed hour the next day for the wedding. After much discussion between the main parties involved, it was ultimately decided that it was more appropriate to have a quick, quiet ceremony with only the closest of friends and family as witnesses and attendees. They'd reasoned that any type of celebratory party or dinner would have been inappropriate so soon after the flu epidemic, and the loss of so many of their friends. It was to be the equivalent of a courthouse ceremony, with the couples married by a judge with no muss, no fuss. Everyone had worn their regular clothing, complete with sidearms on their hips, and there were no flowers or special flourishes.

As Daryl and Allison and Glenn and Maggie took their places in front of Hershel, Michonne made Allison giggle by asking, "Do you think you should preserve those cargos, so that some day your daughter can wear your wedding pants?"

Hershel cleared his throat and opened his Bible, indicating that it was time to become serious. "My dear friends," he began, "you are about to enter into a union that is most sacred and most serious. It is most sacred because it is established by God Himself, and most serious because it will bind you together for life."

A hush fell over the group as the solemnity of the occasion washed over them.

"It is most fitting," Hershel continued, "that you begin your married lives upon the principle of self-sacrifice. You've voluntarily and completely surrendered your individual lives to the deeper, wider lives you have in common with the rest of our group; our family, so to speak. Sacrifice is always difficult; only love can make it easier." He paused and then smiled before continuing. "In
the difficult days that come in any marriage, Glenn and Daryl, you will need to be heroic. And likewise, Maggie and Allison, there are days when you'll likewise need to be angelic."

Hershel then began reciting the traditional wedding vows, and as the two couples made their responses, Merle glanced over at Beth. She was smiling but at the same time had tears running down her face. For once in his life his face didn't smirk or sneer; instead it was…..almost wistful. The innocence and vulnerability of that beautiful princess' face made him want to rush over and embrace her, comfort her. He had the inexplicable urge to assure her that some day she, too, would be taken care of forever, just like Daryl did for Allison. He was so focused on Beth that Hershel had to ask him twice if he had the ring.

"Huh? Oh yeah, sorry," he fumbled in his pocket and handed Daryl the spectacular wedding band for his brother to place on his bride's finger. Even though Allison had explained and apologized to Daryl previously that she hadn't had time to find a ring for him and he had assured her that it was no big deal, she still felt a pang of guilt when Maggie slid a ring onto Glenn's hand.

"I now pronounce you husbands and wives," Hershel concluded with a smile. "Y'all can kiss the brides."

Glenn was pale and struggling to stand upright by the time he kissed Maggie at the conclusion of the ceremony. "I think this groom needs to get some serious rest," Maggie announced, caressing Glenn's face lovingly.

"But…" Glenn weakly protested, "it's our wedding night…our honeymoon."

Maggie knew that Glenn was in no shape to climb the steps to the tower that served as their usual canoodling spot. She stroked his hair and told him softly, "Right now what you need to do is get your strength back. Get some rest. When you're feelin' better, we'll go to Amicalola Falls for a proper honeymoon. How does that sound?"

She began leading him back to their cell as he mumbled, "Sounds good….sorry I'm so tired…."

"That goes for you, too," Daryl said to Allison as he attempted to lead her back to their cell.

"What? Huh? No…" She was dead on her feet and struggling to keep her eyes open, but even so she knew that a couple's wedding night (even if it happened to occur mid-day) was supposed to be something special. She tried to protest but Daryl was hearing none of it.

"Don't give me any lip," Daryl admonished her. "You promised me before after the wedding you'd finally get some sleep." He was not only concerned for her health, he also knew that there were unfinished matters with Rick and Tyreese that needed attending to. Plus, to be honest, it made him shudder in embarrassment to think that everyone in the prison would know that he and Allison were retiring to their room specifically to "do the nasty"…. He preferred that matters of intimacy were just that – intimate. Not general knowledge. He liked it to be spontaneous and not "required". He walked Allison to their cell and sat beside her on their bed. He put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close to him. "We have our whole lives to…you know…."

Allison smiled, knowing how Daryl was just as shy about talking about sex as she was. It gave her that familiar warm, fuzzy feeling she felt when he revealed something like that that they shared. She nuzzled against his chest and tucked her head under his chin. "Yes, you're right…." she murmured.

He helped her lay down and covered her up, without removing any of her clothes or even her boots. He figured she'd strip down as necessary later if she got uncomfortable. He bent down and gave her
a long, lingering kiss. "I love you, Angel," he said against her neck as he trailed his lips down from her mouth.

"I love you, too," she replied sleepily.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

"Y'all need some help out back?" Merle asked Hershel and Michonne after the conclusion of the ceremony. He'd helped Michonne drag and stack some of the dead onto the platform utility cart (having worked at various day labor jobs over the years as a "temp", he prided himself on knowing the correct terminology for tools and equipment…it was always the fast track to being appointed a supervisor or foreman if you could speak like an expert) the previous day and had pulled several loads outside to the burn pile.

"No, I think we're good," Michonne spoke before Hershel could reply. She had to admit that even with only one hand, Merle's muscle had speeded up the removal process considerably. And even though she had long ago accepted his presence in the prison, it was still somewhat of an uneasy truce in her mind. After all, he had shot at her back when she left Woodbury. On the other hand… she mentally chuckled at her unintentional Merle pun – there was no "other" hand…he did cut her loose during that so-called prisoner exchange mission. OK, he'd been a contributing member of their prison community for a long time now, but that didn't mean she had to like the guy.

"All right then, I've got other stuff I need to do…" He mumbled to himself as he left her. It had been a few days since he'd inspected their stockpile of weapons. He'd assigned the cleaning and maintenance of the weapons to a few trusted personnel, but he was still more comfortable if he personally checked their work. It wasn't like in Boot Camp when a lack of preparedness earned you an extra set of push-ups; a lack of ammunition or a misfiring weapon affected him and his family directly these days.

"I'll meet you out back," Michonne told Hershel as the pair continued on their way. "I'm gonna stop and grab another jerry can in case we need more fuel. Got a pretty large stack waiting for us." She was referring to the red plastic containers of gasoline that were kept outside south of the courtyard for safety purposes.

"See you there," Hershel replied cheerily. As a rule he hated disposing of the dead in this manner; in fact, death of any sort broke his heart. But today his heart was filled with gladness… Glenn, who had been so near death, was on the road to recovery, and he had also officially married his beloved daughter to this brave young man (who had become family to him long ago) in the eyes of God. He had seen the look of unadulterated joy in Maggie's eyes when she'd exchanged vows with Glenn, and he knew that she would always be safe, protected and loved.

He arrived at the disposal area and started moving bodies from the cart to the burn pile on his own. "Not bad for an old man," he thought to himself as he heaved once corpse after the other. While he worked at his task his thoughts moved from Maggie to Beth, his youngest child and the one who had worried him the most after The Turn. She wasn't as strong as her sister, and she was too trusting and naïve in some ways. Hershel was well aware of the sort of hero-worship Beth had exhibited toward Merle Dixon since he'd arrived at the prison. And, despite Merle's less-than-stellar track record, Hershel wasn't totally averse to a possible relationship between the two. In the previous world, Hershel would have greeted someone like Merle on the front porch with a shot gun had he come to court his daughter. He was too old, too coarse, too….everything inappropriate. But that was Before. In this current world, Merle had the survival experience and skills to protect Beth, and – most importantly – he respected her. Hershel was a wise old soul, and he'd had his share of wild life experiences after leaving home at the age of 15 that even his children didn't know about.
He saw something in Merle that most everyone else didn't; that deep down he below that bad-ass, screw-everyone-else demeanor, he was still a Good Ol' Southern Boy who had most likely respected his father, even though Daddy was a hopeless alcoholic who beat the shit out of him, just because he was family and his elder. Merle had always been very proper around Beth, Hershel had noticed, always using his "company manners", such as they were. No, it wasn't the ideal pairing, but in the current circumstances Hershel felt a large weight lifted off his shoulders knowing that if anything ever happened to him, Beth would be safe with Merle Dixon around.

He paused for a moment to catch his breath and heard a suspicious "click". He looked in the direction of the sound and saw the Governor pointing a gun at him. The vision in front of him was so unexpected, such a ghost from the past, that he was caught off-guard and it took him a few seconds to reach for his sidearm.

"Don't even try it, old man," the man with the eye patch said evenly.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

"Rick! I've been looking for you! You have to come see this," Tyreese said when he encountered Rick and Daryl in a corridor.

"Tyreese, we need to talk," Rick started to say.

"It can wait," Tyreese interrupted him. "There's a psycho among us, and this is proof!"

Rick and Daryl followed the man into a cell deep within the Tombs and were taken aback when he aimed his flashlight on what looked like a junior high school science project. A dissected rabbit was splayed and pinned onto a piece of board.

"What the…" Daryl started to muse aloud.

"See?" Tyreese insisted. "There's some serial killer living with us, and you ain't doing nothing about it!"

"Tyreese," Rick tried to calm the man down, even though he was unsettled by the vivisection in front of him. "You have to listen to me. The person who killed - -"

His statement was interrupted by an almighty BOOM sound, followed by falling pieces of plaster from the ceiling.

"What the…" Daryl uttered for the second time.

A second ground-shaking explosion spurred the trio into automatic action, and they all ran down the long corridor leading to the back courtyard.
Chapter 92

Hershel walked slowly as the Governor directed him with a gun in his back. He was alternately silently cursing himself for being caught off guard and also making mental notes on everything around him – the trailer that he was ultimately pushed into, the other vehicles nearby, the number of armed people he spotted along the journey. And the tank. A damned military tank. How had that thing rolled up on them unnoticed? Apparently they'd all been too elated that the sickness that had killed so many of their group in the prison was finally running its course and that people were actually now getting the medicine they needed to pay attention to what was going on outside the fence.

He climbed up the few stairs and stumbled into the RV as the Governor warned him again not to "try anything". Hershel was surprised to see Michonne already sitting on the bench that he was shoved towards. He sat down silently and allowed his wrists to be tied by a man the Governor had addressed as "Mitch".

"Get off me!" Michonne hissed as the Governor placed a bandage over the cut on her forehead.

"You should eat," the Governor said, ignoring Michonne's threat. "It's going to be a long day. Nobody's going to hurt you."

"I don't believe that," Hershel told him.

"Well, I don't care," the Governor replied. "I just want you to know that this isn't personal."

"Then what is it?" Hershel asked. "Just tell us what it is…please."

The Governor paused and then turned to face Michonne. "I want you to know – my daughter, Penny – she was dead. I know that now." He looked directly into her eyes for a moment and then began pacing as he continued. "Now, I don't want to hurt you. I don't want to hurt anyone. I need the prison. That's it. There are people I need to keep alive, and you two are going to help me. No one needs to die."

"I'm going to kill you," Michonne said evenly, her eyes narrowed.

"Stop," Hershel told her and then said, "You want the prison, Governor?"

"Don't call me that," the man now known as "Brian" to his new followers snapped at Hershel.

Hershel continued in a calm yet pleading tone. "Your people, our people, we can find a way to live together. These people you need to keep alive, do you love them?"

"You're a good man, Hershel, a better man than Rick," the Governor admitted.

"Everything you've said," Hershel stated, "the way you've said it, you've changed. So has Rick."

"The two of us will never be able to live together. Michonne and I, we'll never be able to live together."

"We'll find a way – " Hershel started to say.

"I found a way!" the Governor interrupted him. "There's all kinds of ways I could do this. This way, you get to live, and I get to be – "
"You say you want to take this prison as peacefully as possible. That means you'd be willing to hurt people to get it. My daughters would be there." Hershel looked at the Governor with eyes that begged for mercy. "That's who you'd be hurting. If you understand what it's like to have a daughter, then how can you threaten to kill someone else's?"

The Governor met Hershel's gaze with an icy stare. "Because they aren't mine."

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

Rick, Tyreese and Daryl simultaneously and immediately ran to the back courtyard as soon as the first explosion rocked the prison. Conversation along the way was limited to brief bursts of "What the hell was that?" and quick directions from Rick to assume full defense mode, something they'd been practicing every day since that attack by the Governor and his Woodbury crew so long ago…

When the trio emerged outside they were greeted by a horrifying tableau. A tank. A huge military tank was just outside the fence. And beside it was The Governor, calling out for Rick. It took a few moments for that scenario to sink in, and then Rick and the others noticed the rest of the picture. They collectively gasped in horror when they saw Hershel and Michonne kneeling down, their hands bound behind them.

Daryl glanced sideways and saw that Beth and Maggie were armed and peering through the fence. He quietly, slowly, so as not to attract the Governor's attention, picked up and passed out weapons from the barrel. "You OK?" He asked Bob. The medic knew that Daryl was referring to their encounter not that long ago at the veterinary hospital, but there wasn't time to assure him that he hadn't touched a drop of liquor since that day.

"Yeah," Bob replied, taking the weapon. He held it low and walked slowly along the fence line before choosing a spot where he had several of the Governor's people in his line of sight.

"We can't take 'em all on," Tyreese said quietly. Daryl turned at the voice over his shoulder and saw Tyreese and Sasha standing there.

"We ain't got the numbers no more," Daryl agreed.

"We'll go through the admin building and through the woods, like we planned," Sasha told him, trying to keep her voice controlled and even. She was worried, but she didn't want anyone else to know that.

"When's the last time someone checked the stash on the bus?" Daryl asked.

"Day before we hit the Big Spot," Sasha replied. "We were low on rations then, even lower now."

"We'll manage," Daryl said. "Things go south, everybody heads for that bus. Let everybody know."

"What if everybody doesn't know when things go bad?" Tyreese asked him. "How long do we wait?"

"As long as we can," Daryl said evenly, returning his eye back to his rifle sight.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

"I'll stay here and talk as long as you want. Let 'em go. Let 'em go right now. You have a tank, you don't need hostages," Rick was trying to reason with the Governor.

"Yes, I do. This is just to show you that I'm serious."
Beth's heart was in her throat as she tried to concentrate on aiming the weapon in her hands. But all she could see was her daddy on his knees with his hands tied behind his back.

"It doesn't have to go down this way," Rick pleaded for the umpteenth time. "We can all live together. There's room for all of us. We'd live in different cell blocks. We'd never have to see each other. It could work!"

"We've got to do something," Carl said to Daryl. The young man had taken his place at the fence beside the hunter and had his rifle trained on the Governor's head.

"Your dad's got it, they're talking." Daryl knew the boy was always anxious to prove himself. But he also knew that Rick was in charge, and that no one should interrupt him while he was negotiating. The last thing they needed now was chaos.

"We could kill the Governor right now," Carl insisted in a low voice.

"From yards?" Daryl asked, noting the distance.

"I'm a good shot," Carl replied. "I could end this right now."

"Yeah, or you could start something else." Daryl looked at Carl's face and tried his best to encourage him. "Look, we both know you're a good shot. But even if you hit the Governor square between the eyes, there's no tellin' what the guy in the tank will do then. Or any of the rest of them assholes. Right now we just gotta trust your dad."

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

"Where are you guys going?" Lizzie asked Molly when she spotted her and Luke in the prison yard.

"To the bus," Molly replied. "Come on!"

Mika emerged from behind her sister and started to follow Molly. "No!" Lizzie's voice stopped her in her tracks.

"You know the plan," Luke said. "That's where we're supposed to go."

"Carol told us to be strong," Lizzie told him, "to protect ourselves. They have guns. We should have guns, too. We should help." As a matter of fact, Lizzie hadn't seen Carol for a day or more. Maybe Carol was being held hostage, too, and needed her help.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

"We're not leaving," Rick stated to the Governor after many minutes of deliberation back and forth. "You try and force us, we'll fight back. Like you said, the gunshots will just bring more of them out. They'll take down the fences eventually. Without the fences this place is worthless. Think about it – we can all live in the prison, or none of us can."

"We'll fix the damn fences," the Governor growled, getting more annoyed by the minute. He hadn't planned on Rick not immediately capitulating.

"You! You in the ponytails!" Rick called out to a girl he saw who seemed to be shrinking back from the confrontation. "Is this what you want? Is this what any of you want?"

"What we want is what you've got," the Governor responded. Period. Time for you to leave,
Rick raised his voice so that he was addressing the entire group outside of the fence. "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. We let go of all of it, and nobody dies. Everyone who's alive right now. Everyone who's made it this far. We've all done the worst kinds 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 all can change."

The Governor's breathing increased until he was almost hyperventilating. Finally he managed to utter, "Liar!" while he simultaneously slashed Hershel's neck with Michonne's katana.

Rick's cry of "Noooo!" was almost drowned out by the hysterical shrieks of Maggie and Beth as they saw their beloved father collapsing and bleeding. The gunfire seemed to erupt simultaneously from both sides.

"Go through the fence!" The Governor yelled. "Get your guns, kill them all!"

The driver in the tank fired several blasts at the building as the vehicle slowly moved forward and plowed down part of the fence.

Rick, Daryl, Carl, Maggie, and Beth maintained their places at what was left of the fence and fired their weapons. Tyreese, Sasha, Bob and Merle stepped back and focused first on vanquishing the walkers that were now entering the courtyard and then the Governor's people who were advancing and firing on them. It soon became a melee fought through the stifling fire and smoke and the onslaught of the Governor's attackers who were threading between the teeming walkers and shooting at anyone who wasn't one of their group.

"I'm out of ammo," Beth gasped to Maggie.

"Run for the bus, I'll cover you," her sister replied.

The two made their way to the bus, and Beth climbed up on the first step. She glanced around and noticed that many of their people were not present. At that same moment, Maggie noted that one particular person was not aboard.

"Glenn's in there!" She gestured toward the prison building. "I have to go get him."

"I'm going with you," Beth said.

"No," Maggie replied. "You get these other people on the bus."

"I won't go without you!" Beth was trying to hold back tears.

"Beth, listen to me – we've all got jobs to do. You get the people here, the ones nearby, onto the bus. The children. I just saw a few of them over there...." She pointed in the general direction of the courtyard. "Get as many as you can, and then get on the bus and get out of here. Go to the meeting place."

Beth nodded her head, unable to speak, tears streaming down her face. She wandered distractedly away from the bus, looking for the children that Maggie had mentioned. The tank fired another shot and she ducked and covered her head at the resulting explosion. When she stood up she looked around and saw someone in the distance pointing to the bus as he climbed aboard and shouted "What the hell's going on?" But due to all the noise and confusion, it sounded to her like "Allison!"
Bob groaned as he collapsed into Sasha's arms after being shot. "Look inside my shirt," he gasped. "Check my back for an exit wound."

"Yeah," Sasha said, trying to maintain her composure amid the chaos.

"That's good," he told her, "We can treat it."

"Not here," she replied, "Stay down. We'll find someplace safe."

"Sasha! Have you seen Beth?" Maggie asked as she ran up to the couple.

"No. Is she on the bus - " Her question was interrupted by another burst of gunfire. "We've got to get out of here," she finished.

Michonne took advantage of the chaos to roll away from the Governor's side. She positioned herself behind a truck and used the sharp edge of the license plate to cut her hands loose. She huddled behind the truck with her heart in her throat while she helplessly watched the Governor finish off Hershel, completely decapitating him. At that moment some woman with a child in her arms appeared out of nowhere, and the Governor dropped the sword in order to unholster his gun. He wordlessly shot the child in the head and then robotically marched toward the prison, loudly ordering everyone once again to "kill them all!". Michonne scuttled over and grabbed her katana, then ran toward the building, slashing anyone who got in her way.

A young girl who wore her dark hair in two short pony tails cowered behind the tank, her hands over her ears. Rick had called her out from his side of the fence just moments before Brian – the name by which she knew the Governor – had sliced Hershel's neck with that huge sword. She rocked back and forth in an almost fetal position, trembling at the noise and violence around her. Back when Brian had told their group that they "needed to take the prison", it had sounded so simple, so cut-and-dry. She hadn't pictured blood spurting from a man's aorta, hadn't imagined the explosive sounds of gunfire all around her.

"Tara! Tara, are you OK? Did you get shot?" The pony-tailed girl looked up into the face of her girlfriend, Alisha.

"No, I'm not OK, this isn't OK…." Tara was gasping for air as she spoke. "We're not supposed to be doing this…."

"We are," Alisha tried to snap Tara out of it.

Tara looked up at Alisha with terror in her eyes. "He chopped a guy's head off with a sword!"

"It's too late to do anything else," Alisha told her. "We have to stay here." She placed her hands on either side of Tara's face and spoke with deliberation. "Stay behind me and if we get separated, you just go run somewhere safe and hide. You understand? Do you hear me? You find a safe hiding place and stay put and I will find you when this is all over. I will find you," she repeated with emphasis.

"Take the fence down!" the Governor shouted at Pete. "All of you, drive your cars through the fence, kill everyone!"
"Roger that," Pete replied and lowered himself into the tank. He fired an explosive shell into the prison wall as he set the huge vehicle into motion.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

Allison had been sleeping more soundly than she had in weeks. She'd never even stirred long enough to remove her boots, so exhausted was she. But suddenly her sleep was interrupted by a bad dream – a dream about a thunderstorm. It was so real she could almost feel her cot shake every time the sky rumbled. Slowly, almost deliriously, she opened her eyes and tried to rouse her tired mind. As she lay still for several minutes she heard another almighty "boom", and this time small pieces of plaster fell from the ceiling as her bed rocked from side to side.

Almost two years of living in this new world filled with walkers meant that it only took another minute for instinct to kick in. Allison scrambled out of bed and began collecting some emergency provisions – her medical call bag, her backpack that was permanently packed with some clean underwear, bottles of water, toiletries and other miscellany. She quickly replaced her machete in her belt holster and donned the multi-pocketed hunting vest that had been pilfered from someone's closet on a supply run months ago. She grabbed her rifle and then ventured out into the corridor to assess the situation. The hallway was filled smoke and it was difficult to see. She felt her way along the wall and headed toward the nearest exit.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

Tyreese needed to reload his weapon, and he looked for cover as he was being ambushed. He dove behind a row of planters into one of the small gardens in the prison forecourt, but his two attackers continued their assault. Nevertheless, while lying on the ground with bullets whizzing over his head, he was still determined to replenish his ammunition. He would not go out without a fight. He took a split second to gaze out over the row of crops and was astonished to see the two people shooting at him suddenly fall to the ground. He gasped, turned his head and saw the two children – Lizzie and Mika- with their arms still extended and guns in hand. Scrambling to his feet, he ran over to them and shouted, "C'mon, we've got to get out of here!"

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

Daryl narrowly escaped being bitten by a walker as he was dodging bullets, but even that close call didn't slow him down. As if it was part of an elaborate ballet, he grabbed a walker to use as a shield and maneuvered himself close enough to the front of the tank and in one fluid motion jumped up, tossed a grenade into the gun barrel and then scampered away. The driver of the tank escaped before the explosion, but not before Daryl put a bolt through his chest. He pulled the arrow from the dead man's body and returned it to his quiver. He turned to look at the prison building and saw billows of smoke pouring out from the shattered windows. As far as he knew, Allison was still inside there. He took a few strides in that direction and almost bumped into a dazed Beth, who was standing in place, shifting from foot to foot. She had tears in her eyes as she looked up at Daryl.

"I was trying to get the kids onto the bus…." 

She appeared to be in shock, which wasn't surprising, Daryl thought to himself, seeing as her old man had been decapitated right in front of her.

"Stay with me, we're going to go get Allison," he said, grasping the girl by her elbow.

"Allison?" She said with sudden recognition. "She's on the bus."

"On the bus? Are you sure?" Daryl asked her.
"When – when I left Maggie there, when I went to gather the children, I heard someone yell Allison's name. He was standing on the steps of the bus and pointing inside….

Another round of gunfire exploded nearby and Daryl pulled Beth to his chest as he ducked down to protect them. "We've got to get out of here," he told her.

"But Maggie….Daddy…."

"We've got to go, Beth. Now, Come on!" He grabbed her wrist and forcibly pulled her behind him. After the first few steps she let go and followed him. They had to make their way to the meeting place, he'd decided, and find the bus and any other survivors.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

Allison finally made her way out into the yard and paused to take in the scene around her. She'd expected a huge thunderstorm or maybe an earthquake. She wasn't prepared for bullets piercing the air and dead bodies of people she'd never seen before strewn on the concrete. She stepped back inside the doorway to collect her thoughts and figure out what was happening. "My God, is that a tank?!" She gasped aloud.

"Allison!" A gruff voice called her name. She squinted through the smoke and saw Merle running toward her.

"What's going on?" She asked, rather unnecessarily considering the chaos that was surrounding them.

"You OK? Anyone else inside?" He fired a series of abrupt questions at her while simultaneously wrapping an arm around her and propelling her away from the building.

"I'm fine, I don't know if there's anyone inside…. I just woke up, grabbed my stuff and got out." She paused to catch her breath. "Where's Daryl?!"

"I haven't seen him since the gunfire started. I'm hoping he didn't run inside to look for you." He glanced back at the flames engulfing the prison. "It would be suicide to go back in there to search for him."

"I'm not leaving without him!" Allison stopped in her tracks.

Merle grasped her shoulders firmly and shouted into her face. "Listen to me! If he's in that building, you running in there ain't gonna help him none. Most likely he's outside the grounds somewheres lookin' for you. Only thing for us to do now is get the hell out of here and meet up with him and the others at the designated area. Do you understand?"

"But – " She started to protest.

"Goddamnit, listen to me! That has always been the plan! We had practice drills! Remember?! Everyone would evacuate as quickly as possible and meet at that place in the woods in this type of emergency. I know my brother, he would not deviate from the plan!"

As he spoke that last sentence he physically turned and pushed Allison in front of him and gave her a shove to encourage her to run. She started trotting toward the back exit, away from the fire and smoke and the hideous noise that seemed to prevent her from stopping and thinking rationally.
Chapter 93

"I can't remember the last time I climbed a tree," Allison gasped as she tried to catch her breath after scrambling up onto an abandoned deer stand.

"Just be grateful someone built a blind right where we could use it," Merle growled, equally out of breath after running a serpentine pattern to escape a horde of walkers for the past several hours.

The two sat in their perch up above the maddening herd and watched as the walkers eventually lost interest. Apparently if they kept quiet enough and their human scent slowly evaporated when it started to rain the walkers slowly but surely stopped clawing at the base of the tree and slowly plodded away elsewhere.

"I think we're safe enough to sleep for a bit," Merle told Allison. She didn't reply but instead slithered out of her outer shirt and pulled it over her face and upper body to ward off the rain and made a pillow out of her backpack. Even though her mind was still whirling with everything that had happened since they'd left the prison – including their several attempts to make their way to the bus/meeting point – it took just a few minutes for exhaustion to overtake her and Allison quickly fell into a sound sleep.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

The sun was just rising above the horizon when Allison stirred from her sleep. She squirmed out from beneath her shirt "blanket" and sat up. At least it had stopped raining, she thought to herself.

Merle grunted and stretched and sat up as she wrung out her soaked shirt. "Mornin' Sunshine," he said. Allison wasn't sure if he was being sincere and trying to keep her spirits up, or if he was somehow mocking her.

"Good morning to you," she replied somewhat guardedly. "Looks like the walkers have found greener pastures," she added, pointing to the clear ground below them.

"Yeah," he agreed. He stood up and surveyed the area. "Wish I would've thought to grab a pair of binoculars," he remarked, "but everything happened so damned fast….."

"What about your rifle scope?" Allison asked as she prepared to leave their platform.

"Limited peripheral vision." He seemed to check himself and then added, "Don't get me wrong, it definitely helps, but I just wish I had something with a more panoramic view so we could better plan our next move." He didn't want Allison to worry any more than she already was, and truth be told, he always felt a bit more confident and reassured when she was upbeat. It was something Daryl had mentioned to him not long after he'd recovered from his gunshot wound – how Allison had kept up his spirits by alternately joking and discussing the technical aspects of lung function while Merle was drifting in and out of consciousness. As long as she remained calm (since she was a doctor and very scientific and everything), it somehow helped to soothe him.

"I guess we should try and make our way to the meeting point, no?" She asked him hesitantly.

"I'm not sure," he admitted. "We tried several different paths to get there so far, and we had to keep diverting because of walkers. I'm thinking that everyone that was in the bus has probably left The Point by this time." If they'd survived, he mentally added. All that gunfire back at the prison had drawn the walkers out in droves, and the engine noise of the bus probably just attracted them that much more. How long would those refugees remain inside the bus after reaching the meetup
location? Would they have gotten antsy and fought their way out? What if someone who'd gotten aboard at the prison in the melee had been bitten and turned while they were waiting? So many possibilities assaulted his mind.

"But Daryl, and Rick, and Maggie, and... the others.... That's where we were supposed to meet them..."

"Yeah, I know, but you saw those walkers blocking our path at every turn. The others probably ran into the same thing." He turned and saw her normally huge blue eyes grow even wider in fear as he spoke. "But they've been through this sort of thing before, just like us. Even if the bus got attacked, you know that Daryl and Rick and all of them are survivors. They know how to take care of themselves and they know that we'll all catch up with one another eventually." He silently added Beth to his mental list of names that he hoped had somehow made it out safely.

The two of them packed up what little they had unpacked the night before and slowly descended to ground level. "I think our best bet is to find some sort of safe place to hole up for at least a day," Merle told Allison. "To have time to get some rest, get our bearings, maybe scavenge for more supplies and then plot out our next move."

Allison thought for a moment and, unable to come up with any sort of counter argument, said, "Sounds like a plan."

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

"I've got him," Allison told Merle. She withdrew her machete from its sheath and neatly decapitated the lone walker that was staggering towards them. Merle walked over to the head that was still gasping and growling and silenced it with a quick thrust of "Li'l Merle" through its brain.

"Anything good?" He asked Allison. She had unbuckled and removed the backpack that the walker had been wearing and was rummaging through it.

"Not much... ew, some used Jockey shorts... Here we go, a partial roll of toilet paper, three bottles of water... Publix store brand... and a couple of Atkins Protein Bars." She put the tissue and one bottle of water in her own knapsack and handed Merle one of the food bars and the rest of the water. He tossed the water in his bag and then they simultaneously unwrapped the Atkins bars and started munching as they continued on their journey.

"Tastes like a Flintstones vitamin mixed with cardboard," Merle commented.

Allison examined the wrapper. "Blueberry vanilla and almond, free from artificial colors and preservatives," she read aloud. "Who knows how old these are, maybe some preservatives might've helped the flavor some."

"Maybe they just spent too much time wrapped up in his dirty drawers," Merle remarked, popping the rest of his bar in his mouth and then guffawing when Allison gagged at his comment.

"Can we please change the subject?" Allison gasped before chugging a slug of water.

Merle laughed once again before finally taking pity on her. "OK, Gracie, how 'bout playing one of those word games you used to play with Daryl?"

Allison was frankly shocked that Merle knew anything about what she and Daryl discussed. True, one of the ways they passed the time while on guard duty was playing what she called "chain link" word games... Either Daryl had mentioned this to Merle, or -- more likely -- he'd overheard them exchanging words.
"OK," she agreed, since it was something to pass the time while they walked, "The topic is songs with bodies of water in the title. I'll start. 'Down by the Lazy River'."

"Beyond the Sea."

"Black Water."

"Blue Bayou."

"Fire Lake."

"Ocean."

"Oh, wow, that reminds me of this time..." Allison started to ruminate. Merle wasn't necessarily interested in her story, but he was pleased that the game had had the desired effect – it took her mind off of their current circumstances and, more importantly, the fate of the others they had left behind at the prison. "...I went to a midnight movie at some dollar theater near campus when I was in med school. I went with a couple of friends who also hadn't gone home over Thanksgiving weekend. We'd gone to TGI Friday's and had a couple of pitchers of beer along with I can't remember how many appetizer plates. And then we went to see The Song Remains the Same...that Led Zeppelin concert movie. Apparently Rocky Horror wasn't playing anywhere nearby. Anyway, I don't remember much of the film except for the idiot sitting behind us who continually yelled 'Ocean! Ocean!', as if the band was taking requests. I finally turned around and told him, 'Dude, it's a movie. They can't hear you.'"

"Did that shut him up?" Merle asked.

"Of course not. He called me a bad word, bounced a Sno-Cap off of my head and then kept yelling even louder." They continued to walk quietly for a moment or two before Allison began another of her monologues. "Sno-Caps are so gross, I remember getting them in my trick-or-treat bag on Halloween as a kid. My Granddaddy ate them, but of course he ate anything that was candy, including black licorice and Circus Peanuts...."

It was starting to get dark. "Probably should look for a place to spend the night," Merle commented.

"Haven't seen much of anything for a while, except for wilderness," Allison replied. "What are the odds of finding another deer blind?"

Before Merle could respond they both saw it ahead in the dusk. A Land Rover butted up against a tree. They approached it cautiously and then surrounded it. When Merle tentatively tried the handle of the driver's door, a walker popped up and started clawing at the window. He peered inside and determined that that was the only occupant of the vehicle. He pulled open the door with one hand and stabbed the walker through the head with the other. Allison helped him pull the corpse out of the SUV and drag it several yards away. Merle started rifling through the walker's pants pockets.

"What are you doing?" Allison asked.

"Hold on," he grunted, and then pulled his hand out with a set of keys in his fist. "Bingo!" The other pocket contained a wallet, which was useless, but at the very bottom was a Swiss Army Camper's Knife. He held it aloft with a broad smile. "This could come in handy!"

It's funny how certain images or sounds or smells trigger specific memories, Allison thought to herself. When Merle presented that pocket knife, she suddenly recalled that day back...how long ago? When they were at that house where the tornado had struck... and she'd given Daryl a Swiss
Army knife as a birthday gift. Daryl…. where was he? Most certainly he had survived, she told herself, but she also knew that he would be searching for her. She mentally fretted about him taking unnecessary chances while trying to fine her.

Merle noticed her sudden sad expression and asked, "Are you OK?"

"Yeah, I'm fine, let's just…" She gestured toward the Land Rover.

They returned to the vehicle and Merle stuck his head inside the driver's door to inspect it more closely.

"Don't smell so great, but there's no one else at home and it's a pretty solid place to lay our heads for the night. Lucky Hoss had the keys in his pocket. Gimme a sec…." he murmured. Suddenly the digital displays on the control panel lit up and the "door open" tone was chiming. "Don't just stand there," he barked at her, "get inside."

She ran back to the passenger side door and quickly scrambled into the seat. Merle busied himself testing the various buttons and switches. Finally he spoke.

"Battery's still good, but the gas gauge is on E. The driver's side airbag didn't deploy, so I'm guessing Hoss ran out of gas and just stayed here until he…. Well, anyway, the front seats recline," he demonstrated as he spoke by lowering and then raising his seat, "so you can sleep there if you want. Or you can lay down across the back seats. Not much room to stretch out, but you can curl up."

"You think we'll be safe in here? I mean, should one of us keep guard?"

"We haven't seen another human for two days," Merle replied with certainty, "and not many walkers, either. Even if some walkers find us, Land Rovers are built to drive through the Australian outback, which makes you wonder why some Georgia asshole with more money than sense bought one. It's not like he had to check the dingo barrier fences on a daily basis…. Anyway, these things are extremely solid, and I think we'll be safe for a few hours of sleep."

"OK," she agreed. His explanation was convincing to her, and besides, once they had finally stopped walking she realized that she was exhausted. She climbed into the back seat and fell soundly asleep a few moments later.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

The sun was just rising when Allison slowly awakened. She sat upright and blinked a few times to get her bearings. She then recalled climbing into this vehicle with Merle the night before. She squinted into the low light of the dawn and noted that she was alone in the car. She stretched slightly in her seat and then explored the back of the SUV. Behind the back seat where she'd slept there seemed to be some sort of storage compartment. She exited the vehicle and opened the rear tailgate. Aside from a spare tire and a jack, the only item of interest was a large cooler. She grabbed it, closed the tailgate and returned to the back seat to inspect her find. She was just picking up a large bag of trail mix when a sudden movement caught her eye. She looked up to see Merle returning from….well, since he was holding a roll of toilet paper in his one and only hand, she could guess where he'd been and what he'd been doing.

"Word of advice, Gracie," he announced as he opened the driver's door, "stay away from the north side of that tree over there." He inclined his head and extended the roll of tissue toward her.
"Must've been that can of Vienna sausages we found yesterday."
"Um, I'm OK for now, thanks," she declined, trying not to shudder.

"That's the thing about gals, have you ever noticed?" He both stated and asked.

"Huh?"

"When it comes to the Ol' Number Two, they're all over the place. Time-wise, that is. The women I've known never had any sort of bodily schedule for that sort of thing. Now men, they get worried if they don't go at around the same time every day. It's only natural. That way you can plan your time accordingly – y'know, how long you should allow for your morning commute between your coffee kicks in and Nature comes a-callin'. Quite frankly, I'm surprised as a doctor that you're not aware of this."

"Quite frankly I never imagined discussing my personal elimination with anyone other than my own personal physician," she replied. "However, if we must press the issue, yes I've noted that male patients are the ones who can recall their last bowel movement right down to the hour. I also remember my Granddad getting concerned and asking Granny to buy some of that one hundred percent bran cereal if he didn't, um, 'go' on schedule for more than a day."

"If you ask me, women wouldn't have so many medical complaints if they paid more attention to their... 'schedule', as you call it."

"I'll make a mental note of that," she murmured, thinking of the long list of Merle's Words of Wisdom she'd been subjected to during the rambling conversations they'd had since they'd left the prison. "That actor, George Hamilton... he only dated Lyndon Johnson's butt-ugly daughter so he could stay out of Vietnam." "Insurance fraud, what the hell do I care? They can't prove who torched that car." "Junkyard owners expect you to climb the fence and just take stuff; saves them the trouble of all that paperwork." What she didn't realize until days later was that Merle kept up his line of inane patter only to distract her from their current situation...and to keep her from worrying about Daryl.

"Anything good in that cooler?" He brought her wandering mind back to matters at hand.

"Nice big bag of trail mix," she turned her attention back to the cooler and rummaged around. "Two cans of cling peaches..." she paused and read the label, "in heavy syrup. Four of these Cup O' Noodles things, three bottles of orange Gatorade and a four-pack of Bumble Bee tuna."

"Not a bad find, Gracie," Merle complimented her. "So what do you feel like having for breakfast?"

"I dunno," she shrugged. "I guess even tuna sounds good...if we had a can opener."

"Just leave that to ol' Merle," he chuckled. He dug into his pocket and pulled out the Swiss army knife he'd found the day before. "Lookit all the gadgets on this thing... Corkscrew, scissors, screwdriver, and – voilà – can opener!"

Allison pawed through the dark recesses of her backpack and found two plastic forks, one of which she handed to Merle. They shared one can of tuna and handfuls of trail mix while discussing their plan for the day.

"I dunno," Allison remarked, "it feels like we've just been going in circles since we left the prison."

"We have," Merle confirmed, "and that's a good thing. We keep making a wider sweep around the same general area and we'll eventually find some of the others. Or at least a sign of some sort."
"True..." Allison mused. "Daryl's a tracker, he'll certainly leave signs wherever he goes. Notches in trees, that sort of thing."

"I've been keeping an eye out and haven't spotted anything yet, but that just means that we should probably widen our scope," Merle told her.

Allison had been watching for trails, too, as best she could. But between the rain – which washed away footprints – and dodging walkers, which took her focus away from the trees and telephone poles, she worried that maybe she'd missed some markings.

"Let's pack up the rest of this stuff and be on our way," Merle said once the tuna was gone. "Gimme the rest of those tuna cans, the trail mix and the Gatorade. Can you handle those peaches?"

She put the large cans into her backpack. "Sure." Of course sustainable food couldn't come in lighter containers, she thought to herself. But she really couldn't complain; Merle was carrying the bulk of their supplies. They packed and adjusted everything that needed to be, and then set off once again.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

It was dark and they'd been walking for hours upon hours, as best Allison could calculate. They were using just one flashlight between them in order to preserve batteries. Visibility was limited due to the blackness of the night and suddenly they were confronted with a brick wall. Merle shone his light left and right, and it appeared that the wall went on endlessly in both directions. He then pointed his light at the top of the wall.

"Concrete capper," he commented. "Looks like there might be something behind here. A subdivision or something."

"How do we find out?" Allison naively asked.

"Only one way I can think of," he grinned. "Set down your backpack and bag, and then I'll give you a leg up." He semi-squatted and cupped his hands together for her to step into.

"What?!"

"Unless you got X-ray vision, this is the only way to see what's on the other side." She was about to say something but he interrupted, "And I don't think you're strong enough to boost me up to the top."

"Oh, geez...." She set down her bags, took his flashlight and stepped into Merle's hands. She had a sudden flashback of that time in the prison when he'd convinced her to look up in the furnace ductwork. Why did she constantly let him talk her into doing reckless things?

"Can you see anything?" he asked.

"A little higher.... Boost me more..." She was just starting to get situated on the top of the wall when Merle gave her another push. "Stop boosting, I'm good! Stop boo - " The rest of her sentence was lost in a barely stifled yelp as went up and over the wall unexpectedly. She hit the ground and rolled...and rolled. When she finally came to a stop it took her a minute to collect herself, she was so dizzy. She caught her breath and looked around and saw her flashlight laying on the ground a couple yards to her left. She crawled toward it on all fours and then shined it around her surroundings once she grasped it. Her machete was still sheathed at her hip, but her hunting knife had slipped out of its holder and was a few feet above her on the hill, as was her rifle. She
clambered about to retrieve her weapons and then finally sat still long enough to answer Merle's whisper-yellings of "Are you OK? What's going on?"

"I'm OK, I'm fine…fell down a big ol' hill…." She paused and listened carefully. "I don't hear any Walkers," she added. She shone her light back at the wall and followed its length with her beam. "Looks like the wall curves a bit – I dunno, maybe about 50 feet or so to your right – and then if you keep going another maybe 20 feet it looks like there's a gate."

"I guess I can carry your bags as well as mine," his tone of voice indicating that he was none too pleased at the prospect. "Can you meet me over there?"

"Will do," she replied. As she walked toward the gate she shone her light around in different directions to get an idea of the landscape. It looked like that huge hill she'd tumbled down leveled off the closer she got to the gate. She arrived at the entrance almost at the same time as Merle, and he easily tossed their bags over and then climbed the barrier that was made to keep out vehicles, not people. She gave him back his flashlight and he handed her her bags in return.

"Guess that explains your little tumble," Merle chuckled a few minutes later as they'd begun to walk along the paved road.

Allison looked where he was pointing his flashlight and read the sign aloud. "'Welcome to Rolling Hills Estates, a Green Community.' Gee, guess I'm lucky you didn't shove me over the wall at 'Hot Molten Lava Estates'." They continued to follow the road for what seemed like miles of nothingness, just wide expanses of grass and trees on either side. "Does 'green community' mean they take good care of their lawns?" Allison made an attempt at a joke.

"Maybe you had to be Irish to live here," Merle replied. Allison was about to express her surprise that he'd actually used the word "Irish" instead of some ethnic slur when they both saw it and stopped short. There was what looked like a turnoff into a smaller curving road, and a large building just a few yards beyond the curve. As they got closer they realized that it was a garage – a large one, to be sure. It had two large standard roll-up garage doors, which apparently meant it was designed to house four cars.

Allison stared at the façade and mentally shook her head in wonderment. She remembered what an achievement it had been to be able to afford her first new car, which wasn't all that long ago. But three or four cars? Plus gas and insurance….

"Gracie! Over here!" Merle's summons interrupted her reverie. She joined him on the side of the building, where he was jabbing one of the tools on his Swiss Army knife into the lock of a standard-sized door, like one that might be found on the front of a house. In a few short minutes he had the door open and she shone her flashlight inside. All they saw was an enclosed staircase. "Stand back and be ready," he told her before pursing his lips and whistling loudly. They listened carefully and heard no response, so it appeared that – at least – there were no Walkers inside.

"You wait here," he directed, "while I go upstairs and see what's what and if anyone's hidin' up there." He quietly climbed the stairs and returned about three minutes later. "All clear," he reported excitedly. "There's a bedroom and a kitchen and a bathroom – it's bigger than any hotel room." He relocked the door they'd entered through and then stepped into the garage area. A moment later he told Allison, "Gimme a hand here." She helped him carry a wooden bench into the entry way and place it in front of the door as a blockade. She then, at his instruction, gathered several cans of motor oil and a couple of baby food jars full of screws and small parts and stacked them on the bench. As they carried their bags upstairs, he explained that with this homemade "burglar alarm" in place, they should both be able to get some sleep without having to stand guard. Anyone – living or dead – who tried to enter through that door would make enough noise to alert them upstairs.
Allison heaved a heavy sigh as she shrugged her bags off her shoulders and sat down on the edge of the queen-sized bed. "I hope that Mr. Hershel, wherever he and the others are, doesn't have to deal with the hills and stairs that we have," she mused. She happened to glance at Merle as she spoke and noticed that he averted her glance for a split second.

"What?" She asked him.

"What do you mean, 'what'?" He stalled.

"You looked funny when I mentioned Hershel and the others. What's wrong? Do you know something?"

Merle closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "OK, yeah, I do know something…but I need you to not jump to conclusions or go to pieces. You get me?"

"What? Tell me!" Her voice rose in fear.

"OK. The only person, and I mean the only one, of our group that I know for sure is dead is Hershel. I saw the Governor kill him. That's what started all the fighting at the prison. But that doesn't mean that everyone else didn't escape," he quickly added.

"Oh my God," Allison gasped. All this time she'd pictured everyone off in little groups surviving somehow, just like she and Merle were doing. She somehow had not allowed herself to imagine any of them not making it out of that inferno alive.

"My God," she repeated. "If Hershel's gone, how many others do you think didn't make it? What about Judith? And Carl and Beth – "

"Stop!" Merle literally shouted at her. "Just stop it," he repeated after composing himself. Not only did he not want Allison to work her way through the list of personnel to question Daryl's survival, he absolutely did not want to think of anything bad happening to Beth. Beautiful, innocent, angelic Beth – the only sign he'd had since the whole world had gone to Hell that there was a God - simply had to be alive somewhere. He refused to consider any alternative.

"I told you, Hershel was the only one I saw killed, and he was on the other side of the fence. The Governor had taken him prisoner somehow. Everyone else had a fighting chance." He took a lighter out of his pocket and lit the trio of pillar candles that were in a holder atop the dresser of drawers. Once the room became more illuminated, he noticed two decorative sconces on the wall with candles inside. He removed them and lit them. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to make use of the bathroom facilities." He went into the bathroom and closed the door. A moment later Allison heard the sound of running water. "Good news, Gracie," he called through the door after turning on the cold water tap on the basin. "We've got working plumbing!"

When he emerged from the bathroom about 10 minutes later, he had a copy of National Geographic under his arm. "Good thing they had a bunch of these fancy scented Yankee candles stashed under the sink," he reported. "They not only make for good reading light, they also…. Well, let's just say that you might want to wait a bit before going in there," he added with a smirk.

"Oh, fine," Allison sighed. Although Merle bathroom stench was very low on her list of favorite things, at the moment her mind was still concentrating on who among their group was still alive. Mr. Hershel had always been so strong…he'd survived the amputation of his leg, and had worked with her treating the flu victims to the point of exhaustion… She'd never pictured him not being with their group.
Merle sensed her upset when he walked out of the bathroom and wanted – no, needed – to uplift her spirits, to make her confident. He'd been alone before, a long time ago, and he knew how much of a difference a companion could make in dire circumstances.

"Hey, did you know that there are certain species of fleas in sub-Saharan Africa that can jump up to 50 times their height without warning?" He extended the copy of National Geographic in his hand as if to provide evidence.

Allison looked at him for a moment, considered his remark and then commented, "Exactly what kind of warning would a flea give before jumping? 'Stand back, I'm about to jump 50 times my height!'" She understood that Merle was trying to cheer her up, and she appreciated his effort. It was yet another reminder of how much he'd changed since he'd first joined their group at the prison. Despite the way her heart was aching at the moment, she felt it was the least she could do to sort of meet him half-way.

Merle chuckled heartily and swatted at the back of Allison's head with the magazine. He was secretly pleased to have wrought a smart-assed remark from her, but out loud he said, "Have you ever actually read one of these National Geographic magazines? There's always a photo of some native woman somewhere walking barefoot carrying a basket on her head, or a big ol' pottery pot to carry water. Why couldn't the photographer at least give her a ride after he took her picture? Seems sort of cruel, don't ya think?"

"You raise an interesting point which I will contemplate while I go brush my teeth and...attend to other things. That is, if the bathroom has aired out by now."

When Allison walked out of the bathroom a few minutes later, she found Merle standing apart and surveying the bedroom. "I guess I can sleep on that little couch over there," he pointed to a love seat against the wall, "and you can have the bed. If you don't mind parting with one of those pillows."

Allison had been with Merle long enough to read all the nuances in his tone of voice. He was hinting that since she was shorter and smaller than him, perhaps she would be more comfortable on the love seat. But she was too exhausted to both argue with him and to give up the opportunity to stretch out on a luxurious mattress for the first time in a long time.

"Why can't we just share the bed?" She asked.

"No," he replied emphatically, "that ain't even remotely right."

"For heaven's sake, we're just sleeping, we're not doing anything else..." She saw the stony look of resolution on his face and thought for a moment. "What about if we stay dressed and just lay on top of the covers? Then we're not 'in' bed, we just 'on' the bed?"

Merle considered her suggestion. He had to admit that an actual Posturepedic bed was awfully tempting. But this was his brother's wife. His furrowed brow told Allison that he was thinking about it. His face suddenly got an "aha!" look and he opened the cedar chest that was at the foot of the bed.

"Here we go, how 'bout this?" He asked burrowing in the box. "Like you said, on top the covers, clothes on, and I put these here..." He removed a few extra pillows and a blanket as he spoke. Allison tried not to giggle as he constructed a miniature Great Wall of China with the pillows and rolled up blanket down the center of the bed. "We can cover up with these..." He removed two large crocheted afghans.
"Whatever, fine, just so long as we can finally get some restful sleep," Allison agreed as she set her knife and machete on the night stand beside her side of the bed. She slipped out of her hunting vest and boots, and Merle removed his outer shirt and boots as well. But they remained fully clothed for the most part as they drifted off to sleep.
Allison rolled over lazily, stretched and semi-opened her eyes. She was surprised to see bright sunlight beaming into the room. She sat up and murmured, "Holy cow, that's the latest I've slept in a long time!"

"Well, I know what to get my brother for his birthday this year," Merle's voice made her jump slightly. She hadn't noticed him standing at the window, peering outside. "A pair of earplugs. Has he ever mentioned your snoring problem?"

"Huh? Of course not, I don't snore!" She replied in a rush and then paused. "Was it that bad?" She asked, slightly embarrassed.

"Only when you were on your back….thought you'd inhale the drapes and choke. But I nudged you in your side and you turned over. Pretty much stopped then."

Allison slipped her boots on and then used the bathroom. When she returned to the bedroom she noticed that Merle had set out a can of tuna and a can of peaches on the dresser. "What would you like for breakfast with your trail mix today?" he asked her.

"Peaches, I guess," she replied. "Since we have running water, we can at least brush our teeth afterward. Lots of sugar in that heavy syrup," she added, noting his questioning glance.

As they ate their "breakfast", Merle asked her, "Why do you think someone built an apartment like this on top of a garage?" He seemed truly perplexed by the concept. Apparently he'd never watched any of those house-building shows on HGTV.

"It's called an 'in-law suite'," Allison explained. "They're meant for aging parents, or widowed mothers-in-law….they can live with their adult children, but still have a bit of privacy."

"Really? Hmmm…." He seemed to be considering something. "This could work out pretty good, then, depending upon what condition the house – " he nodded vaguely in the direction that the main house presumably stood – "is in."

"You've lost me."

"We still have to scope out the general area, of course…. See if that wall surrounds the entire subdivision, are any other survivors squatting in the house, but if everything checks out you and Daryl could live in the main house, and I could live in this place." He noticed her quizzical expression. "Because I'm your brother-in-law," he added, enunciating the words so that she understood his meaning.

"Oh, OK, I get you," she quickly agreed, even though she was somewhat taken aback. The last she'd heard, they were just camping out in this place for a night and were going to resume their search for the others. Now suddenly Merle was not only making long-term living plans, he'd somehow reunited them with Daryl in the process.

"Grab your weapons, leave your bags here, and let's go see what we can find," Merle instructed her after they'd finished eating and had duly brushed their teeth.

They descended the stairs and their first order of business was to inspect the garage. There were many tools hanging on a pegboard on a far wall, and two vehicles parked in the large expanse of area.
"A BMW X5," Merle murmured as they walked around the cars, "and a Lexus RX350." Allison had always been impressed at the way men could seemingly just look at the tail lights of a car and know the year it was made. At that precise moment, all she'd been able to recognize was the BMW logo, which she was tempted to tell Merle that it had nothing to do with an airplane propeller, as was often purported by legend, but actually was simply the colors of the Bavarian flag. She resisted, somewhat nobly she thought to herself, the urge to show off and top his automotive knowledge. "If the cars are still in the garage, maybe the keys are inside the house," he said.

They made their way along the small walkway that led from the garage to the house. "I'm surprised that a place like this doesn't have an attached garage," Allison remarked as they walked.

"Probably because of that in-law suite," Merle replied. "Don't wanna have your relatives too close so that they're all up in your business."

The narrow walkway led to a larger sidewalk which led to an impressive brick house with two white pillars supporting a protective overhang that hovered above a dual set of doors. In the daylight they noticed that there was a circular driveway that curved around the front of the house, which was separate from the driveway that led from that small side street they'd followed to the garage.

"Stand ready," Merle instructed Allison. She stood a few feet behind him, her machete held aloft, as he walked up the three stairs and then banged several times on one of the front doors. They waited quietly for a few minutes, and when they heard no walker rumblings from inside, he gave her a nod that it was OK to join him on the porch. He tried the knob of the door, even though it was locked, as he had suspected. "You got a hairpin?" He asked her.

"A hairpin?! How old do you think I am?" She pictured an elderly blue-haired grandmother with old-fashioned U-shaped wire things holding her tightly-wrapped bun in place.

He chuckled in reply and reached into his pants pocket and produced his Swiss army knife. It occurred to her that he'd been yanking her chain for his own amusement as she watched him carefully choose a particular blade and then gently maneuver it into the deadbolt lock that was installed just above the doorknob. Allison peered over his shoulder with interest as he carefully moved the blade just slightly this way and then that, and then suddenly she heard the deadbolt slide home. Merle grinned with pleasure and then turned the doorknob and opened the front door. Suddenly their ears were assaulted with the piercing sounds of a burglar alarm.

"Holy cow – what the hey?!" Allison stood stunned as Merle simply opened the door and stepped inside. She scurried in behind him quickly and watch fascinated as he opened the small "door" on the front of the alarm control panel, punched in a few numbers and instantly silenced the alarm. They both stood in place quietly for a few minutes to listen for any walkers. When they were sure it was safe, Allison spoke.

"How did you know how to do that? How to turn it off?"

"I worked one summer for some subcontracting company that installed home alarms. One of the first things I learned was that most of these rich folks will spend a fortune on an elaborate security system, but they won't take the time to change the demo code and memorize a new one. Can't tell you how many houses kept the installation code on the piece of masking tape right inside the little door here so that they'd remember it." He gestured as he spoke and, sure enough, there was a piece of tape with a series of numbers written in Magic Marker stuck inside the alarm casing.

Allison was about to agree with him about the stupidity of alarm customers when she and he suddenly locked eyes in realization. "Electricity!" They said in unison. Merle expanded on their
train of thought: "The backup batteries on these systems don't last more than two days….this motherf – um, house must still have electricity!"

"I wonder why we didn't notice it last night," Allison started to ask but then she stopped as she realized that they'd been so used to not having power that they never routinely turned on switches or lamps anymore to test the situation. The two of them looked around the large living room for a few minutes and then proceeded to the right, where a short stretch of corridor led them to a large kitchen. Allison flipped on the light switch on the wall near the doorway and smiled broadly when the overhead lights illuminated. "Wow," she murmured both in response to the thought of running electricity and to the huge, beautifully-appointed kitchen that wrapped around one corner of the house.

Merle noticed the stove with coiled burners. "Electric stove," he commented, tentatively turning the dials that activated each individual burner. "You could actually cook here!"

Allison ignored his use of the preposition "you" (instead of "we") and turned her attention to an envelope affixed to the front of the refrigerator (a very expensive Sub-Zero, she noted). The name "Pilar" was written on the front. Allison removed it and looked inside. It contained a note and three $20 bills.

She read the note aloud: "The lawn man will be here on Thursday, we're not expecting any deliveries so if you see any trucks pull up while you're there, please call 911! Make sure to thoroughly scrub all of the upstairs bathrooms – we had guests before we left who complained of hairs on the bathroom tile. Don't forget to set the alarm when you leave. See you in three weeks!"

Noting the mention of a plural number of bathrooms upstairs, Allison remarked, "Sixty bucks doesn't seem like a lot of money to clean a place this size. Especially if they're going to be so nit-picky as to comment about stray tile hairs."

Merle shrugged. "'Pilar'," he remarked, looking at the front of the envelope. "Probably some illegal alien who sneaked across the border and makes more here cleaning houses that she could back in ol' May-hee-ko," he exaggerated the pronunciation of Pilar's presumed home country. He replaced the note and cash in the envelope, folded it and shoved it into his pants pocket. Another action that had become reflexive since The Turn: Any piece of paper will become useful in the future, whether to start a fire or to wipe one's nether regions when using Nature's Restroom.

"I guess that explains why this house was unoccupied," Allison said, walking around the huge kitchen and peeking into the various cupboards, "the owners were away on vacation somewhere when everything started." A moment later she exclaimed, "Holy cow! Jackpot!" She began to extract a series of canned goods from one cupboard that included a variety of soups, vegetables, and pasta sauces. The next cupboard contained a more exotic variety of canned foods: tuna, chunked chicken breast, sockeye salmon, minced clams, smoked oysters, kippers, and anchovies. "These folks seemed to love their canned seafood," she remarked.

Merle, in the meantime, was checking out the refrigerator. As a rule, in the past when any of them had scavenged a house they'd left the fridge closed, since everything inside had long since spoiled. But this house had apparently not run out of electricity since The Turn. As it turned out, the homeowners had apparently prepared in advance for their lengthy vacation; the refrigerator was devoid of all except a jar of pickles, a jar of anchovy-stuffed olives, several sticks of butter, half a carton of eggs, and two bottles of salad dressing (one Ranch, one Italian).

"Hmph," he grunted, closing the door. He moved across the room and peeked through the vertical blinds that covered a double sliding door. He looked past the huge wooden deck (which was equipped with patio furniture and a propane gas grill) and gazed into the distance. "That explains
"it," he said aloud.

"Explains what?" Allison asked as she joined him at the door.

"Why this place still has electricity," he answered. "Look out there, see 'em?"

She peered in the direction he was pointing and saw a row of slowly spinning wind turbines lining one of the rolling hills this subdivision was apparently named after.

"Wind power?" She asked, somewhat unnecessarily, but she felt that Merle was itching to explain it to her.

"Yep," he confirmed. "I remember Ralph talking about the pros and cons of wind versus solar power," he added. Noting her quizzical expression, he elaborated: "Ralph Jacobson, back at the prison."

"Oh, Mr. J, of course." She'd rarely addressed the elderly electrician by his first name.

"Each system has its pluses and minuses," Merle continued as he stepped away and proceeded down a hall to further explore the house. Allison followed in his tracks, peeking in doorways on one side of the corridor as he poked his head in rooms on the opposite side. "Solar panels have no moving parts, so they're low-maintenance and they last longer than turbines. They're also silent, unlike windmills. But they also take up more space than turbines and only generate power in good sunlight. Turbines, though, are subject to bird strikes and just plain wear and tear. But they'll generate power in the dark as long as there's some wind."

"I suppose that's why those windmills are up along that hill – to catch the wind," Allison remarked.

"Exactly," Merle confirmed. They'd arrived at the end of the hallway and had found three bedrooms, a full bathroom, one half-bath, a closet and something that looked like a den along the way. At the end of the corridor was a stairway. They slowly ascended the steps, with Merle in the lead, and each with a weapon in hand just in case. Halfway up to the second floor there was a large landing with a bay window and a long cushioned window seat beneath it. They continued up the last set of stairs and looked down a long corridor. "Wait here," Merle said quietly, then proceeded to silently skulk along the hallway about halfway. He then stopped and turned around and said in a normal voice, "All clear, come on."

"All the doors to the rooms are open," he explained when Allison caught up to him, "so unless there's Walkers trapped in one of the closets, I think we're safe." He led her to the far end of the corridor and they worked their way back to the staircase, stepping into each room as they went along for a quick "look-and-see".

At the very end of the hallway was a door, which, when opened, revealed a large unfinished attic or storage area. There were a few cartons and cardboard boxes stacked along the areas where there was planked flooring, two of which were marked "Xmas" in black Magic Marker. Allison closed that door and turned her attention to the large room on the left that Merle was already exploring.

"This is a bedroom? Jesus Christ, my whole house coulda fit in here with room to spare," he murmured.

Allison had to concur that what was apparently the master bedroom was definitely spacious. There was a king-sized bed against one wall, with large multiple-drawer nightstands on either side. Directly across from the foot of the bed was what looked like an armoire, but when Merle opened one of the doors they found a flat-screen TV on one shelf, a cable box and DVR player on another.
and a collection of DVDs on the lowest shelf. "Bet they've got some good porno in this library," Merle grinned as he bent down to read the titles on the spines of the cases. "As Good As It Gets, Gran Torino, Road to Perdition, The Nanny-Seasons One through…" He stopped reading and stood back up, shaking his head in frustration. "What the …who the hell keeps pansy-ass videos like these in the bedroom?"

He glanced at Allison and noted her quizzical expression. "I mean, if you want to watch chick flicks, you can do that in the living room. If you go to all the trouble of having a DVR in the bedroom, you'd think that…" His voice trailed off.

Allison was about to smack him down verbally for yet another one of his misogynist assumptions, but then she saw his face. He actually looked sincerely confounded. And it made her think back to the few remarks Daryl had told her about the Dixon household while growing up. Other than stepping inside the entry way of the homes he'd helped to install alarm systems, Merle had probably never seen the furnishings in an upper-middle class home. To his mind, DVR players were a high-end appliance that folks only had in their living rooms, hooked up to the one television set they owned.

"Maybe, if they did own any X-rated DVDs, they kept them hidden," she said instead. Merle's eyes opened wide in surprise at her response, so she hastened to explain. "Back when my Granddaddy died, and I helped Granny clean out the closet with his clothes and such – once she was finally ready to do that – I found a Joy of Sex paperback book and a couple of videotapes with handwritten labels on them. I slipped the one marked "Tillie Goes to the Dentist for a Drillin' and a Fillin'" into the VCR when Granny was napping one afternoon and found out it wasn't about an actual dental check-up." Merle guffawed so hard he bent over double and then backwards. "I put the book and those tapes into one of the cartons earmarked for the dump. Granny probably knew they were there, but I didn't want her to know that I knew they were there, if you get my drift."

"You're probably right," he replied, wiping his eyes once his laughter subsided. "House this big, they probably had kids…" He paused a moment to think. "Actually, since this house is fairly new, their kids were probably grown and off to college and elsewhere, and they had those extra bedrooms for when they came home to visit. And they sure as hell wouldn't want Junior wandering into their bedroom and seeing Forrest Hump in their video cabinet!"

"Let's explore further, shall we?" Allison was anxious to change the subject. They entered a room that could probably be described as a "man cave"; it was decorated in earth tones with a black leather sofa and matching La-Z-Boy chair positioned in front of a large flat-screen TV. One wall was accented with faux brick and contained a gas fireplace. The mantle above the fireplace was adorned with several golf trophies.

"Pine Vista Country Club, First Place Team, 2008 William Mann Golf Scramble, 2007 Pine Vista Country Club President's Cup Winner…," Allison read the inscriptions. "We didn't walk all the way to Augusta, did we?"

Merle guffawed. "Whatever Pine Vista is, it ain't the home of the Masters," he told her. "Sounds like some sorta fancy country club in the area. Makes sense if they were building an expensive neighborhood like this. Gotta have activities to amuse the rich folks." He sat down in the large recliner and hit the button that made the foot rest pop up. He smiled and sighed in contentment. "I could get used to this," he murmured.

"I wonder what's in here?" Allison asked as she pulled open the door of a small, thick-walled square-shaped cabinet that also appeared to serve as an end table at one end of the sofa. She pulled open the door and her nose was assaulted with the aroma of tobacco. "Nothing in here but cigars,"
"That's called a humidor, Gracie" Merle told her. He reluctantly got up out of the chair to peer inside of the cabinet with her. "Any Cubans in here?" He wondered as he shuffled through the boxes contained within.

"Aren't Cuban cigars illegal in the U.S.?

"Technically, yes," Merle's reply was somewhat muffled because he'd stuck his head inside of the humidor to get a better look at its contents. "But maybe Mr. Country Club Member knew someone who was willing to row a boat within that 12-mile legal limit off the Cuban shore….”

"You seem to know an awful lot about the illicit cigar trade," Allison remarked. She was secretly impressed with his knowledge of nautical boundaries and regulations.

Merle pulled his head out of the cupboard and sat back on his haunches, disappointed to find nothing more exotic than a box of Don Carlos Robustos. "Like I told you before, we had a great library at Woodbury. Not only books and encyclopedias, but a bunch of specialty magazines. Folks picked up whatever reading material they found while they were out on runs, so we had not only Tooth Decay Monthly but also the occasional issue of Simply Buckhead and Cigar Aficionado." He noted the surprised expression on her face and added, "Hell, folks will read the instructions on a tube of toothpaste if there's nothing else available when they're busy punishing the ol' thunderbucket….”

Allison gave a small smile in reply without meeting his eyes, because other than Daryl, no one (as far as she knew) was aware that she liked to take reading material with her to the bathroom, and she certainly wasn't about to admit it to Merle. In an effort to change the topic, she pointed to the mounted deer heads on the opposite wall.

"Hey, if those are his trophies, he must have some guns stashed around here someplace," she said.

"Now there's some good pro-active, forward-type thinking," Merle congratulated her. "We'll just have to explore more to find out where the goodies are stashed." They left that room and continued down the hall, finding a few more bedrooms and bathrooms along the way. None of the rooms they'd poked their heads into had anything more exciting than chintz comforters or perfumed soaps – there were no gun cabinets to be found.

"We haven't looked downstairs yet," Merle told Allison when they reached the end of the hallway.

"Huh? We just came from downstairs. That's where we were before we went upstairs."

"No, I mean downstairs, like in the basement," Merle explained as he led her down the stairs to the first floor.

"Oh," Allison replied, thinking that Merle was probably way off-base in his thinking. The only basements she'd ever seen were akin to concrete bunkers beneath the house, used for storage and maybe the washer and dryer. Nevertheless she followed him on the ground level until he found a door that led to a set of stairs that led to the basement. When they got to the foot of the stairs Allison gazed at the space before them in awe. The floor was carpeted, not bare cement, and the entire expansive area looked more like one huge living room than a basement to her humble eyes.

They wandered to the right of the stairs first, where they found what appeared to be a very expensive treadmill, stair-stepper and exercise bicycle. One of those fancy ones with a video screen on the handlebars. There was a door to the far right which concealed a half-bath – a toilet, sink and
shower stall.

They went back past the stairway and explored the other side of the basement. There were bookshelves, cabinets, display cases and in the far corner a large desk equipped with a computer.

"Here we go," Merle said aloud, opening one door of a tall cabinet that Allison had presumed was some sort of wardrobe. She peeked around him and saw eight different hunting rifles standing upright in a row. Merle pulled open one of the two drawers at the bottom and grinned when he saw all the boxes full of ammunition neatly stacked inside.

Allison admired the weapons cache for a minute and then continued to explore the underground den. One of the bookcases had a variety of different awards and plaques on display. She began reading some of the inscriptions aloud – "Member of the Year, Coweta County Chamber of Commerce", "Presented for 25 Years of Integrity and Excellence in Business…".

Before she could finish reading the text Merle was looking over her shoulder and took over. "Presented to Edgar Pearson, Founder of Pearson Ornamental Concrete. For 25 Years of Integrity and Excellence in Business…” He stood back and then snorted in disbelief. "You mean to tell me that birdbaths paid for this huge-ass house?!

"Well, maybe they sold headstones and grave markers as well. Those can be awfully expensive…” Allison mused. She was frankly surprised that that particular type of business could make a person so wealthy. But what did she know? In the area where she grew up even the richest person didn't own a house like this.

"Whatever," Merle was still sort of shaking his head at the foundation of this apparent fortune, "after we've scoped out the area around this place, I think we should move our bags down here from that in-law apartment. And then let's make sure to gather up as much of this ammo as we can carry and pack it. Oh, sweet….”

Allison turned to look at what had suddenly distracted Merle. He picked up a camera bag-sized case off of a shelf and opened it up with a huge grin. She hadn't noticed the logo on the case, but apparently Merle had. "Nikon Monarch Fives," he told her as he removed a pair of binoculars. "These will be a big help." He slung the shoulder strap of the case over his shoulder and told Allison, "Follow me back upstairs."

She trotted after him up to first the main floor and then the second floor, and then followed him to the master bedroom, unsure of what he had in mind. When he burst into the bedroom he went directly to a door on one wall that Allison hadn't noticed during their last visit when Merle had been discussing pornographic movies. But Merle had apparently noted that it led outside to a deck that extended the length of the room. He raised the binoculars to his eyes and scanned the land that extended beyond the back yard of the house. "Got a great bird's eye view from here, Gracie," he commented. He was quiet for several minutes as he slowly panned from one direction to another. He finally removed the binoculars from his eyes and placed them carefully back in their case. "Didn't see any sort of movement outside, so it don't look like there's any walkers nearby. Also didn't see any lights on in the other houses, or any movement in the windows that are visible from here. Hopefully that means nobody's squattin' in any of the buildings."

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

Allison shoved hangers aside, one by one, in what appeared to be Mrs. Edgar Pearson's walk-in clothes closet, trying to find something to wear while her clothes (and Merle's) were downstairs in the washing machine. She'd already helped herself to some of Mrs. Pearson's lingerie, even though it was a bit large for her, and had also used the Lady Schick she'd found in the bathroom to groom
her underarms while showering. Her bodily hair had always been very fine and very blonde, and even back before The Turn she'd only had to shave her underarms about once every four or five months. But on this day a complete scrubbing under hot water with a loofah sponge and imported perfumed soap felt exquisite, whether her pits required de-forestation or not.

It had been an exhausting day, both mentally and physically. She and Merle had checked out the rest of the Rolling Hills Estates gated community and had found that there were three other completed houses similar to the one they'd now holed up in. Sadly, they'd found residents in the other homes who had turned, and had spent much of the day killing them and hauling their bodies off to a grassy area that would eventually become a burn pile. There were also four houses that were in various stages of construction – some were still in the wooden frame stage, others had Tyvek insulated wrapping around them. They also found one huge pit that was apparently a basement that had been dug for a future house with two walkers dressed in coveralls wandering back and forth in it. "Just leave 'em be for now," Merle had said. "Can't do no harm from there."

Her arms were getting tired from browsing through the clothes-filled hangers one by one, so she finally just grabbed a pair of yoga pants and an oversized T-shirt with the words "Pine Vista Ladies League" scrawled across the front. "Who the heck actually bothers to put T-shirts on a hanger?" she thought to herself as she shimmied into the pants. She also helped herself to a pair of black Crocs that were at the bottom of the closet, since all of her socks were currently being washed and she couldn't bear to wear shoes or boots without socks.

"You about done in there, Gracie?" Merle called. 'I'm getting' hungry and wouldn't mind if you'd rustle up some dinner for us."

Allison stepped out into the corridor and was unable to stifle a guffaw. Merle was standing there clad in a pair of green-and-pink plaid seersucker slacks with a green polo shirt that had a tiny Pine Vista logo on the breast pocket. He'd obviously been shopping Edgar's clothes closet, but was that the best he could find?

"What's so funny?" He asked her.

"Nothing, I was, um, just thinking of something funny."

Sensing that she was mocking his outfit he defended himself: "Hey, this ain't nothing less than ol' Tiger Woods would wear out on the golf course. These are some officially classy duds."

"What do you feel like for dinner?" Allison asked, walking downstairs toward the kitchen in an effort to change the topic.

"We've got a whole smorgasbord at our fingertips," Merle replied, proud of his elaborate food vocabulary. "Surprise me."

Allison decided that they should have a "seafood banquet", and put a saucepan of water on the stove to boil. She heated up another saucepan and added some olive oil and then a can of diced tomatoes to it. But before that sizzled and the other came to a boil, she presented Merle with an appetizer – she opened a can of smoked oysters and delicately placed two on each of a Carr's Water Cracker and then topped them with a drop of Tabasco sauce.

After they'd finished their appetizers Allison mixed a can of minced clams and Ragu pasta sauce into the diced tomatoes and then poured some angel hair pasta into the boiling water. While the various ingredients cooked, she set out plates and silverware and a few paper towels to use as napkins for the two of them.
Merle twirled his fork in the pasta (as he'd seen Allison do) and shoved a huge portion of it into his mouth. After he'd chewed and swallowed, he commented, "I bet you used to eat like this all the time."

"What?" She asked, looking up at him innocently. "You mean with utensils?"

"Very funny," he replied. "I mean all this fancy stuff – oysters and what not."

"Not when I was growing up, no. I didn't have any so-called 'fancy' food until I was older and at college. Luckily my Granny taught me all about table manners when I was a kid, so I knew what forks to use and how to spoon my soup properly, because once I was in med school I occasionally had to attend dinner parties and banquets at upscale restaurants. I remember…" She paused slightly and Merle noticed her eyes looked sad for a fleeting moment. "I was invited to a dinner party at the home of a prominent surgeon at our hospital who was hosting a retirement party for another doctor. I was young, didn't have a boyfriend or really anyone I knew well enough to ask to be my date. So I not only showed up alone, I also arrived at exactly the time indicated on the invitation. How was I to know that it was understood that everyone was expected to be 'fashionably late.'?!"

Merle snickered, even though he felt a bit of sympathy for her.

"On top of that, I'd gone shopping that afternoon because I didn't have any sort of formal dress in my wardrobe. I bought what I thought was a very pretty floral print gown… it was in shades of amber, pale yellow and rust that had metallic gold threads running through it..." She noticed Merle's eyelids drooping so she hastened to continue. "Well, anyway, imagine my surprise that the living room where the party was held had drapes along two sides of the room that were almost the same color and pattern as my dress. I was hoping no one would notice, but this annoying resident, who was always giving me grief at work, came up and told me that whenever I stood near those drapes I looked like a disembodied head."

Now Merle couldn't help but laugh out loud. "Even Princess Grace screws up socially sometimes, huh?!" He said as he gasped for breath.

"Yeah, well, I'm just saying that I haven't always been the suave and sophisticated person you see before you; I've taken my share of social lumps." She averted her glance and looked down into her plate. That memory had hurt more than she thought it would.

Merle sensed her discomfort and changed the subject. "Um, talking 'bout appearances and such, do you think you could give me a haircut? It's getting longer than I'm used to."

Allison glanced at the top of his head and noticed, perhaps for the first time, that Merle was actually sporting a head full of tight curls. "Why not just let it grow? Some women like men with long hair."

"I ain't gonna sport that hippie look you somehow talked Darylina into," he growled. "Can you cut it for me or not?"

"Does it say 'Vidal Sassoon' on my forehead? I don't know anything about barbering or hair styling. Besides, you need training to cut hair, you need… I dunno, a chair that goes up and down… Trust me, you don't want me anywhere near your hair with a pair of scissors if you're worried about looking goofy." She finished the last of the pasta on her plate and rose to collect his empty plate. She'd already figured out that she'd be in charge of dish washing as well as laundry. "How did you maintain your hair before?" She asked.

This time it was Merle whose gaze grew distant and sad for a moment. "Beth," he mumbled so
quietly that Allison hadn't understood him.

"What?"

"Beth," he repeated, a bit impatient this time. "Beth used to cut it for me every two weeks." He paused and swallowed hard in response to the lump forming in his throat. "She told me that she used to cut her daddy's hair for him because he couldn't be bothered to drive into town to go to the barber shop."

He turned away from the sink where Allison was rinsing off the dishes. He tried hard every day not to think of Hershel… How he'd promised the old man that no harm would ever come to Beth as long as ol' Merle was around. He'd failed both Hershel and Beth, though. He should've stayed behind, looked further when the prison was burning to find her, to make sure she got away safely. Right now he clung to the hope that Beth was Out There with someone – Maggie or Glenn or Rick or Michonne or Daryl. Someone strong who had escaped the burning prison and who could protect her until he found her. Because he knew that once he and Allison had rested for a day in this house and gotten some good food in their bellies and clean clothes on their backs, the two of them would be Out There searching for survivors from their group.

"I'm gonna just set the dishes in this rack to dry, rather than using a towel, if that's OK with you," Allison commented as she washed and rinsed.

"Fine, we're just gonna use them tomorrow…" Merle murmured. He turned and stared at Allison's back. In some ways she was just as naïve as Beth. Yeah, she'd been to a fancy college and was book smart, but… Occasionally, memories of Maggie at Woodbury came to his mind unbidden. What the Governor had done to her. Hopefully he'd always be around to protect his sister-in-law, but then again, he'd thought the same about Beth. No one could predict what could happen minute to minute in this new world. Before he and Gracie ventured out to look for the others, she needed some basic tutoring in basic survival techniques. Not building a fire or collecting rain water, but protecting herself from any evil live people – not walkers – that she might eventually encounter.
Despite her exhaustion after the previous day's training, Allison was very meticulous in packing certain items they'd found in the house in her various bags as well as the pockets of her hunting vest. Merle had decided that later today they were setting out to explore the vicinity in widening circles to see if they could find any signs of survivors from the prison. She hoped that they could eventually come back to this house, either the two of them or — hopefully — with some other members of their "family", but there were no guarantees, as Merle told her. In order to search a large enough area they might be gone for several days, and in that meantime someone else might stumble upon this refuge just as they had.

"Why are you wasting space with this?" Merle's voice interrupted her train of thought as she arranged items in a backpack. He plucked out a bag of Haribo Gummy Bears. "If you want something to satisfy your sweet tooth a roll of LifeSavers takes less room." He paused. "Or is this some sort of monthly craving thing?"

She smiled slightly at his clumsy attempt to understand "womanly" things; in that regard, at least, he was a lot like his brother. "These aren't for me… I thought we might be able to use them in a hostage situation, God forbid we get in one. Look - they're the sugar-free variety." She pointed to the words on the package as she spoke.

"So?"

"They contain Lycasin, a hydrogenated syrup that's used as a sugar substitute. It's sweeter than table sugar, but the human body can't fully digest it, so it ferments in the gut."

"I repeat, so?"

"If you eat more than, say, 15 of these at a time it's like Napalm for the intestines."

"Really?" Merle was suddenly intrigued.

"I know it's probably a long shot, but if for some reason we're held up by someone or held hostage maybe they'll demand what food we have to offer and they'll find this bag. If they're hungry enough they'll gobble down several handfuls… and then, all we'll have to do is wait for Nature to take its course and we can easily waltz away."

"Yeah," Merle was thinking it over, "it might rely on a 'perfect storm' set of circumstances, but they could come in handy if they work like you say."

"They do," Allison assured him. "And please don't eat them yourself when I'm not looking just to test my theory and see if I know what the heck I'm talking about."

"I wouldn't — "

"Yeah, you would," she interrupted him. "Believe me, you don't want to be anywhere without functioning plumbing, and probably a big container of Oxyclean, after chowing down on these." I should probably just shut up, she thought to herself; no doubt Merle was like the many typical males she'd seen in the ER doubled over in pain who'd heard from friends or co-workers about the havoc these candies wreaked on your colon but didn't believe it.

"While we're on the subject," she added, "I've marked this bottle of water with a tiny 'M' I carved down in the lower left corner of the label." She pointed as she spoke. "And also on top of the cap."
He waited for her to continue.

"I found two bottles of Visine in the bathroom upstairs, and I poured about half of one into this water," she explained. "Even though it's Visine brand, I used an 'M' because it could stand for 'Murine', which both of us would realize means eyedrops, or 'Merle' in case we're captured and someone stealing our water happens to notice the initial and ask about it."

"No wonder my brother is so damned silent all the time," Merle grumbled, "bein' married to someone as long-winded as you. Can you please just summarize what the hell you're talking about?"

"My point is, this bottle of water is laced with eye drops – "

"I get it," Merle suddenly understood, "and you marked it so neither one of us drinks it. 'Cause those eyedrops cause explosive diarrhea just like those Gummi Bears."

"Well, you're partially correct," she told him. "I did mark it so that you and I don't mistakenly drink it. But any of those 'get the red out' eye drops that contain Tetrahydrozoline do a lot worse than causing a case of the trots when ingested…. what they actually do is cause the body's temperature to lower to dangerous level, slow the breathing down or even halt it, and cause enough extreme fluctuations in the blood pressure to put a person into a coma."

"Oh," Merle stared at the water bottle thoughtfully for a moment. "That's good to know," he finally said. "Whenever we're out scavenging and I find bottles of eye drops, I'll collect 'em."

"Good idea," she replied.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

"Put those bags in here," Merle instructed Allison, gesturing to the open tailgate of the Lexus. She noticed a cut-off section of garden hose on the floor of the garage as well as the aroma of gasoline. Merle caught her gaze and explained, "I siphoned the gas outta the Beemer; the Lexus is a little more fuel-efficient."

They drove off and followed a main street at first, then Merle kept searching for smaller and more local roads and even things that looked like goat paths to Allison. But, as always, she realized that he actually had a plan in mind. They'd get out of the car for brief periods and wander off the shoulder of the road, into the woods and wilderness, looking for signs. Allison knew that Daryl, as a long-time outdoorsman, would no doubt leave "marks" of some sort wherever he wandered in the hopes that someone else from their original group would recognize them. They also continually inspected the landscape for any signs of a recent campsite. By the time it got dark, Merle decided that they'd roamed too far from the house to go back; they'd spend the night in the car and press on in the morning.

"Here, have another kipper cracker," Allison extended one of the Carr's Water Crackers she'd found in the pantry topped with some smoked kipper snacks she'd also found in the dark reaches of Edgar Pearson's house's gourmet kitchen. Their main course was a can of tomato soup Merle had heated over a small campfire. They passed the small pan back and forth and sipped out of it.

"What the hell is this crap, anyway?" Merle asked after devouring another fish-covered cracker. "Seems fishy to me!" He then laughed out loud at his own pun.

"Smoked kippers," Allison explained as she squinted to read the side of the can in the dim firelight. "It's a type of herring."
"What's that? Speak up! I'm hard of 'herring'!" He collapsed in laughter once again, and even this time Allison had to join him. "See?" He gasped a moment later, "You're not the only one who can make bad jokes!"

"You got me," she chuckled as she handed him another kipper treat. "In any case, the crackers will help fill us up, and the fish have protein and stuff….

"Stuff." Merle repeated somewhat sarcastically. "I guess that's what you say to Big Dumb Ol' Merle who don't understand 'nothing 'bout antioxidants and Omega-3 fats."

"No, I didn't mean anything of the sort," she defended herself. Although, deep down, she knew that she had a habit of sometimes regarding Merle as less than intellectual. "I'm just too tired to use specific terminology at the moment."

Merle resisted the urge to point out that "specific terminology" probably took more effort to say than "Omega-3". What was the point of starting a fight right now? It was getting late, they were both exhausted, and he needed to do his best to keep her optimistic… even though as each day passed and they found no signs of other survivors, his own optimism was waning.

Instead he changed the subject. "I think we're parked far enough off of any beaten path to be safe here if we both sleep at the same time." He carefully doused the remains of their small campfire. "We haven't seen a human since we've been out and about, and only few walkers. If you don't mind curling up on the back seat, I'll recline the front passenger seat a little bit and sleep there. That way if any walker starts bangin' on the window, I'll be able to take care of things."

"Sounds fine to me," Allison agreed sleepily. She cleaned up the remnants of their supper, used a bit of bottled water to brush her teeth as best she could, and then assumed a fetal position in the rear of their vehicle.

When Merle woke her at sunrise, she was surprised to find herself somewhat sprawled all over the back seat. "Didn't think I'd actually get comfy back here," she mumbled as she sat up and made sure her clothes were all positioned properly.

"Go do what you need to do," Merle told her from behind a large map he was holding. It was one of many that he'd found in the glove compartment. "Then we'll have something to eat – " (Allison knew that this was his way of instruction her to take care of her morning bathroom needs and then prepare something for breakfast) – "and head out of here. I found this county map that shows a lot of unmarked roads…" His voice drifted off as he spread the map out on the hood of the car and made marks on it with the mechanical pencil he'd found in the glovebox.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

A few hours later, Merle turned the car down a narrow road that Allison noted had a small sign beside it marked "PRIVATE DRIVE" and in smaller letters underneath: "EMPLOYEES ONLY". The long paved path ended in what looked like a small parking lot; it was a small plot of land covered in blacktop and marked with yellow stripes. Merle parked the car and exited to look around. A moment later he poked his head back into the car and told Allison, "Get your gear together."

She obediently grabbed her go-to backpack, along with her machete and a handgun which she stashed in the waistband of her pants. She followed where Merle was leading her. He was silent for a few minutes, and then he stopped and pointed. She looked in the direction he indicated and saw a building of some sort.
"The map was right," he told her as they walked toward the building. "This is is the Pine Vista Country Club."

"Pine Vista…" Allison repeated, "why does that name sound familiar – oh, wait! Those golf trophies back at the house!"

"Right," Merle replied, "and it's as good a place as any for folks wanderin' through the woods to hole up…"

"Geez," Allison remarked when they finally reached what appeared to be rear of the building. "Why is the parking lot so far away from the club?"

"That was the employee parking lot, Gracie," Merle told her. "You know, where the peons must park their run-down used cars so they don't embarrass the rich people."

As they approached the building, they noticed that many of the windows had yellowed newspaper taped over the windows. "Some folks must've stayed here since the Turn," Merle remarked. They found a door that was obviously a rear service entrance. Of course it was locked. "Gimme your bump key," he directed, and Allison retrieved the "universal" key that Merle had taught her to fashion back at the house. It only took a few seconds for him to jimmy the lock open. "Stand ready," he told her.

They both stood back, weapons at the ready, as he abruptly pulled the door open. They were greeted with silence. Merle stepped in first, with Allison close at his heels. He whistled loudly and then they waited for a response. More silence.

"Stay close," he instructed her as they started making their way through the abandoned country club. There were dead walkers littering the floors every which way, but they still stepped carefully lest one of the heads still had enough life left to bite them. They slowly walked through a narrow corridor where a tilted Grandfather clock was blocking their way. Merle lifted it enough for them to pass through, and it suddenly starting to "clang", which made Allison jump. "Sorry, it startled me," she apologized to Merle. "Hey, 'tempus fugit'," he said, quoting the text on the face of the clock. "Which, I might add," he said in a pompous tone of voice, "means 'time flies'." As they continued up a small set of stairs and then along another corridor, Allison replied, "Well, you know what they say…time flies like an arrow, fruit flies like a banana."

Merle chuckled; he was pleased that Gracie had overcome her nerves enough to make a joke. They entered a room that had several racks of clothing. Polo shirts and sweaters, mainly. Allison impulsively started pawing through the hangers, as if she was at a Walmart, when Merle uttered some sort of weird sound she'd never heard him make before – a combination of an "Ooh" and a "Wow", was the best way she could describe it.

"What's wrong?" She asked.

"No, not wrong, but right!" He stood up straight from whatever it was he'd been peering over and actually grinned. "Look!" He pointed to a grey blob of clothing on the floor. "Don't you get it?!"

"Get what?" Allison was truly confused.

"This," Merle picked up the garment, "is Beth's shirt. Her tank top. She used to wear it all the time at the prison. And it's still wet. Remember it rained just a day or so ago?" His voice was actually getting higher with excitement. "She was here recently!"

"Oh, wow," Allison took a moment to digest this information. This was the first sign of another
prison survivor since she'd evacuated with Merle. "Wow," she repeated, lost for words.

"Let's look around some more," Merle said, and they cautiously proceeded to the adjoining room.

The room had half a dozen dead walkers scattered on the floor, but Allison focused on one thing: "Look!" she almost squealed at Merle. He looked in the direction she was pointing.

She knelt beside one of the dead walkers. "Look at this hole in his head – that's not a bullet hole, that's a bolt hole! That means Daryl was here!"

Merle studied the scenario around them and then slowly agreed. "I'm thinking you're right, Gracie. I think Daryl and Beth are together somewhere now, and they were here not too long ago."

Allison was almost giddy with excitement but then, in a split second, her expression changed. Merle noticed it immediately.

"What's wrong? Somethin' botherin' you?" he asked.

"Well," she drawled, trying to mentally connect some dots, "I'm just thinking about Beth's tank top on the floor over there, and I can't help but wonder where was Daryl when she was changing her clothes…"

"Christ Almighty!" Merle exploded before she could finish her thought. "We just found evidence that two of our people might still be alive and that's all you can think of?" He assumed an exaggerated, sarcastic tone of voice, imitating Daryl: "Hey, we've been on the run since the Governor destroyed the prison, and I don't know where our next meal is coming from or whether we'll get bit by walkers. What should I do? Hmmm, I know! Why don't I see if I can go and cop a peek at Beth?!"

"Okay," Allison lowering her head slightly, "I said a dumb thing."

"Y'know, once in a while it wouldn't be too upsetting if you took the glass half-full philosophy," Merle told her as he led her through the next few rooms. "Smells fruity in here," he interjected suddenly.

Allison noticed a wet spot on the carpet. "Seems to be fresh," she remarked, "and smells like Peach Schnapps to me."

"How the hell would you know something like that?"

"My granny used to mix it with orange juice whenever she had a cold….said it worked better than the cough medicine you could buy over the counter."

They exited through one of the back doors and, not seeing any other visible signs, decided to head back to their car. While walking towards the parking lot Allison paused and asked, "Do you smell that?"

"Yeah, and I thought I was safe being outside and all," Merle replied. "Besides, you were the one who fed me all those fish snacks…."

"No," she rolled her eyes in exasperation, "I mean I smell smoke."

Merle took a few deep breaths and then agreed. "Yeah, me too." He craned his neck from side to side and then pointed. "Look! 'Way over yonder!"
Allison looked in the direction he indicated and saw in the distance a huge plume of black smoke.

"Looks like a fresh fire of some sort," Merle added. "Should probably check it out."
"It's all so clean," Beth marveled as she and Daryl tentatively entered a funeral home they had found after walking through a small cemetery.

"Yeah," Daryl muttered in response. He kept his voice low. "Someone's been tendin' to it. May still be around." He looked around, quickly taking in the immediate surroundings and then instructed Beth: "You stay here and stay ready. I'm gonna take a quick look around, and if I call out to you to 'get', then you get the hell outta here through that front door."

He took a few cautious steps down a corridor and then into a few rooms leading off of it. He paused and then gave a short, shrill whistle as he poked his head into each room, crossbow in the "ready" position. When he was satisfied that there were no survivors nor walkers to be found, he returned to the lobby. " Seems to be empty…for now," he told Beth. "Let's see if we can get that ankle wrapped."

The pair found a room that had something of a medical feel to it, but was apparently the place where bodies were "dressed" for display, based on the half-made up walker corpse on the gurney in the center of the room. "Looks like someone ran out of dolls to dress up," Daryl remarked as he searched through the cupboards.

"It's beautiful," Beth told him, gazing at the distorted facial features on the body that someone had begun to cover up with cosmetics.

"'Beautiful'?' Daryl asked, then added, "Scoot up on here," nodding toward the counter. He'd found a roll of stretchy gauze that could be used to support the ankle Beth had gotten caught in a concealed bear trap earlier that day.

"Whoever did this cared," Beth explained as she slid off her boot and sock and Daryl began wrapping her bruised ankle. Luckily, her boot had offered some protection so that the swelling was minimal, considering the power of the mechanical jaws of that trap. "He wanted them to have a proper funeral. He – or she – remembered that they were people before all this." She paused and looked at Daryl as he handed her back her sock. "Don't you think that's beautiful?"

Daryl picked up her boot off the floor and considered his words before answering. He had his own opinion about Walkers, and had always been against wasting time and energy burying them….as had Allison. He mentally tried to shrug Allison out of his thoughts for the moment, and instead remembered back at Hershel's farm…how Beth and her father believed those Walkers in the barn could someday be "cured". Beth's mama had been in that barn…

"I guess…" was the only response he could muster up.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

"Place is nailed up tight," Daryl told Beth a few hours later. He'd found a storage shed in back of the funeral home with gardening supplies and tools, and he'd torn some of the wooden planks off the sides of the building to board up the few entrances to the parlor proper. In the meantime, Beth had located two cupboards completely filled with a variety of candles and had set them out and lighted them in what was apparently the area where viewings were held.

Daryl climbed up into a display casket and stretched out. It was equipped with light padding on the bottom and a nice, small satin pillow at the head. He noticed that Beth had been sitting at the piano
and had abruptly stopped playing when he'd come back into the room.

"What're you doing?" She asked him when he stretched out in the coffin. Quite frankly, it gave her the creeps.

"Comfiest bed I've had in years," he replied. After a moment he added, "Why don't you go ahead and play? And sing?"

"I thought my singing annoyed you," Beth said shyly, not quite meeting his eyes.

Daryl inwardly winced at her reference to his outburst of the previous day…. He'd never been very good at apologizing properly…. He finally simply told her: "Ain't no jukebox here, and after all them pig's feet and peanut butter (referring to the 'goodies' they'd found in the kitchen earlier), I could use some music to help me digest….

Beth turned back to the keyboard and grinned to herself as she started playing a tune. "Maybe there's a soft side to Mr. Daryl Dixon after all…" she thought as she started hitting the chords with more emphasis and singing the words aloud.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

Beth insisted her ankle was fine later the next day, but Daryl was feeling playful and insisted upon carrying her down the stairs to the kitchen. He'd decided against spending the night in that coffin and instead had slept on the bed in one of the two bedrooms upstairs.

"Really, I'm fine, I can walk on my own," Beth giggled as Daryl cradled her in his arms. "Besides, I thought you said that I was heavier than I looked." She playfully reminded Daryl of when he'd hoisted her up piggy-back fashion after she'd first injured her foot.

"Must've been your backpack adding extra weight," he grunted, setting her down beside a kitchen chair. Beth was pleasantly surprised to see that Daryl had obviously been up for a while, since the table was set with a few candles, some plates, and jars of peanut butter, jelly and pig's feet.

After they'd dined on their "white trash feast" as Daryl called it, Beth produced a small notebook and a pen and started writing.

"Whatcha doin'?" Daryl asked.

"I'm writing a 'thank you' note to the person who lives here," she replied.

"Why?" he asked.

"Just…just because. Even if they don't come back, I want to say 'thank you' for…well, for the food and the shelter they provided us."

Quite unexpectedly, Daryl's heart made a quick "twinge". Beth's gesture…taking the time to write a 'thank you' note…reminded him of Allison. That was something she would have done.

"Maybe you don't have to leave a note," he said a few moments later.

"What? Why?" Beth was confused.

"Maybe you don't have to leave that," Daryl repeated as he paused and considered his words. "Maybe we can stay here for a while, and when then come back, we deal with it. Maybe we can make it work." He considered their situation and then added, "Might be good to have a place to
stay while we look for the others…”

Beth smiled at him and her blue eyes sparkled in an unsaid "A-Ha!" moment. "So you do think there are still good people left?"

Daryl averted his eyes from hers and shrugged.

"What changed your mind?" She pressed him.

"I dunno," he barely mumbled as she shrugged yet again.

"Don't give me 'Mmm-mm-mm'", she was teasing him now. "What changed your mind?"

Before he could reply they both heard the tin cans strung up by the front door rattle. "Must be that mutt," Daryl grumbled, thankful for a change in the topic of conversation. "I'll give that dog one more chance," he said over his shoulder as he opened the front door. Days, weeks, months later he would curse himself for taking such a stupid chance, feeding a one-eyed mangy dog that had approached their doorstep before. Beth and her innocence and blue eyes and kindness….it all had distracted him and got half of his mind wondering about Allison…he wasn't thinking clearly… and he recklessly opened the front door to be confronted by a herd of walkers.

"Beth!" He cried out. "Beth!"

She ran down to the foyer and saw Daryl trying his best to kill the walkers on the front porch.

"Get your shit and get out of here!" He shouted at her. "Pry open a window in the back somewhere and get the hell out!"

"No! She cried. "I'm not gonna leave you!"

"Go on, get your stuff…." He grunted in between his words as he stabbed walkers. "Go up the road, I'll meet you there!" Beth hesitated for a moment until Daryl barked another "GO!"

Daryl returned his attention to the invading walkers and fended them off as best he could with the equipment within reach until he finally made it back to the kitchen to grab his crossbow and his knife. The next few minutes were a blur of slashing and stabbing, of knocking down walkers and stomping on their chomping heads. Finally it was over. He was exhausted, but at least he hadn't been bitten. He stepped outside to catch his breath for a moment and then trotted up toward the road where Beth was supposed to wait for him. Instead of seeing her he saw a dark car with a white cross painted on the back window speeding away.

"Beth!" He cried out and started to chase the car on foot. "Beth!" He yelled again before slowing down to a walk and realizing that Beth couldn't hear him, and he'd never catch up with that vehicle. He retraced his steps and found her backpack on the shoulder of the road. He picked it up and just started walking, his mind almost numb. He should've taken better care of Allison, kept a closer eye on her, then she'd still be with him. And he should have done the same with Beth – how damn hard was it to keep track of one young girl? What was wrong with him? After all they'd survived together, how could he fuck up things so bad?

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

"Someone torched this building intentionally," Merle remarked as he and Allison stood clear of the smoldering remains and the crispy Walkers that all seemed to be headed in the opposite direction for some reason. "Wasn't just some random lightning strike or anything."
"How can you tell?" Allison automatically asked without thinking. After she spoke she remembered previous conversations with Merle about burning cars and insurance fraud and "what the hell did he care".

He paused and then gave a subtle nod of his head which Allison now knew meant "follow me". She fell into step behind him as they walked back to their vehicle.

"Place is pretty much burned to the ground," he finally answered. "Lightning strike would cause this much damage, no matter how dry the wood was. Some sort of accelerant was involved."

"Who would bother to do such a thing?" Allison inquired.

"Dunno," Merle grunted. He was frankly confused, too. Back when he was a teen, he'd known many folks who'd torched their moonshining sheds when they caught wind that the revenuers were on the way. But who cared about illegal stills these days? Did someone set this off to attract Walkers so that they had an escape route? And if so, who?

They climbed back into their car and continued on their way, such as it was. A few hours later Merle noticed the fuel gauge was hovering near "Empty".

"Best stop now," he told Allison, "see if I can siphon some gas out of those cars over yonder." He inclined his head slightly and Allison looked in that direction. They'd been driving on some narrow, unmarked roads for the past half hour, which seemed to lead to nowhere, but now she saw a small parking lot in the distance. They were apparently in the midst of one of those industrial parks with winding streets off of the main highway that led to a variety of small office buildings.

"OK," Allison agreed. "If you don't need my assistance at the moment, I need to, um, use the facilities...." After all this time, she was still embarrassed to admit that her bladder and bowels operated like every other human. As was typical in most industrial parks, there was something that looked like a woods or small forest area off to the west side of the street. "I'll meet you back here in a few," she added.

She'd pulled her pants back up and was replacing the roll of toilet paper into her backpack when she heard a voice.

"Whoa-ho, what do we have here?"

She glanced up and saw a man approaching. His clothes and hair were filthy, and he was dragging a large Hefty trash bag along with him, and he had a gun in his hand pointed at her.

"Darn, darn, darn, how stupid can I be?!" She silently cursed herself. She'd left her machete back in the car, and she had left her guard down enough to let someone get this close without hearing him. She rifled around in her backpack and grabbed the biggest, heaviest thing she could grasp....one of those cans of cling peaches. She stood up and kept both hands behind her back.

"You all alone out here, little girl?" The stranger asked as he moved closer. Allison noticed now that he limped slightly and that what she'd thought was whisker stubble on his face was black-and-blue bruising that was a few days old.

She stood mute, staring at the man.

"Whatsa matter, cat got your tongue?" He said in a voice that made her skin crawl. "I hope not," he continued as he inched toward her, "cause I got some plans for that pretty tongue of yours...."

Allison tried not to tremble visibly, and her mind was in a frenzy, trying to remember all of Merle's
lessons. Was this the time to act crazy?

The stranger grinned at her with yellowed, decaying teeth. "Whatcha got behind your back there, little girl?" He got closer. "Can't be a gun; you woulda shot me by now." He kept his gun pointed at her as he walked a few steps closer. "And iffin' it's a little ol' knife you got there, you gotta know that I'll shoot you dead as you stand."

He took the final few steps that brought him face to face with Allison, and at that moment she swung her right hand out with as much force as she could muster and smacked him on the side of his head with the can of peaches. The stranger stood still for a few seconds, staring at her as if stunned, and then he collapsed onto the ground.

Allison was equally stunned. "Must have been the heavy syrup..." she thought, looking at the dented can in her hand. Seconds later she saw the knife stuck in the man's back, and Merle walking toward her. He bent over and pulled out the knife he'd thrown with expert accuracy.

"What the hell's wrong with you?!" He immediately chastised Allison. "How the hell did you let some asshole sneak up on you like that?!!"

Allison attempted to defend herself, but suddenly she couldn't speak. The threat of the situation was only now sinking in and she tried hard not to hyperventilate.

Merle took pity on her as she bent over in an attempt to breathe normally. "You did good, OK? You played dumb and clocked him and you coulda finished him without me. OK?" He asked again.

"OK," Allison finally stood up and collected her backpack. "I tried to remember what you – "

"Yeah, you did," Merle agreed as he started looking through the dead man's pockets and garbage bag. "But if you ever get stupid enough to let some stranger get that close to you, I'll smack you upside the head with a can of peaches. Understood?!"

"Yes, sir," Allison replied, trying to conceal her trembling hands.

"Shit," Merle commented, examining the revolver the man had dropped, "no bullets. Guess he just kept it to scare...." His voice drifted off. He was already pissed at how close Allison had come to being assaulted, but at least she'd remembered enough of his training to strike back. But he couldn't help thinking about Beth, wherever she was. He knew she and Daryl were still alive, thanks to the clues left at that country club, but what if she happened to get separated from his brother, even for a few minutes? Would she know how to defend herself from scum like this guy? He clenched his eyes tightly closed, trying to clear his mind.

"You OK?" Allison asked cautiously.

"Yeah, yeah, just see if there's anything we can salvage from this dirtbag."

The trash bag the man was carrying contained a pair of socks that were only slightly less filthy than the ones he was wearing, along with a hubcap, a spoon, and – most disgusting of all – half of a decaying dead rabbit.

"Do you think he's part of a group?" Allison asked Merle as they prepared to leave. "I mean, are there others like him around here?"

"Maybe he was once part of a group or a camp," Merle told her as they headed back to the car, "but judging from how he was all beat-up, and what little shit he was carrying with him...." His mind briefly darted back to his days at Woodbury...how exiled residents were sent out with very little
supplies, and sometimes some black eyes and broken bones once they'd crossed The Governor. "I think he was on his own."
Chapter 97

"I wonder if this is what Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder feels like," Allison thought to herself as she and Merle drove toward some destination he'd plotted on the map they'd been using. About an hour after they'd been driving her hands had started shaking uncontrollably. She'd intertwined her fingers and clasped them tightly to stop the trembling, which helped a little bit. She kept replaying that scene in her head – when that hideous man approached her and she'd smacked him in the head with all her strength. She knew now that she would have killed him, if Merle hadn't taken care of it for her. It was one thing to read about defending yourself in a True Crime book, but they never thoroughly described the feeling afterward. How adrenaline took over when actually faced with a Him Or Me situation, but how you started to think about taking a human life after the fact…. In the Previous World, had she been similarly attacked, she probably would have simply hit him hard enough to subdue him and then run away before calling 911. But that option no longer existed. It was now a "kill or be killed" world in many ways, and she struggled to come to terms with it.

Merle noticed that Allison had been fidgeting and rocking slightly in her seat. "Why don't you put on your 'Who's on First' CD?" he suggested.

"It's packed away somewhere in one of my bags," she replied, gesturing vaguely to the back of the vehicle. She smiled ever so slightly, catching Merle's reference… Years ago – when she was in her teens – she'd listened to some radio special on New Year's Eve that ended with what they'd called a "Time Sweep". It was a brief snippet of every Number One Billboard single from 19-fifty-something until 1981. Luckily she'd had a blank cassette tape handy at the time, and she'd recorded the Time Sweep and had listened to it repeatedly over the years. It soothed her in some odd way. When she was in college a tech geek in her dorm had burned it onto a CD for her, and it had been packed in one of her traveling bags back when she'd first set off for Georgia when The Turn first started. She'd listened to it so many times that she could now hear any Number One song from that time frame and then proceed to sing segments of the Number Ones that followed in order. She frequently did that unconsciously while working ("My baby does the Hanky Panky…Wild thing, you make my heart sing…Hot town, summer in the city…"), which is why Merle happened to ask her about it back at the prison. "What the hell is that you're always singing?" he'd asked her with annoyance once. "You remind me of the retard guy in that Rain Man movie, when he'd recite that 'Who's on First' routine."

Instead of digging through her luggage, Allison turned on the radio and hit the "Seek" button. Watching all the digital numbers flash by was somewhat mesmerizing and provided a momentary distraction. Suddenly, however, the display stopped on a low-end AM station.

"Sanctuary for everyone. Those who arrive survive. Terminus." A voice from somewhere repeated itself robotically through the car speakers.

"What the…" Merle asked aloud.

"Is that a recording?" Allison chimed in, "or a live human somewhere?"

"I don't know…" was all Merle could muster up in response.

Stunned and fascinated by the broadcast, they kept the station tuned in as they continued on their route. The signal alternated faded and got stronger and was occasionally interrupted by bouts of static. Other than the advertising catch-phrases ("Those who arrive survive"), occasionally the voice would instruct listeners to "follow the signs".
"You'd think they'd give a supposed sanctuary a better name than 'Terminus',' Allison remarked. "Sounds almost fatal."

"Terminus was the original name of Atlanta," Merle replied, taking on the authoritative tone he liked to use when he knew a trivia fact that Miss Gracie didn't. "It was the end of a railroad line that led directly to the Midwest."

"Oh yeah," Allison slowly nodded, "now that you mention it, I remember learning about that in my Georgia history class in elementary school... Of course, those were the days when I was concentrating more on recess than what the teacher was saying..." She caught Merle's face out the corner of her eye, and he was making what she'd learned was his "annoyed and/or impatient" expression. "So, anyway, do you think that this Terminus place is a train station?"

"Probably the train station," he replied. "If they're broadcasting a welcome mat like this, it's gotta be a pretty big place. I've been to Union Station, which was huge, but Terminal Station was even bigger. Still..."

"Something's obviously bothering you – besides me, that is. What's up?"

Merle glanced at the fuel gauge before speaking. They were running low and hadn't seen another vehicle on the road for some time. They'd need to either find some gas to siphon soon or else hoof it the rest of the way. Wherever "the rest of the way" exactly was... "Did you ever see the movie 28 Days Later?" He finally asked.

Allison thought for a moment. "Oh yeah, that one where Sandra Bullock had to go into rehab for her drinking problem." She stifled a chuckle. "You actually watched a Sandra Bullock movie?"

"I don't know what the hell you're talking about," Merle's voice began to growl with impatience, "but I'm talking about a zombie movie. It was British. And at one point some survivors heard a recording on the radio that offered sanctuary at some military stronghold. Anyway, when folks got there, the men were killed and the women became the sex slaves of the army guys there."

"Oy," Allison responded. She turned and looked at Merle. "That was just a movie, though. Do you think the people running this Terminus place are up to something similarly sinister?"

"Right now we've got to find us some gasoline somewhere," was Merle's reply. Allison continued to think aloud. "What do we know right now? From previous experience, for example, at the prison, we were particular as to whom we would bring inside. I mean, we had something of a selection criteria... the three questions and all. We didn't put up posters advertising the place. Every sort of camp these days has a limited supply of resources... food, medicine, toiletries... Why would anyone publicly advertise a camp?" She paused for a moment and then answered her own question. "Occam's Razor tells me that there is something hinky about this place."

"Ocky's what?" Merle asked.

"Occam's Razor. It's a philosophy, and a principle of reasoning. Basically, it means that when there are two explanations for something, the simplest one is the correct one. And in this case it seems to me that the simple explanation is there is something wrong with a camp that advertises."

"That was a long bus ride to arrive at the same thing I was thinking, but yeah, I believe you are right to be suspicious," he said.

A little later the engine sputtered and the digital fuel gauge was both blinking and beeping. "End of the line, Gracie," Merle sighed. They gathered up all their various backpacks and satchels and
continued on foot, with Merle occasionally glancing at the map in his hand. They walked slightly off of the road to avoid being seen, but continued to follow it from a safe distance. Eventually they encountered an elevation…actually, it was a clearing and the woodsy trail they'd been following was replaced with a sudden dirt and gravel path that led up to a set of railroad tracks.

"Hmph," Merle grunted. "Dunno if it's safe to follow these….too out in the open….

"Look over there!" Allison pointed into the distance. There was a telephone pole with some sort of notice tacked onto it. They rushed over to it and found a map with a highlighted path leading to Terminus, along with a handmade sign above it stating "Sanctuary For Everyone".

They both stood silent for several moments and stared at the posting. Allison finally spoke. "Do you think that – maybe – some folks from our group might have seen one of these signs?"

"It's possible," Merle drawled. "Even if one or two saw it, they might've gone there thinkin' that they'd find some of the rest of us…"

"You think we should go there?"

"Yeah, but carefully," Merle replied. "I always remember the old saying 'If it's too good to be true, then it probably ain't true'." Allison bit her tongue to prevent herself from correcting Merle's proverb and waited for him to continue. "I say we go there, but we don't follow the railroad tracks. We don't expose ourselves, make ourselves obvious. We find the place, scope it out, and then decide what to do."

"Sounds like a plan," Allison agreed.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

Using the high-powered binoculars he'd taken from that fancy house he and Allison had spent those few days at, Merle was able to spot the "Terminus" sign in the windows of the abandoned train station from many yards away crouched in the woods. He silently gave Allison a signal to remain quiet and to follow him. They got a little closer and Merle saw a railroad car close to the fence, small plumes of smoke rising up into the air, and many armed people milling about.

"Eew," Allison murmured quietly.

"What?" Merle whispered.

"That smell…that's the smell of burning human flesh."

"So what? They're probably cremating their dead like we used to."

"No," she shook her head. "This aroma is different. It's not the smell of clothes and boots and all that when we burned our dead…. This is what I used to smell in the ER….burn victims….their flesh and subcutaneous tissue literally cooked…"

"Whatever," Merle wasn't interested in her scent analysis at the moment. He kept scanning the Terminus courtyard in search of any sort of clue that would indicate any of their people might be inside that fence.

The very slight crunching of leaves and twigs on the ground caused both Merle and Allison to turn and raise their weapons. It was not the sound of a Walker approaching…

"Oh my God…" Allison gasped. It was Carol, barely recognizable with all the goo splashed over
the poncho she was wearing and the red clay on her face.

"Holy shit," Carol whispered almost simultaneously. "I can't believe...."

Allison ran toward the woman, but refrained from hugging her, since she was covered in Walker guts. Instead she clasped one of Carol's hands in both of hers and murmured all sorts of "Holy cow, oh my gosh" comments. She hadn't seen Carol in how long.....it had been even before the prison had fallen.

Carol released her hand from Allison's grip and immediately got down to brass tacks. She indicated that Merle and Allison should follow her to the fence as she spoke.

"See that train car?" She asked them. "I saw Rick and two or three other people being dragged out of it. I couldn't see the others clearly." Merle examined the area Carol was pointing to through his binoculars.

"Where'd they take 'em?" He asked Carol.

"Hard to tell," Carol replied. "One of those buildings over there, I think. Too many Walkers got in the way of my line of vision to be sure."

"What's your plan?" Merle asked Carol, after scoping out the situation and seeing something that looked like fireworks poised to be shot through the fence.

"See that propane tank over there?" Carol replied. "I'm thinking I can shoot it, cause a leak, and then hopefully aim this skyrocket just so to create an explosion. At least that will create some sort of diversion.....I'm hoping it will be a big enough 'boom' to distract those people who took Rick and the others...wherever they took them."

"Sounds like good strategy," Merle acknowledged. "You're already smeared in Walker guts, so I guess you plan to mingle and find our people?"

"Yes," Carol said.

"I'm goin' in with you," Merle said definitely. "You go first, make your way to the building you think they might have been taken. I'll follow behind, and go in the opposite direction."

"You should probably smear some - "

Merle interrupted Carol. "I can take care of Walkers, especially those who are stumbling every which way because of the noise and the fire."

"Well, then you should see who is left in that railroad car," Carol told him. "I know that Michonne and Carl are in there, and maybe others, too."

Allison was about to ask how Carol knew who was in the car, but Merle spoke first.

"Gracie, after Carol and I go over the fence, you follow behind and let the people out of that train car. It probably has a padlock on the door, most of 'em do, so don't waste time with your bump key, just shoot it off. We'll all meet back here." He said it with such confidence, as if of course all of their people would escape unharmed.

Allison took the remaining large piece of oilcloth from which Carol had cut and fashioned her poncho and threw it over the top of the barbed wire on the fence. After Carol expertly hit her mark and caused an enormous flaming explosion, Carol and Merle scrambled over the fence and
disappeared into the confused crowd of Walkers. Allison waited a few minutes and then hopped
the fenced and ran to the train car.

"Michonne!" She called out. "Are you in there?"

"Yes?!" The voice that answered sounded uncertain.

"It's me, Allison. Stand back away from the door, I have to shoot the lock off."

The shot Allison fired caused some of the Walkers to again change direction and head toward the
sound, so time was of the essence. She slid the door open and was startled to see so many pairs of
eyes looking back at her.

"Quick!" She told them. "We have to get out of here!"

As people exited the train car she stood and pointed toward the part of the fence with the cloth
draped over it. Out the corner of her eye she recognized Maggie and Sasha running past before she
had to face the other way and push over some approaching Walkers and slice off the heads of
others with her machete.

"I have to find Glenn!" Maggie declared as she turned to run not to the fence but toward the fracas.

"No!" Allison physically blocked her by grabbing her shoulders. "Carol and Merle are in there. We
have a plan," she breathlessly told her. "We are all supposed to meet outside the fence over there."

"Daryl's in there, too!" Maggie shouted in Allison's face.

Allison's already huge eyes widened to the size of Frisbees. "What?! Daryl?" She let go of
Maggie's shoulders and turned to run into the smoking chaos of gunfire. They both stopped
abruptly when an enormous muscular man with screaming red hair and an equally impressive
moustache blocked their way.

"No!" The man barked at them while simultaneously edging them back in the direction of the
fence. "You!" He jabbed a finger at Allison. "You said there was a plan in place, correct?"

"Uh-huh," Allison mumbled, startled by the sheer bulk of this stranger.

"Then we do not deviate from the plan. On the double now, get your asses over that fence!" He
commanded.

Maggie reluctantly climbed over the cloth covering, with Allison close behind her. The group
continued to run a bit until they felt a safe distance away from the pandemonium at Terminus.
Then they all stopped to catch their breath. Allison was gasping for air and trying to collect her
thoughts as she surveyed the group of mostly strangers. Before she could ask anyone who in the
heck they were, or, more specifically, who this ginger-haired drill sergeant wannabe thought he
was, she heard a sound behind her. She turned and felt as if she was dreaming – Glenn, Bob, Rick
and Daryl were suddenly there, wet with sweat and speckled with blood droplets on them, with a
grinning Merle behind them.

She was frozen in place for a moment while her mind processed the scene in front of her. An
involuntary whimper/gasp escaped from her throat as she ran to Daryl. He almost knocked her
down as he simultaneously ran to embrace her. While she nuzzled her head underneath his chin and
he mumbled words she was too excited to understand, she overheard Rick ask someone "Did you
do this?"
Allison stood apart from Daryl and turned to see Carol walking toward Rick. She had shed the gut-covered poncho she'd been wearing before and was now slowly staggering toward him carrying a crossbow over her shoulder.

Carol smiled in response to Rick's question, and Allison watched as the two hugged. Moments later Carol wordlessly stepped toward Daryl and slipped the crossbow off of her shoulder. Daryl took it from her and then pulled the woman close to him for a quick embrace. When he let go, Carol smiled at Glenn. "Here," she held out her hand. Glenn had to gulp back tears when he saw that Carol had managed to rescue the pocket watch that Hershel had given to him.

Everyone suddenly started to speak at once, but Carol held up her hand to stop them. She looked at Rick, the man who'd banished her from the prison many weeks before, and said, "Follow me. I have something to show you."

"Hold up a minute," Rick replied. "We've got to...." He didn't finish his sentence, but instead walked a way through the woods, with Carl close at his heels. The two of them used the butts of their rifles to dig into the ground and unearth a bag filled with weapons. Carl slung the bag over his shoulder and followed his father when Rick started walking back toward the inferno that had once been Terminus.

"Rick?" Glenn asked. "What are you doing?"

"Go along the fences," Rick replied. "Use the rifles."

"We got out," Glenn told him. "It's over."

"It's not over until they're all dead," Rick stated, looking at the compound where he and his "family" had so recently been held captive.

"The hell it isn't," the red-headed giant announced. "The place is on fire. Full of Walkers. I ain't dickering around with this crap..." He turned as if to leave, but Carol held up a hand to stop him.

"Hold on," she said. "First you have to come with me." Her tone of voice left no room for argument and they all fell into line behind her.

"Wait a minute," Merle asked as they walked. He swiveled his head around as if counting heads for the first time since they'd met up in the woods. "Is this all of us? Where's Beth?"

"She's...gone," Daryl said quietly, glancing down at his feet as he spoke.

Merle violently spun his brother around by the shoulder and began shouting in his face. The happy reunion they'd exchanged just moments ago was immediately forgotten.

"What do you mean 'gone'?!" He knew that if Beth had been bitten, Daryl would have said so. "Gone" meant something else....

"Come on, you can talk as we walk," Carol called over her shoulder.

"We were together...for a while..." Daryl started to explain.

"Yeah, I know that."

"How did you know that?" Daryl asked.

"We found her shirt at that golf country club building. And then we figured out that you might be
at Terminus…Allison said that it has something to do with some guy's shaving kit…"

"Huh?" Daryl was confused at Merle's interpretation of Occam's Razor.

"Never mind that, where the hell is Beth?"

"We were holed up at a place…a funeral home…got overrun with Walkers. I held them off while she escaped through a window… When I got outside to meet her, I saw a car race off and her backpack was on the side of the road."

"A car? What kind of a car? Didn't you try to follow it?!" Merle was shouting by now.

"Hush," Michonne turned and held her finger to her lips. "Are you purposely trying to attract Walkers?"

"I followed as far as I could," Daryl told his brother. It seemed pretty obvious that no human could catch up with a speeding vehicle while on foot, but Merle wasn't being exactly rational at the moment. "It was a black sedan of some sort with a white cross painted on the rear window."

"A white cross?" Merle asked. "Like what, like a – "

He stopped mid-sentence when Tyreese stepped out of a small shack in the clearing they'd just approached. And in his arms was baby Judith. Rick, Carl and Sasha all raced over to tearfully embrace the two.

Rick was clutching Judith close to his chest and Carl was gently stroking her head when Michonne quietly asked, "What next?"

"We need to go," Rick replied.

"Yeah, but where?" Daryl asked.

"Somewhere far away from here."
Chapter 98

The group chatted among themselves constantly while walking in some unknown direction towards who knew what. But no one seemed to particularly care for the moment that they had no particular destination in mind; they were too busy catching up with one another, finding out where everyone had been since the prison had fallen, what they'd been up to, how they'd met up with one another, etc.

"I'd heard that you were on the bus," Daryl had apologized to Allison for the umpteenth time as they walked. "And then when Beth and I found the bus, it was all, well…" He felt guilty, as if he'd given up searching for her.

"It's OK, Sweetie," she was careful to reply softly so no one else heard her term of endearment – he was still very shy when it came to public displays of affection, and it had been a major Step Forward of him to have embraced Allison so tightly when they were reunited in the woods. Not to mention the hug he'd given Carol. Baby steps, Allison thought to herself. "I was lucky that Merle found me, and for a while we didn't know who had escaped…." They continued chatting and Daryl would occasionally reach an arm around her shoulders and clutch her close to him for a moment as they walked, as if he was afraid to lose her again.

As they marched on, Allison slowly got to know a few of the new members of their group. The red-haired man who'd barked orders at her back at Terminus turned out to be Abraham Ford. He was ex-military – a former Army Sergeant – and he had a very salty vocabulary, which immediately endeared him to Merle. Rosita Espinoza was, as far as Allison could determine, very capable with weaponry and also Abraham's girlfriend. Then there was that goofy-looking guy with the outdated mullet haircut…Eugene Porter. Or, as he'd been introduced to her "Doctor" Eugene Porter. Allison had heard from the others that Eugene knew the "cure" to this outbreak and that Abraham and Rosita were escorting him to Washington D.C., where he'd be able to implement this knowledge and stop the disease from spreading.

The bits and pieces she'd heard of Eugene's story from Sasha, Glenn and a few others seemed dubious to her, to say the least. She eventually found herself walking beside the man and struck up a conversation.

"I hear you're a doctor," she said casually. "What's your specialty, if you don't mind me asking?"

"I have PhDs in biochemistry and immunology and microbiology and I've completed my doctorate which, in fact, makes me a doctor," he replied in an almost robotic tone.

Allison started to laugh, thinking he was joking, but stopped herself when she caught the serious look on his face. "Oh," she said, struggling to compose herself. "Um, Sasha said something about you knowing what caused The Turn, and having a solution…?"

"Yes, but that's classified information. I've already revealed too much."

"I promise not to sell your secrets to the KGB," Allison told him with a slight smile.

Eugene walked in silence for a few minutes and seemed to decide that it was safe to confide in Allison. "I was part of a 10-person team working on the Human Genome Project, under the direct supervision of Dr. T. Brooks Ellis."

"Oh, wow," Allison replied with growing excitement. "That sounds like a Texas accent...and
knowing a little bit about the Human Genome Project, I'm guessing …whoa, do you mean you actually worked at Baylor University…?"

"Yes, ma'am." He nodded.

"Oh my goodness, are you saying that you actually worked with Dr. Henry Weschler?!" Her eyes were wide with new appreciation for his esteem. "Wow, I heard him speak at Duke in my first year of med school."

"Yes, I was privileged enough to have been included in conversations with Dr. Weschler and other team members over inter-departmental cocktails about the use of weaponized diseases to fight diseases. Fire with fire, in laymen's terms."

"Impressive," Allison murmured and slowed down her pace a bit to allow Eugene to get ahead of her. She'd heard enough.

"What was that?" One of the new people Allison had learned was named Tara asked her.

"What was what?"

"That look on your face when you were talking to Eugene," Tara replied. "You sounded all excited, but you had a weird expression, like something was wrong."

"Excuse me?"

"That look on your face," Tara repeated. "I didn't mean to eavesdrop, but I was nearby when you were talking to Eugene. Why did you start laughing when he talked about his college degrees?"

Allison didn't know much about Tara, but she had to admit that the girl was perceptive if she'd noticed her Eugene skepticism.

"Well," Allison drawled, "between you and me and the wall, I don't know of any accredited university that would allow someone to pursue dual PhDs, particularly in such closely related disciplines."

"What do you mean?" Tara asked with genuine curiosity.

"I mean," Allison explained as they walked, "that I've seen TV series and such where some supposedly super-smart character has two or more PhD degrees. But those scripts were very obviously written by people unfamiliar with the actual PhD program process. It usually takes a little over eight years to get a PhD in one area of study. It's also extremely expensive…unless you get a grant or a fellowship. And I can't think of any university that would give someone enough grant money to pursue two PhDs in similar science fields." She was silent for a few minutes as she thought more about the situation. "And what would someone do with two PhDs in biochemistry and microbiology…" She seemed to be thinking out loud. "He wouldn't be taken seriously as a tenure-track candidate at any university…he'd be regarded as a 'professional student' with too much time and money and no clear career goal…"

Tara was quiet as she considered what Allison had told her. She didn't quite understand some of what she had said…like "tenure-something"…but she was getting the impression that Allison was doubting Eugene's credentials.

"But he knew that Doctor Henry something that you mentioned," she suddenly pointed out. "That professor you knew at Duke."
Allison replied with a wry smile. "Henry Weschler was the man who sold my grandparents their septic tank back when I was a teenager.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

"We need to find us some means of transport," Abraham told Rick as they walked. "We have to get Eugene to Washington D.C. ASAP."

"I get you," Rick replied, having heard the mustachioed man's mission statement many times already. "But I think that in the meantime we need to find a place to hole up for at least one night. To get at least one night of sleep, and get a meal in our bellies."

"Allison and I found a group of houses in a subdivision," Merle chimed in. "had wind-powered electricity. But..." his voice trailed off, "but it wasn't securely gated or fenced in...and shortly after we left we encountered an adversarial intruder nearby..." He sighed and then added, "even though it seems like a comfortable safe-haven for all of us, I'm worried about vulnerability. If that one wanderer found it, others might, too, before we'd have time to build up barriers..."

"I think you're right," Rick commented, "probably not the best choice at the moment..." He was hesitant to mention out loud that some of the Terminus people who might have survived might be following them, bent on revenge. They needed a safe and secure place for at least one night. They were all tired and hungry.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

"Don't you get it?!" Merle badgered Daryl as the group continued to wander and he had more time to think. "They didn't pick up your ugly ass from the side of the road, did they?!"

"I was fightin' Walkers, we were s'posed to meet outside..." Daryl's initial emotional rush of happiness at finding Allison alive was quickly being harshed by his brother.

"What I'm sayin' is if someone was willin' to spend the gasoline to prowl the streets in a car and pluck a young girl off of the side of the road...well, there's no good outcome to that scenario."

"What are you saying?" Maggie asked anxiously.

"I'm sayin' exactly what you're thinkin'," Merle replied, his voice raising in irritation. "It's not like they were thinking 'Oh, here's a young damsel in distress...let's pull her into our car against her will.' What we need to be doin' right now is finding Beth."

"He's right, Rick," Maggie appealed to the sheriff. "we have to try to find her."

"I agree," an exhausted Rick replied. "But we all need some rest and some food first. Then we can take the time needed to make a logical, thought-out plan."

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

"Wet socks," Sasha said to Bob.

"Cool feet," he replied with a smile.

"Mosquito bites," she said.

"Itching reminds you that you're alive," he told her.

Sasha and Bob had been playing this verbal game from the time it was just them and Maggie
making their way to Terminus. She had been poking fun at him for a long time about how he was always able to find the good in whatever adversity they’d encountered. And even when she pretended to be exasperated with his constant optimism, Sasha had trouble concealing her attraction to the medic.

"The hot sun beating down on you," Sasha stated.

"A glorious tan, my caramel-colored beauty," he purred into her ear.

Sasha started to giggle and then noticed several sets of eyes looking at her. "It's a game," she hastily explained. "'Good Out of Bad.'" Everyone continued to look at her as Bob smiled guiltily. "He's an expert at it," Sasha defended herself.

Before anyone could tease the two of them a scream resonated from nearby.

"Help! Help!"

The entire group ran toward the voice as it continued to call "Anyone! Please! Help! Help!"

They found a man in a minister's garb perched atop a large rock, with Walkers reaching up to him. Carl, Glenn and Daryl quickly and efficiently disposed of the attacking Walkers. The man cowering on top of the rock thanked them in a quivering voice, vomited and then introduced himself in gasping breath as he tried to compose himself.

"I'm Gabriel."

"You got any weapons on you?" Rick asked the man.

"Do I look like I have any weapons?" The still-nervous man replied.

"We don't give two short and curlies what it looks like," Abraham said.

"I have no weapons of any kind. The word of God is the only protection I need."

"Sure didn't look like that a minute ago," Daryl grunted.

"I called for help, help came," Gabriel told him.

Judith made cooing sounds in Tyreese's arms.

"That's a beautiful child," Gabriel commented as he descended from his perch. "Do you have a camp?"

"No, do you?" Rick replied.

"I have a church."

"Hold your hands above your head," Rick instructed the preacher as he proceeded to pat him down. "How many Walkers have you killed?"

"None, actually."

"How many people have you killed?"

"None. The Lord abhors violence."
Rick considered the man for several moments. "You said you have a church?"

"Yes," Gabriel started walking and the group fell into line behind him. "This is the farthest I've been outside of my church since this all began." He turned and grinned at Rick. "Or maybe I'm lying and there's no church ahead at all." He looked at all the people following him and have an awkward laugh. "Maybe I'm leading you into a trap so that I can steal all your squirrels."

His attempt at humor was greeted with steely stares from the entire group. "Um, then again," he hastily stumbled over his words, "Members of my flock often said that my sense of humor leaves much to be desired…"

"We already have one comedian in our group," Merle told the man with a sidelong glance at Allison. "That's more than enough."

Father Gabriel led the group to a small, out-of-the-way picture-perfect small rural chapel. The sign out front announced "St. Sarah's Episcopal Church". It took a few minutes for everyone's eyes to adjust to the darkness once they entered the building. Rick was leading the group and was the first to approach the altar.

"Where'd you get that food from?" He asked, nodding to a long row of empty cans of soup, Spaghetti-Os and beans.

"Our annual canned food drive," Gabriel answered, lowering his eyes. "Things fell apart just after we finished the last one…” His voice drifted off and he shifted on his feet. "Today – when you found me – that was the first time I'd ventured out so far from the church…”

Rick noticed that the man had no guns or hunting gear on his person. "What were you expecting to find?" He asked.

Gabriel sighed. "There's a food bank not too far from here… I scoped it out a few days ago, but it was overrun with the Dead."

"How many?"

"What?" Gabriel was confused.

"How many Walkers did you see?" Rick repeated.

"Oh, I don't know for sure… so many… at least a dozen…”

"A dozen Walkers we can handle," Rick replied with renewed confidence.

"Bob and I will go with you," Sasha told him.

"I'll draw you a map," Gabriel offered.

"No need for that," Rick told the man, "you're coming with us."

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

Gabriel nervously flitted from place to place inside and outside the church, emphasizing his inability to fight Walkers whenever Rick stood still long enough to listen. Meanwhile, Abraham came inside to talk to Rick.

"Mind if I don't go along on your food run?" He asked.
"What you got in mind?" Rick replied.

"Found a short bus out back," Abraham gestured over his shoulder. "It's not operable now, but we can probably get it up and running in a day or two. Preacher here says he don't want it, we're free to do as we please."

"Then do it," Rick said.
Chapter 99

Glenn tore a page out of the Yellow Pages and set off with Maggie and Tara to some shops in the area on a weapons run. Daryl and Carol left together in search of any other vehicles that might be of use, particularly if the group decided to go ahead with Abraham's Washington D.C. mission. While the others were gone, Allison and Carl followed Tyreese around the church as he walked and cradled Judith in his arms and murmured reassuring sounds to lull her to sleep. They ended up in a room that was apparently Gabriel's bedroom. Allison could tell that Carl was concerned about his father being away on a precarious food run, so she sought to lighten the mood. She pointed to a painting of The Last Supper on the wall.

"Hey, Carl," she asked with a smile, "do you know what Jesus said to his disciples at the Last Supper?"

The boy looked at the picture she was pointing to, thought a moment, and then said, "No, what?"

"'Everyone who wants to be in the picture get on this side of the table!'" She laughed and Carl joined her.

Tyreese was a God-fearing Christian man, and his first reaction was to chastise Allison for mocking the Savior. But he paused a beat and understood that she was trying to keep Carl's spirits up, so he remained silent. He sat down and started softly singing a lullaby to the baby in his arms.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

"If a sewer could puke, this is what it would smell like," Bob remarked, screwing up his face in disgust as the group peered through a hole in the floor of the food bank. The basement below them was semi-flooded and skeletal Walkers were wading around aimlessly. Unfortunately, the basement was also the place that had shelves filled with canned goods.

Sasha suggested scooting the metal shelving around to use as a sort of shield, to block the Walkers, and Rick agreed that it was a good plan. They slowly lowered themselves into the muck, with Gabriel gagging and trying his best not to vomit. Bob made his way toward a shelf containing still-dry unopened cartons of canned vegetables when he suddenly disappeared underwater. Sasha heard the thrashing and grabbed a plastic storage tote that was floating nearby and hit the Walker in the head as best she could when it surfaced. Temporarily stunned, the Walker backed off long enough for Bob to push it backward onto a protruding piece of pipe, impaling it so that it could no longer advance on him. Sasha finished the job by smashing the Walker's head into pulp with one swift impact of the storage bin.

"Are you OK?" She asked Bob anxiously.

The medic was still gasping for air and took a moment to reply. "Yeah, yeah, I'm fine, I'm good," he assured her.

An hour or so later, the group was making their way back to the church, pushing several carts full of supplies that they'd scavenged from the murky depths of the food pantry basement.

"Do you miss your sword?" Rick asked Michonne as they walked.

"Wasn't really mine in the first place," she replied. "Just happened to find it in the beginning."

"How'd you get so good?"
Despite being covered in disgusting goo, Michonne couldn't help but feel a tiny happy glow inside when Rick asked her that question. She had to admit that it felt good to have someone like Rick Grimes regard her with admiration. Sometimes it pained her heart to see how protective he was of Carl and Judith – how he'd do anything to keep them safe. If Mike had been like that, she would think to herself, Andre would still be here. But instead her Little Peanut had been devoured by Walkers because her poor excuse for a boyfriend was too busy getting high to take care of his own son.

"It was just me and them out here all day, every day a good long time," she told him. "I don't know what that was, but it wasn't a life. Not like today." She paused and gave him a sideways glance and a small smirk. "Stumbling around in three feet of slime for some peas and carrots, now that's living."

Rick chuckled and nodded in agreement.

"I do miss Andrea," Michonne continued in a more serious tone. "I miss Hershel. But I don't miss what was before. I don't miss that sword."

Rick noticed the ever so slight change in Michonne's expression when she mentioned "before". It was as if a dark curtain temporarily descended over her eyes. He was tempted to question her but he decided that now was not the time. The woman obviously had some demons in her past that occasionally poked their way back into her consciousness, just as he had. Maybe one day they'd feel comfortable enough to talk about such things…

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

"Jee-zus Christ!" Merle exclaimed when Rick and company returned from their food run. He'd been helping Abraham make repairs on the bus and was the first to hear the scavenging team approaching. He was relieved to see them all alive and well – and with carts full of supplies – but in true Merle fashion, he was only able to express his happiness by commenting on their collective stench.

"Y'all smell like Satan's jockstrap," he grimaced.

"There's a working shower inside," Gabriel told him. "We can take turns cleaning up – "

"Whoa," Rosita interrupted him. "If there's a communal shower inside, we sure as hell don't need you folks fouling it up for the rest of us." She had a tiniest hint of a grin on her face as she walked over to the opposite side of the bus. She emerged a moment later with a garden hose in her hand. "We've been using this to clean some engine parts, but pressure's good enough to rinse off humans, I'd imagine…" And with a slight laugh she launched a spray of water on Gabriel and Rick, who reflexively backed away at first, but then the entire group stood still and were pleased to have the clean water wash over them.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

"I'd like to propose a toast!" Abraham announced. The group was assembled in the church proper and had finished what tasted like a gourmet meal out of some of the canned goods that Rick's team had brought back. "To the survivors!" He raised his glass.

"Here, here!" "Cheers!" "To the survivors!" Everyone held up their glasses and sipped the wine that Father Gabriel had provided.

"I think we should also thank Father Gabriel for his hospitality," Rick raised his glass for another
toast. "We appreciate you sharing your Communion wine with us."

"There isn't anyone left to take Communion," Gabriel said sadly. "It's just wine until it's blessed."

Allison chuckled and then was suddenly consumed with a fit of giggles. Everyone turned to look at her.

"What's so funny?" Maggie asked.

It took several minutes for Allison to catch her breath and collect herself so that she could speak. It had been a long time since she'd had alcohol, and they'd all been surviving on starvation rations, so it was no surprise that the wine had gone straight to her head so quickly.

"I'm sorry….I just….when Gabriel mentioned the Communion wine, and it being blessed, it reminded me of an old novelty song I used to listen to when I was a kid. It was on some album my Granddad had of "Goofy Greats" or some such thing…. Anyway, it was pretty funny, all about the Catholic church…."

"How'd it go? Can you sing it for us?" Carl asked.

"Well, I don't have much of a voice…" Allison hesitated for a moment. But the wine was giving her confidence, so she didn't hesitate too long…. She cleared her throat and began to sing the ragtime tune to the best of her memory:

"First you get down on your knees, fiddle with your rosaries
Bow you head with great respect and genuflect, genuflect…
Get in line in that processional, step in to that small confessional
There the guy who's got religion'll tell you if your sin's original
If it is try playing it safer, drink the wine and chew the wafer
Two-four-six-eight, time to transubstantiate….
Ave Maria, gee it's good to see ya, doin' the Vatican Rag!"

There was laughter and applause, and Abraham poured some more wine all around.

"I have to tell you something…" Tara sidled up beside Maggie in one of the church pews. This had been weighing heavily on her heart ever since she'd seen it happen, but now that she'd been accepted into this group and saw how they all got along…. She just needed to bare all, put her cards on the table and let the chips fall where they may. "I was with that group that attacked the prison. Brian, the guy with the eyepatch, he told us what I now know are lies about y'all - -" She lowered her head and tried to collect herself. "I'm so, so sorry about your dad… I didn't know Brian was…."

"Glenn told me," Maggie smiled at the girl and clasped one of her hands. "I know that the Governor, or 'Brian', was a convincing con man, and I also know that you saved Glenn's life. And then he saved mine. That's how it works with us, OK? With 'us'. You are one of us now."

Tara simply nodded and smiled and blinked away the tears that were forming in her eyes.

"I propose a toast," Abraham announced. "I look around this room and I see survivors. Each and every one of us has earned that title."
There was a chorus of "Cheers" and "To the survivors" as everyone sipped from their glass.

"But is that all you want to be?" Abraham continued. "Sleep at night with two eyes open, wake up in the morning fight the undead pricks then forage for supplies. Lather, rinse, repeat?"

"What's the alternative?" Maggie asked.

"Eugene here has the solution. We get him to Washington D.C. and he can not only make the dead die permanently, he can also give this world back to the living." Abraham paused to let his audience digest that information. "And that is not too shabby a takeaway for a little road trip, in my opinion," he added.

"What's in DC, Eugene?" Rick asked as Judith wriggled in his arms and made cooing noises.

"Infrastructure constructed to withstand pandemics even of this FUBAR magnitude," Eugene replied in his typical robotic monotone. His response was greeted with blank looks from most of the group. He hastened to explain: "That means food, fuel, refuge. However this plays out, however long it takes for the 'reset' button to kick in, we can be safe there."

The group was quiet for a few minutes while they considered his proposal and then Allison spoke up. "But wouldn't the most populous areas of the U.S. have run out of supplies by now? And I seem to recall that during the 9/11 attacks most of the highest-ranking government officials were secreted out of the city to, I dunno, I can't remember, but some location far away from D.C.…" The wine was clouding her brain as she struggled to make her point. "I mean, didn't those guys you met at that bar with Hershel tell you that Fort Benning had already been overrun…?" She looked at Rick.

Maggie and Glenn simultaneously winced and lowered their heads at the mention of Hershel.

"They did say that," Rick agreed, "but how trustworthy were they? Eugene here is a scientist…."

Something in the back of Allison's drunken mind was nudging her consciousness…Eugene and his claim to having multiple doctorate degrees…. But as she looked around the room, she saw that her mention of Hershel had already depressed many of the folks sitting in the pews.

"Save the world for yourselves," Abraham resumed his spiel. "Save it for that little one," he nodded at the gurgling babe standing up in Rick's lap and taking pieces of food from his mouth as he attempted to eat.

"What was that?" Rick asked Judith in a cutesy tone as he fed her pieces of canned fruit. She grinned and he looked into her eyes as he announced "I think she knows what I'm about to say….if she's in, I'm in." Judith cooed and giggled right on cue, looking up into her Daddy's face. "We're in!" Rick said with a laugh and everyone else laughed along and applauded. Well, most everyone. Allison had her doubts both about Eugene's plan and the wisdom of making a group decision based on a baby's approval. But she'd gotten such a frosty response when she'd mentioned Hershel that she kept her negative thoughts to herself.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

Merle had stepped outside once Allison had started singing. Not that she had a great voice or anything, but singing to the group reminded him of Beth. He needed some fresh air to clear his mind. He walked the length of the lawn in front of the church and the was suddenly caught short.

"What the fu - ?!"
"Help me, please," Bob asked in a weak voice. "Please get me inside…"

"Help!" Merle called out only once before Bob stopped him.

"No, no, you have to be quiet," he urged. "They're nearby. They knocked me out…" he paused for breath and as Merle scooped him up into his arms to carry him he noticed that one leg had been amputated below the knee.

"We'll get you inside to Dr. Allison," Merle told the man as he hauled him back to the church.

"You have to listen to me," Bob's voice was soft but urgent. "They're nearby. That guy, Gareth, and some others from that place…Terminus." He paused to catch his breath, and tears began pouring from his eyes. "When I woke up they were eating my leg right in front of me!"

"Help! I need help here!" Merle shouted as he kicked the church doors with his foot. His arms were full of Bob and he was unable to grasp the door handle.

A bunch of people pushed the doors open and gasped in shock when they saw Bob's leg bleeding out. Sasha gasped in shock and cradled Bob's head as Merle carried him to Father Gabriel's bedroom.

Allison called out to Carl to get her call bag as she examined Bob's injured leg, but he halted her instructions with a wave of his hand.

"No, look…" He lowered his shirt to reveal a large Walker bite on his shoulder.

"Oh, no…"Allison sighed.

Tears flowed from Sasha's eyes.

"Listen, baby," Bob said, grasping one of Sasha's hands. "Don't worry 'bout me, You've got to worry about everyone else, including that baby. Those people are nearby and they'll be here soon." Perspiration was breaking out on his face as the fever began to take effect. "Please," he implored to Tyreese and the others who were gathered around his bed, "you have to get ready for an attack. You have to protect yourselves."

Allison left the room and returned with a towel soaked in cold water. She bathed Bob's forehead in an attempt to make him as comfortable as possible.

"Can y'all leave us along for a few?" Sasha said, her gaze never leaving Bob's eyes.

"We've got some serious preparing to do," Rick told everyone after they left Bob's bedside.
Chapter 100

Allison rushed to Daryl and gave him a brief but rib-crushing embrace, seeing as they had an audience. She had long since ceased saying “Thank God you’re alive!” when he returned from a run; and he’d likewise learned that her bear hugs silently expressed that and many other unspoken emotions.

Inside the church, Noah briefly described his time at Grady Memorial and gave as detailed a description he could of the layout of the hospital so that Sasha could draw a map as he spoke. Daryl interrupted Noah’s narrative occasionally to point out vantage points in the nearby abandoned buildings. Pretty soon a plan was discussed and put into place, and once again Allison found herself being left behind.

“No!” She protested. “I’m a good shot, I can help.” Her pleading eyes searched Daryl’s, hoping he’d understand that she was reluctant to let him out of her sight again while he embarked on such a dangerous mission.

“I’d rather you stay here,” Rick said placatingly. “Worst case scenario, something happens to you and we no longer have a doctor in our group.” He paused and then gently grasped her shoulder. “I know that you are more than capable with weapons out in the field, but I’m asking you to indulge my selfishness… I’d feel much better and would be better able to focus on the task at hand when we’re out there if I knew that whatever happens, there is still a doctor back at home that can care for my children.”

“OK,” Allison sighed. Rick had pressed all the right buttons, but she knew that deep down he was sincere – he truly was worried about his kids, young Judith in particular, and he was able to relax somewhat when there was someone with medical expertise nearby to treat them.

Later that afternoon she gave Daryl yet another bear hug before he climbed into the passenger seat of the truck he’d driven to the church from Grady. Rick was driving, and Sasha, Tyreese, Merle and Noah loaded themselves into the back. The truck sped off with Michonne, Carl (with baby Judith in his arms) and Father Gabriel joining Allison in waving good-bye. Moments later three of them got to work. Gabriel spent his time alternately watching Judith in her bed and fretting as the others continued to dismantle fixtures from inside the building to add to the reinforcement measures the entire group had begun previously.

“Are you going to take the cross, too?” He asked in a sarcastic tone as his house of worship was being torn apart.

“If we have to,” Michonne replied, hammering a length of wood across one of the doors. “Delusional preacher obviously didn’t accept what Maggie had told him just the other day – that this building was nothing special, it was just four walls and a roof. Hell”, she thought to herself, even if they’d been holed up in the friggin’ Louvre, they’d nail the Mona Lisa to the door if that was the only barricade handy.”

Gabriel wandered away, his mind in a turmoil. Yes, he’d seen the walkers at the food bank…but these people – they were not only ripping apart his church from stem to stern, they had also murdered people inside these hallowed halls. Was the outside world really as bad as all that?? He struggled to comprehend it all. Somehow..for some reason…he needed to see it for himself…

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

“Allison’s afraid she’ll look weak in front of us,” the big bald beefy cop known as Licari told Rick
as he sat handcuffed in the warehouse that had served as temporary headquarters for the team that had come to rescue Beth and Carol. “She’ll see this trade as a rip-off if she thinks you took out one of our guys. So it’s a good thing Lamson got bit by Rotters,” he added encouragingly.

Rick eyed the man suspiciously, not knowing how close he was to his fellow officer Bob Lamson, whom Rick had both hit with his car and then shot in the head after the man had threatened him.

“He’s telling you the truth,” Officer Amanda Shepherd, who was likewise handcuffed, stated. “It’s a weird pride thing with Dawn… I’ll back Licari up, tell Dawn that Rotters got Lamson, and there should be no problem exchanging us for your two people.”

After some private discussion and strategy planning with the members of his group, Rick ordered Shepherd to radio Dawn to have Beth and Carol ready to leave the hospital in exchange for her and Licari. Amanda did as directed, and after 30 minutes and several other radio transmissions, the woman known as Dawn announced that she was ready to make the swap.

Rick ordered the two captives to rise to their feet and then marched them to Grady Hospital, with Sasha, Daryl, Tyreese, Merle and Noah backing him up, weapons drawn and ready.

“Where’s Lamson?” Dawn asked Rick as his group paused several paces in front of her in the hospital corridor.

“Rotters got him,” Amanda replied.

“Saw it go down,” Licari added, lowering his eyes and looking sad for effect.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Dawn remarked after a pause. “He was one of the good guys.” She took a deep breath and then said, “OK, one of yours for one of mine.”

Rick uncuffed Amanda Shepherd and nudged her forward at the same time that one of Dawn’s wards pushed Carol forward in a wheelchair. Dawn then personally pushed Beth in front of her, which prompted Rick to release Licari. Beth rushed forward with a slight sob and embraced Rick and then Daryl. She struggled to catch her breath, so excited was she to see these folks she’d considered to be family since back at her daddy’s farm.

“Glad we could work things out,” Dawn said reasonably. “Now all I need is Noah…”

“What?!” Rick turned to confront her. “That wasn’t part of the deal.”

“Noah was my ward,” Dawn explained, “and Beth was his replacement and now you’re taking her, so I need him back.”

“Ma’am, please – it’s not – “

“Shepherd!” Dawn barked at the officer who’d dared to contradict her. “My officers put their lives on the line to find him. One of them died.”

“No,” Rick told her, “he ain’t stayin’.”

“He’s one of mine, you have no claim on him.”

“Claim?!?” Tyreese couldn’t help but speak up. “I thought Mr. Abraham Lincoln abolished that sort of thing back in 1863.”

“The young man wants to go home,” Rick told Dawn. “You have no claim on him.”
“Well, then,” she shrugged, “we have no deal.”

“No, no,” an agitated Noah limped forward. “I’ve got to do it. I’ll stay.”

“It’s not OK,” Rick told him.

“No, it is,” Noah replied. If this was the sacrifice he had to make to set Beth free, then so be it. There were worse things than living in Grady with Dawn in charge.

“It’s settled then,” Dawn smiled smugly. She then glanced and Noah and added, “I knew you’d be back.”

Beth broke free from Carol’s embrace and walked up to Dawn to confront her face-to-face. All the things she’d seen going on at this hospital plus Dawn’s self-satisfied grin triggered something within her. Reaching inside the cast on her wrist she withdrew a small pair of surgical scissors she’d stashed away earlier and told Dawn, “I get it now.” And with a quick motion she jabbed into what she’d hoped was Dawn’s jugular vein, but the woman jerked away at the last minute and the scissors ended up stabbing somewhere between her neck and her shoulder. Almost reflexively Dawn fired the revolver she’d been holding in her hand in Beth’s general direction.

Everything seemed to move in slow motion after that shot was fired. Beth stood upright for several seconds before collapsing to the ground. Rick heard Dawn gasp quietly, “I didn’t mean to – “ just prior to Daryl stepping forward and putting a bullet through her head. The police officers that had been standing behind Dawn raised their weapons but Shepherd called out, “Hold your fire! Hold your fire! Stand down!!”

“It’s over,” Amanda turned to tell the group behind her. “It’s over,” she repeated to Rick. “It was always about her.”

Daryl bent down to scoop up Beth, blood staining the right side of her blonde hair.

“You can stay here,” Dr. Edwards spoke up. “We’re surviving. It’s better than out there.”

“No,” Rick replied as the members of his group slowly made their way to the exit. “But I’m taking any of you back there who wants to go with us. If you want to leave, just step forward now.”

Noah was the only person who accepted Rick’s offer, and he trailed behind the sheriff and his crew as they slowly left the building.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

“Michonne! Carl! Allison! Let me in!!”

“What the hell – “ Michonne looked at Allison first and then to the front doors of the church. Father Gabriel was banging his fists on the wooden doors. “Oh, God, please let me in!!”

Carl and Michonne started prying the boards off of the front doors while Allison cradled a fussing Judith in her arms. Gabriel burst inside as soon as the doors opened enough, sweaty and panting. Carl and Michonne did their best to hack at the Walkers that were pressing behind the preacher, but it was a losing battle.

“The rectory!” Gabriel gasped. “Follow me…” He led them to the room where Bob had died, where Judith’s bed was, and lifted up a trap door in the floor. “This is how I got out…” He explained breathlessly. “Hand me the baby….” He reached up after lowering himself down through the opening. Even though Walkers were growling and clawing at the door behind her,
Allison – the last in line to exit - took the time to first hand down her backpack, her medical call bag and two other bags to Gabriel before slithering down through the floor.

The foursome stood and caught their breath just outside of the church building while the horde of Walkers still single-mindedly made their way inside.

“What the hell were you doing, sneaking out like that?!” Michonne demanded of Gabriel, not unreasonably.

“I had to…needed to see…” Gabriel was still trying to catch his breath. “Was it really as bad as all that? To necessitate killing those intruders….”

“I hope it was worth it, I hope you found a satisfactory answer,” Allison grumbled, looking wistfully at the building that had been their sanctuary just 15 minutes ago.

Gabriel remained silent; he wasn’t yet able to vocalize what he’d seen back at the school…the campfire with an obvious human leg bone still smoldering on top of it.

“Well, what do we do now,” Carl began to ask as he took his baby sister from Allison’s arms, but his question was interrupted with the sound of a truck engine. They all gazed in surprise when a fire truck pulled up in front of the church.

Abraham, Glenn and Tara emerged, knives flashing in the sunlight as they took care of the handful of Walkers that had been lingering on the steps and were suddenly attracted by the noise made by the vehicle that had just pulled up.

Maggie jumped out of the truck and rushed to embrace Michonne and then Allison. “You OK?” She asked the pair.

“Yeah,” Michonne replied with a reassuring smile. She then grasped Maggie’s forearms and added, “Beth’s alive!”

“What?!” Maggie took several steps backward and covered her mouth with her palms.

“Where is everybody?” Glenn asked, only slightly overhearing Maggie’s conversation with Michonne.

“Gone to Grady Memorial Hospital,” Allison told him. “Beth and Carol are both there.”

“I know where that is!” Abraham announced. “OK, Attention everyone - get your asses the hell on board right now!”

“You’re back,” Michonne commented to Maggie several minutes after everyone had settled into place and the truck was headed toward Atlanta.

“Yeah,” Maggie sighed, “Eugene lied. He can’t stop it. Washington isn’t the end.”

“You were right,” Tara said to Allison.

“About what?” Allison was confused.

“About Eugene not being a scientist and having all those degrees…”

“Wait a minute,” Glenn sat up straight from his position on the floor of the truck. “You knew that Eugene was lying?”
“I didn’t have any definitive proof,” Allison replied quietly, hoping the mullet-headed pseudo-scientist who was curled up on the floor near the front of the cab (apparently sleeping off the beating that Abraham had given him) wouldn’t hear her. “It was just some of the things he said about his multiple degrees that didn’t add up from an academic viewpoint…and then I threw out a name that he claimed to recognize as one of the scientists he’d worked with who was actually a septic tank salesman…”

“Why the hell didn’t you say anything??” Glenn leaned forward and hissed at her.

“Like I said, it wasn’t anything definite. Just some suspicions. And the way things were going back at the church, everyone seemed to believe him and when I tried to make a few arguments against going to Washington back before y’all left, everyone shot me down….”

Glenn sat back and considered what she’d said…true enough, he had to admit that he was one of those who’d thought Allison was being overly negative when it came to whole Washington thing.

The truck pulled into the parking lot at the back of Grady Memorial Hospital. Everyone emerged with weapons drawn, not knowing what to expect. As they walked as a group toward the entrance doors Rosita, Tara and Abraham took care of the few Walkers that wandered nearby. As they drew closer to the building, the doors opened and Rick and the others emerged. Maggie took a few steps forward and then collapsed on the ground with a whimper when she saw Beth in Daryl’s arms.

“Allison!!” Merle called out. ”Allison!” he repeated. “Get over here!”

At first Allison had only noticed – somewhat selfishly – that Daryl was still alive and safe. Then she saw that he was carrying a limp Beth, and that Merle was walking closely beside him. And then, only because the gruff bark of Merle’s voice jolted her to attention, she instinctively ran forward.

“She’s still alive, you gotta do something,” Merle gasped at Allison, holding one of Beth’s arms in his hand.

“She’s gone,” Daryl’s voice was almost a sob, as he tried to stem the tears that flowed from his eyes.

“The fuck, bro?!” Merle shouted. “I saw her eyelashes move; hell, I’ve got a goddamned pulse!!”

“Quick, carry her over to the truck,” Allison nodded to the fire truck as she took Beth’s arm from Merle and kept pace with Daryl. “She does have a pulse,” she announced moments later. “Support her head and upper body while I remove her sweater…” She was almost thinking aloud, but Merle and Daryl did as directed, and Merle tossed Beth’s cardigan onto the ground after Allison stripped it from her.

Tara and Abraham unhooked the gurney that was fastened to one wall of the truck and positioned it on the truck bed so that Beth could be lowered onto it. Quickly glancing around, Allison noted that Carol – her usual assistant – was in a wheelchair, so she called upon the next most likely candidate for assistance. “Eugene, grab that small black bag over there and get the blood pressure cuff out – “

Before she could finish her instructions, Eugene took one look at the ugly gash along Beth’s face: the top half of her ear almost torn off, part of her cheek bone exposed, the blood turning her blonde hair red, and started gagging.

“Oh geez,” Allison groaned, “if you’re going to faint or vomit, I don’t need you in here gumming up the works….get him out of here, please.”
Merle not-too-gently grabbled Eugene by the shirt and escorted him a few steps away from the truck.

“How the heck did you get through frog dissection in Biology 101?” Allison wondered aloud.

Eugene was doubled over, dry heaving, but took a moment to gasp, “I told you that I lied!”

“I can help,” Tara offered.

“Me, too,” Sasha added. She’d been a firefighter before The Turn, so she knew about all the supplies stashed away in the nooks and crannies of your average fire truck. She rooted around and found two squirt bottles of sterile water. Before offering either one of them to Allison she called out “Gloves!”, at which Allison automatically raised her hands upward. Sasha rolled a pair of disposable gloves onto Allison’s hands and then stood by for further instructions.

Tara fetched the blood pressure cuff from Allison’s bag and applied it to Beth’s arm properly thanks to Carol offering precise instructions from her wheelchair. After Allison listened to Beth’s heart, she handed her stethoscope over to Tara and asked Carol to explain to Tara how to read the dial on the blood pressure cuff while keeping track of Beth’s heart rate.

“Rosita,” Allison called out, having noticed the woman still standing in the truck bed, “will you please look through that middle-sized black satchel over there,” she inclined her head as she gently squirted water on the long gash on Beth’s face, “there are a couple of boxes that’re marked Veti-Gel….”

It took Rosita only a few seconds to paw through all the boxes and bottles and such in the bag before she found the one she was looking for. “Found ‘em!”

“Please open a box…you’ll find several pre-wrapped syringes inside….unwrap one of those and hand it to me…. Sasha? Do you have some gauze pads ready? If you would, please, continue rinse the area as I pull the wound closed, and dab the excess blood and gel off…”

Allison almost seemed to be speaking to herself as she finished her sentence. She carefully squirted the gel from the tube that Rosita had handed her along the line where the bullet had torn Beth’s face and ear. She very deliberately applied a bit of gel then pulled the wound closed with her gloved fingers (forceps might have caused nerve injury, she’d decided) every few millimeters or so. She didn’t notice Merle looking directly over her shoulder as she gently pushed the two sides of the cheek muscles that have been neatly sliced in half by Dawn’s bullet and seemingly glued them together.

“Look at that…” Merle whispered loudly, “the bleeding stops wherever she squirts that stuff!”

Glenn had also been watching with interest from his spot near the tailgate, but as Allison continued to pull the loose skin along Beth’s wound and press it into place, he suddenly felt something triggering his gag reflex. Turning suddenly very pale, he turned and dashed a few feet away from the truck before he, too, doubled over and started heaving.

Tara meanwhile continued to monitor Beth’s pulse and pressure, which were both very low but stable. Allison pushed Beth’s hair as far away from her ear as she could as she mended it. Dawn’s bullet had grazed upward across Beth’s cheek. It had severed her upper ear in half, which Allison tried to position back in place as best she could while applying the gel.

She let the areas she’d “stitched” together with gel dry for a moment, then asked Sasha for gauze pad sand some adhesive tape. She patched over the nasty gash on Beth’s face as best she could,
which unfortunately meant covering one of her eyes.

“What is that stuff?” Rosita asked. “That stuff you had me get out of your bag?”

Allison sat back for a moment and carefully observed Beth as she spoke, looking for any signs of discomfort (which, in cases like this, would be a good indicator.) “VetiGel,” she replied. “Veterinarians have been using it for a while…it was up for FDA approval for use in humans right about the time everything Turned…” She paused and pulled Beth’s exposed eye open and shined her penlight into it. Pupil was responsive. “It’s actually made out of algae, but it has antimicrobial properties and works with the body to heal without stitches, and also to stop hemorrhaging…”

She happened to glance up from her patient at that moment and noticed that Daryl was pacing back and forth near the truck bed…she recognized that look on his face. That dark cloud that covered his eyes whenever he felt responsible for something bad. Most times for something beyond his control, but nevertheless he carried the burden for anything that had gone wrong. In this case, Allison knew that Daryl was blaming himself for Beth being captured and taken to Grady in the first place.

“Luckily,” she continued her explanation to Rosita, but in a louder voice now, “Daryl, Michonne, Bob and Tyreese happened to bring this with them back when they’d raided a veterinary hospital for anti-viral medications…back when we were at the prison.”

“That was mainly thanks to Daryl,” Michonne piped up, hoping the dejected hunter who seemed to be studying his feet, would overhear her. She’d been alternately hugging and comforting Maggie and then returning to the fire truck to check on Beth’s status. “He was the one grabbing almost everything from the shelves, stuffing our bags full, saying that you might find some use for whatever we collected….”

Daryl barely raised his eyes when he approached the back of the truck and mumbled to Allison, “She gonna be OK?”

“Can’t promise anything,” Allison answered honestly, “but she is stable for the moment.”
Beth stirred slightly on the gurney and moaned.

“Beth?” Allison leaned forward to speak directly to the girl. “Can you hear me?”

“Yes…” came the weak reply. “Hurts…” She added.

“Can’t you give her something for the pain?” A gruff voice barked insistently nearby. Allison hadn’t noticed that Merle had climbed up into the truck at some point and was peering anxiously at Beth.

“Not yet, I have to – “

“Look,” he interrupted her. “I know you’ve got some Norco or something like that stashed away in your magic bag of tricks. Ain’t no need to worry ‘bout me stealin’ them as you sleep, just do something for her!”

“Calm down a minute, please,” Allison told him. “First of all, I’m not hiding pills from you or anyone else…” (which was a little stretch of the truth, because there was a time, in the early days of Merle’s arrival at the prison, that she carefully kept all the opioids under lock and key) … “but when it comes to a head injury, the protocol is to question the patient before any pain medication is given.”

“But – “ Merle started to say, before Allison interrupted him.

“I’m wasting valuable time explaining it to you; all I can say is trust me for now and I’ll explain later.” She then turned her attention back to her patient. “Beth, can you hear me OK?”

“Yeah…sort of… noise in ear…. ”

“You have ringing in your ear?” Allison clarified. “Please just answer ‘yes’ or ‘no’, don’t nod or shake your head.”

“Yes,” Beth replied, her voice getting a bit stronger.

“Are you able to raise your arm and point to the ear that’s ringing?”

Beth slowly placed her hand over the ear that the bullet had severed.

“Where else does it hurt?”

“Face…feels like it’s burning…”

“Do you remember what happened to you?”

“Shot…Dawn shot me.”

“I’ll give you something to help with that burning pain in just a minute, but first I have to ask…” Allison looked up at Merle and said, “would you excuse us for a minute?” The man stepped out of the truck but still lingered near the back. “Beth, did anything else happen to you there? Did anyone else hurt you in any way?” Beth’s unbandaged eye blinked a few times, so Allison pressed a little further, “Would you be more comfortable talking to Maggie about….things?”
“No, I…” Beth started to say something but Merle jumped back into the truck and was back at Beth’s bedside in a single motion. He’d apparently hovered close enough to overhear Allison’s line of questioning.

“Beth, can you hear me, Princess?” He picked up one of Beth’s hands and squeezed it. “If any of those bastards did somethin’ to you at that place, you just tell ol’ Merle and I’ll go back in there and personally kill every last one of those motherfuckers, you hear me?” He paused and then added, “Excuse my French.”

To Allison’s surprise, Beth didn’t pull away from Merle’s touch. She didn’t ask for Maggie. Instead she squeezed the rough redneck’s hand back and gave him a tiny smile. “No, nothing like that happened…honest.” She let go of his hand and patted the top of it. “Thank you,” she said softly.

“I need some room here, Merle,” Allison told the man, while scooting around the foot of the gurney to approach Beth on her injured side. Merle reluctantly stepped down again but stayed close enough near the truck to observe the proceedings. “Beth, can you put your arm around my shoulder? I’m going to try to ease you up into a sitting position for a minute.” The younger girl complied and once she was seated upright Allison gently inserted an otoscope into Beth’s injured ear. A few moments later she removed it and helped Beth to lie back down.

“I’m going to give you something for the pain now,” Allison told her, “and it should help you to get some sleep. The good news is your eardrum isn’t ruptured. The not-so-good news is that the ringing in your ear might annoy you when you’re trying to rest, which is another reason I’m giving you a low-dose Oxycontin.” She rifled through her “magic bag”, as Merle had called it, and removed a pill from a bottle. “Can I get some – “ Before she finished her request Tara was thrusting a bottle of water in her direction. “Thanks,” she said and then hand Beth the pill and the water. As Beth took a couple of swallows, Allison continued speaking in her traditional soothing “doctor” tone, trying to reassure her patient. “Actually, the cut to your cheek is deep but technically isn’t really too traumatic and usually a couple of aspirin or Tylenol every few hours could probably do the trick to relieve your pain,” she explained as Beth handed back the bottle and closed her exposed eye. “But aspirin and certain anti-inflammatory drugs are known to be ototoxic,” she hoped that her droning explanation would lull Beth to sleep, “which means that they can possibly cause hearing damage, especially to an ear that’s already been injured.” A few minutes later, when Allison was certain that Beth was resting comfortably, she re-packed her equipment and jumped down out of the firetruck.

Daryl had ceased pacing, and appeared to be half-listening to Rick, Abraham, Glenn, Michonne and Noah as they alternately discussed heading north to Virginia and toyed with the walkie-talkies they’d liberated from some of the wards at the hospital. Allison noticed that he was also keeping an eye turned toward the firetruck as they spoke, his entire posture still indicating that he was wracked with guilt over the entire situation. She walked over to him and started to speak, but he immediately averted his glance.

“How is she?” He asked without looking at her.

“I’m always hesitant to give any guarantees, but I believe that she’s going to be OK,” Allison told him.

Daryl gruffly whipped his head around and pointed with one arm to Beth as she slept on the gurney. “But look at all that blood – her hair is half soaked with it – “ His voice cracked slightly and he wiped carelessly at his cheek with the back of his hand as he blinked away the tears he was trying to keep under control.
“Ever cut yourself shaving?” Allison asked him. Then she playfully grabbed his chin and stroked his wispy growth of whiskers. “OK, maybe you haven’t.” She paused, hoping for a smile that was not forthcoming. “Anyway, the face has a lot of blood vessels close to the surface, so facial and scalp injuries tend to bleed a lot. But it usually looks worse than it is, blood-loss-wise.”

Daryl seemed preoccupied with his feet as he spoke. “I shoulda been there…that car just appeared out of nowhere and scooped her up…I coulda stopped it – “

“Daryl, Sweetie, please listen to me,” Allison spoke softly but firmly as she gripped his shoulders. “It was not your fault. From how you described it to me before, you saved her from Walkers. You just now said that that car appeared out of nowhere. I don’t think there was anything you could have done to change the situation, unless you were lookin’ to get bitten yourself.”

He considered her words and then heaved a sigh. Allison let go of his shoulders and reached up to push the hair out of his eyes and gently stroke his scalp. “I know you can’t help it, that you’ve always been this way. Wanting to help everyone, trying to protect everyone…” He looked up and met her gaze. “Even back when we were driving from the quarry to the CDC, you didn’t say much, but when you did talk it was to show concern for our group. I remember you feeling sad for Jim, and then doing your best to get us all out of the CDC when we were locked inside…” He pushed himself against her and snuggled his head underneath her chin. Allison gently embraced him with one arm and continued to massage his head with the other hand. “I wish I could magically lift that burden that you’re always carrying for the rest of us off of your heart, but if I did, you wouldn’t be you.” She kissed his forehead.

He stood back and gave her a quick, almost imperceptible nod.

“So you think she’s really going to be OK?” Allison heard a voice ask her from behind. She turned to see Maggie, her face pale and tear-stained. “Are you tellin’ us the truth?”

“The truth as best as I can guess at the moment,” Allison replied. Maggie stood several feet away from the tailgate of the firetruck, looked at her sister – half of her face swathed in bandages – and then collapsed into Glenn’s arms.

“What was that you were sayin’ about her ear – it’s ringin’ or something?” Merle’s voice was the next to question her.

“Yes, from best I can determine it seems to be due to acoustic trauma – the noise of that gunshot going off so close to her. I couldn’t see any physical damage to the eardrum.”

“But she said her ear is making a noise,” Merle persisted.

“It’s called ‘tinnitus’, and like I said, it’s a result of loud noise. Some folks experience it after going to a rock concert without wearing earplugs, for example. It often goes away on its own, but it can take days, or sometimes even months…”

“She’s a singer, she needs hear hearing,” Merle seemed to be thinking aloud. “How can you test her to see if that tin-whatever is getting better?”

Allison did her best to stifle a sigh. “Normally an ear doctor has electronic equipment to use to test hearing, but – “

“There has to be something else!” Merle shouted at her. “What did doctors use before there was electricity?!!”

“If you’d let me finish,” she replied with as much patience as she could muster, “a tuning fork. In
fact, a lot of doctors still use tuning forks to test for middle ear damage…"

“Well, then tell me where to get one.” He was visibly fidgeting and obviously anxious to do something to help. Then the look on his face and his next statement forced Allison to stifle her laughter. “But first maybe you better tell me what the hell it is.”

Allison did her best to describe a tuning fork, and then an invisible light bulb seemed to go off over Merle’s head. “Like that thing our music teacher had in grammar school!” He exclaimed.

“Yeah, but I don’t know where you’d find one these days, unless we find a store that sells musical instruments or something…” Allison commented.

“What about those other stitches on her face?” Merle asked in a slightly lower voice. “Isn’t there stuff you can get to prevent scars?”

Maggie looked over from Glenn’s side and commented, “Beth was never a vain person, Daddy taught us not to be. She won’t care ‘bout scars…”

“Ain’t no reason for her to be reminded of what happened to her back at that hospital every time she looks in the mirror for the rest of her life,” Merle grunted.

“Well, if any of you are out scavenging for supplies and you see some Vaseline, petroleum jelly is the best thing to reduce scarring,” Allison told him. She’d secretly wondered about those Frankenstein-like sutures on Beth’s face; any competent physician would have used either medical adhesive or at the very least a vertical mattress stitch with absorbable gut for a superficial facial wound. Whoever had sewed up Beth’s face had – in Allison’s opinion – unnecessarily used a horizontal mattress stitch with permanent sutures, which was traditionally reserved for wounds on high-tension areas, like the elbow, because it was quick and easy. Unfortunately, it frequently left “railroad track”-type scars, which is why Allison had been taught not to use it on the face. Well, maybe the doctor at Grady had limited supplies….but still, they apparently had X-Ray equipment, since Beth was wearing a soft compression cast on her wrist….

“OK,” Merle replied simply, but with a look of determination in his eyes.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

“It was secure, it had a wall,” Noah repeated. He was trying to convince the group to go to Richmond, Virginia, which is where his family lived at the time of The Turn.

Carl was unconvinced. “That’s a long way away.”

“There were houses, too,” Noah enthused. “And only about 20 people.”

“He’s got family there,” Tyreese stated.

“My mom and my brothers – they’re twins,” Noah added.

Rick looked around at the group, silently asking for their opinions. Glenn was the first to cast a vote: “We don’t have any other plan in place, at least this is some sort of destination.”

“It is on the way to D.C., in case we decide to eventually go that route,” Rosita said.

“If it’s walled like he says, might be a place to stay for a while, at least,” Michonne remarked. “Get some rest, collect some supplies….”
“Are you up for a long road trip?” Rick asked Carol.

She slowly rose from her wheelchair. She was unsteady on her feet at first, having been in bed for a few days and then in the chair. She took a few tentative steps and then carefully twisted her back in various directions while extended her arms and moving them. “I think I’ll be OK,” she replied. “Doesn’t seem like any major injuries other than lots of bruises.” She didn’t mention that she’d been unconscious with a concussion for almost 24 hours after she’d been hit by that car.

“Looks like we’ve got a consensus, then,” Rick said with a slight sigh. The group spent the next hour choosing a few vehicles with the most fuel from the hospital parking lot and dividing into teams, each one with a walkie-talkie in hand. When they finally hit the road for Virginia, Rick was driving the lead car with Daryl riding shotgun and Carol, Carl (who clutched Judith in his lap) and Noah in the back seat. They hadn’t been driving long when Abraham gave a short blast on the horn of the fire truck he was driving. The cars in front of him stopped and then backed up and followed the truck into a driveway that led into a large parking lot filled with city buses.

“Why did we stop here?” Glenn asked when Abraham emerged from the cab of his truck.

“Municipal bus barn,” Abraham replied, as if that explained everything. As the others emerged from their various vehicles with questioning looks on their faces, he climbed back into the truck and then returned holding some sort gadget that looked vaguely like a small engine. “Found this here in one of the cubbies on the truck – it’s a diesel fuel transfer pump. With this little lady we can siphon some of the fuel out of these Greyhound rejects and fill our tanks.”

“Tanks?” Tyreese was curious about the plural. None of the cars in their convey used diesel fuel.

“According to Professor Eugene here, fire trucks have an auxiliary or ‘booster’ fuel tank that is used when they need to keep the engine running to pump water. But if we ain’t puttin’ out a fire, we can use that fuel to further our journey to Washington.”

Daryl tried not to let his mind wander too much as they drove, but sometimes he couldn’t help it as the hours passed. A part of his brain was always alert, ready to detect Walkers or even any sort of foreign noise that might signal car trouble. But that still left plenty of time to thing about…things. He kept remembering Allison’s words – that it wasn’t his fault that Beth got taken. And that she also understood that no matter what she said, he’d still feel responsible. Because, according to her, that ever since they’d first met, he’d always been that way. He mentally compared that to a conversation he’d had with Carol, back when they’d first tracked Beth to Grady Hospital… She’d told him “You’re not who you were and neither am I.” He understood what she meant when she referred to herself, and he had to agree. He remembered the days when she was almost afraid to hold a weapon and relied on everyone else to keep her safe. But what did she mean about him not being “who he was”? He wasn’t sure exactly what bothered him about her explaining that before he’d been a “kid” and now he was a “man”, but something about her analysis didn’t set right with him. OK, maybe when he’d first joined this group he’d been more introverted and kept to himself, but that didn’t necessarily render him child-like, did it? And, maybe, part of what she’d said had struck a painful nerve…one he’d thought long ago buried…the one Merle never failed to poke at every day of his life while they were growing up.

“Two more miles!” Noah’s voice piped up suddenly.

“All right,” Rick announced, “we’ll all pull over here in the woods and go the rest of the way on foot.”

“We don’t have to!” Noah protested.
“Just to be safe,” Rick replied.
Chapter 102

The other vehicles in the small convoy pulled up behind Rick's car when he stopped on the side of the road. Glenn was behind the wheel of the Buick Roadmaster station wagon, with Maggie beside him in the passenger seat holding the walkie-talkie. Gabriel, Tyreese, Michonne, Sasha and Merle were all piled into the rows of seats in the back of the vehicle.

"What's up?" Glenn asked Rick as he exited the parked car. The other occupants got out, one by one, stretching their legs and surveying their surroundings. Abraham likewise joined the group after positioning the fire truck on the shoulder of the road.

"Noah says it's about two miles from here to his house," Rick explained. "I think it's best we hike it from here on foot, just in case. Keep the vehicles here, safe. In case we need 'em in a hurry. We don't know for sure what we'll find when we get there."

"There's no need," Noah repeated, his voice growing with excitement at being so close to his home, "I told you it's safe! There's walls!"

"Hold up there, young blood," Tyreese tried to rein in Noah's enthusiasm. "Hear the man out, he's been out here a lot longer than you have."

After a few minutes of discussion, Rick laid out his plan: Tyreese, Noah, Glenn and Michonne would go with him to Shirewilt Estates, the subdivision where Noah insisted his family was waiting for him. Carol would stay tuned to her walkie-talkie, awaiting instructions from Rick.

"If I don't hear back from you in 20 minutes," Carol told him, "the rest of us will come looking for you."

"And," Rick added, "everyone else should be at the ready….whether this turns out to be a place we can stay, or if it has some worthwhile supplies that we can haul away. If that's the case, I'll alert you and then you'll mobilize the others."

"Gotcha," Carol acknowledged. She paused and then added, "Be careful."

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

"I'm gonna go out and about, stretch my legs, survey the terrain, drain the beast…." Abraham announced to the group in the firetruck. He hopped out of the cab and closed the driver's side door as quietly as he could, just in case there were Walkers nearby.

"You might want to join him," Rosita said to Eugene, who was sitting nearby and looking nervous and somewhat uncomfortable. He knew that he'd lost his Protective Custody status after his recent big reveal, and he worried that Abraham and the others wouldn't go to the same great lengths to keep him safe him from Walkers as before. He was in no way equipped to kill them on his own. Truth be told, he was even more of a big ol’ scaredy-cat that he was prior to finding Abraham back in Texas.

"I…um…." he stammered.

"Just a word of warning," Maggie said as she scooted up into the truck to sit beside her sister, "we might get to talking about womanly things….y'know, our periods and such….

Eugene visibly cringed at the thought. Talk about being between a rock and a hard place…
"We've been on the road for a long time," Allison added, "surely your, um, 'beast' must be in need of drainage as well."

Eugene had developed excellent bladder control since he'd first started hiding and running from Walkers and riding for hours on end in a military truck. But the more these ladies talked about it, he suddenly felt the urge to pee.

"Daryl and Merle and the others are out there with weapons," Tara reassured him. She still had something of a soft spot for this mulleted misfit. "You'll be OK."

Eugene gave her a vague nod and then slithered his way out of the back of the truck.

"Is it just me, or is he kind of weird?" Allison asked no one in particular.

"You wanna talk weird," Rosita said with a shake of her head, "I've spotted Eugene playing Peeping Tom more than once when I was with Abraham."

"You mean 'with' as in….?" Allison asked.

"Yeah, we were doin' the nasty, gettin' it on, whatever you wanna call it," Rosita still didn't quite buy this wide-eyed blonde's apparent naiveté, or whatever it was. For Christ's sake, she was a doctor and certainly knew about human anatomy and reproduction. Plus she was apparently hooked up with Daryl, and between him and his brother she'd certainly heard her share of curse words. Yet, for the short time she'd known her, she'd noticed that apparently Allison wouldn't say the word "shit" even if she had a mouth full of it.

"Eew," Allison uttered involuntarily. "He was actually watching you?! What did you say to him?"

Rosita shrugged. "Nothing. Like Abraham said, if that's how he gets his jollies, well, he's not hurting anyone."

"It didn't bother you?" Maggie was simultaneously shocked and intrigued. She recalled how she and Glenn had sought out as many private places as they could to make love back at the prison, and how embarrassed she was that time when most of their group saw them emerging from the watch tower one morning.

"Hell," Rosita replied, "when the world's coming to an end and you've done things you'd never thought you'd do before just to survive, who the hell cares if some scientific goofball gets a kick out of watching people fuck? At least he was always discreet…or what he thought was discreet. Abraham always spotted him peeping from around a corner or through a curtain." She said the last part of her statement with a tone of pride in her voice, as if she was less concerned about being spotted in the act of coitus and more pleased with her Military Man's awareness skills.

"He even came on to me once," Tara admitted.

"Really?" Maggie asked. "When was this?"

"Oh, let me think…we hadn't found you yet. Glenn was there, though. Actually, now that I think on it, it was right before Glenn and I parted ways with Abraham and Rosita and Eugene. Glenn was reading the signs you'd left and we were following them to Terminus." She paused for a moment and her eyes clouded over temporarily as she recalled both the train tunnel with the Walkers and then the railroad car at Terminus….. "Anyway, he said to me something like 'you are seriously hot. And then I told him that I liked girls, and he said I'm well aware of that.'"

Everyone chuckled and then Allison finally asked in all innocence, "Really? How could he tell?"
To be honest, during the time they'd been together, all she knew of Tara was that she seemed to be a very nice, friendly, caring person. She had never bothered to consider the woman's sexual preferences.

"Isn't it obvious?" Rosita replied. "All women who wear flannel shirts, hunting vests and cargo pants are known to be lesbians."

Everyone laughed at her comment, and Allison joined in until she took a moment to think about it and then look down at her own attire.

"Hey - - !" She belatedly objected, which made everyone laugh even harder, including Beth.

"Well, if you're healthy to laugh at my expense, that must mean you're feeling better," Allison said to Beth, partially to draw the mocking attention away from herself.

"I have to go to the bathroom," Beth said, "and if y'all make me laugh any harder, I'll wet myself right here."

"I'll take you," Maggie said, easing her sister up into a sitting position. Beth stood up and was unsteady on her feet for a few minutes, having been on her back for so long and also having one eye bandaged, which affected her depth perception.

"When you two get back, I'll change those bandages…maybe we can let Beth look at the world with two eyes now," Allison said.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

Abraham came rushing back to the truck, his walkie talkie poised near his ear. Carol was shouting questions into her walkie. Rosita, Tara and Allison jumped out to see what the hubbub was all about.

"Should we come there?" Carol asked more than once to the jumble of voices that were coming through the speaker.

"What's going on?" Tara asked Abraham.

"Don't know for sure, sounds like someone got hurt."

"Were they bit?" Rosita asked.

"Can't tell…too many people shouting at once," Abraham's face was contorted with frustration. If there was trouble afoot, he wanted to pitch in and help.

A few minutes later Rick's voice came over the airwaves: "It's OK, we'll be there in a few minutes…just cut, not bit…."

The group that had been waiting by the vehicles gathered together and stared into the distance. Merle had been using his binoculars while on watch for Walkers, so he was the first to spot Rick and the others approaching. "Here they come!" He announced.

Glenn and Michonne appeared to be supporting Tyreese, and Tyreese simultaneously seemed to be shrugging them away. As they got closer, the highway group gasped almost in unison when they saw that Tyreese's shirt front was covered with blood, and one of his sleeves was ripped to shreds.

"Damn it, it's just some cuts," the bleeding man yelled when he arrived at their caravan of vehicles.
Sasha was the first to run up and embrace him. "Are you bit?" She asked when she released her hug.

"No, no, and I wish to Heaven someone would listen to me!" Tyreese griped. Noah was trailing behind the group, crying and gasping for breath.

"What the hell happened?" Merle asked of no one in particular.

Rick gestured for folks to gather closer to him so that he didn't have to shout. "The place was overrun," he explained. "Noah's family was…gone."

"But what happened to – " Carl's question was interrupted by the man himself.

"I was in Noah's house," Tyreese explained as calmly as he could while Sasha daubed at the cuts on his arm with her shirt sleeve. She took a moment to grab some hydrogen peroxide and gauze pads from the fire truck while her brother continued to tell the others what had occurred. "It was stupid of me, got distracted, wasn't paying attention…Walker came at me in a bedroom. It managed to get hold of my sleeve and tear it and when I pulled back I smashed a mirror on the wall with my arm. I guess the glass cut me, but I didn't feel it at the time. I grabbed an airplane and used the wing to stab the Walker through the eye."

"An airplane?" Carl asked.

"There was this decoration hanging from the ceiling – a mobile, I guess it's called. Model airplanes on wires. Ow! That stings!" Sasha was cleaning his cuts as Allison looked on, trying to determine if he needed stitches. "Anyway," Tyreese lowered his voice, casting a side glance at Noah, who was still crying unconsolably a few feet away, with Glenn and Michonne trying to comfort him, "that Walker was Noah's brother, and he came in right after I killed him. Saw the blood and assumed I'd been bit. Started crying out for help, yelling that I'd been bit, and Michonne came running in with her sword and was this close to cutting my arm off before I could explain…"

"…and that's why I heard so many voices on the walkie," Carol finished. She now understood the confusion – Rick wasn't quite sure what had happened, and apparently Noah in his grief at finding that his brother had Turned was shouting in the background, convinced that Tyreese had been bitten.

"None of these cuts look very deep," Sasha said aloud as she continued to clean them as gently as she could, despite the moans and groans of her supposedly rugged brother.

"I agree," Allison told her. "No stitches or adhesive necessary….maybe a little gauze over some of them, but otherwise air and time will heal him."

"He could also use a new shirt," Maggie observed.

"We didn't get a lot of time to do a thorough search," Glenn said, "but it looked like there was still some food and some clothes left in the houses."

"We could go back," Daryl suggested. "A group of us, in pairs. Someone to stand guard, the other to collect whatever we can use." He didn't bring up the fact that it had appeared to him that Noah's mother and some of the other bodies they'd seen appeared to have been executed. And that some of them had had a letter written or carved in their foreheads….a 'W', whatever that was supposed to symbolize. But other than a few Walkers, he hadn't seen any humans in the area, so hopefully the W people were long gone. Nevertheless, searching for supplies in teams seemed like the safest plan.
Tyreese and Noah remained behind as the others left on their scavenging mission, as well as Merle, Carl and the baby, Carol, Eugene and Allison. Merle and Carl turned abruptly and raised their weapons when they heard the underbrush near the side of the road make a noise, but lowered them when Maggie and Beth emerged from their bathroom run.

"Thought I heard voices; where'd everybody go?" Maggie asked. "What happened to you?" She asked an instant later, when she caught sight of Tyreese's bloody shirt and arm.

He recapped his story as succinctly as he could, as quite frankly he was tired of all the fuss. What kind of damned world was this if a man can get a papercut without someone immediately wanting to slice his arm off at the shoulder?

Beth had overheard the part of Tyreese's story that mentioned the death of Noah's family, and she slowly stepped toward the grieving young man to embrace him. "I'm so sorry," she said softly. "I know how special family is, and how it hurts to lose them…"

Merle was standing close enough to hear what she was saying as she hugged Noah, and for a fleeting moment his heart felt as though it had a hand around it, squeezing tightly. Just a few days ago Beth had had half of her face shot off, and here she is, still swathed in bandages, ignoring her pain and comforting someone else. A Bible verse popped into his mind, unbidden: "For He shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways." If he had ever questioned the existence of angels on Earth before, he no longer did.

"Beth hasn't seen herself in a mirror yet," Maggie said to Allison after their return, "so she doesn't know that she's got all that dried blood in her hair. But she did mention that she felt grungy and wished she had some shampoo… How soon can she wash her hair? I mean, that stuff you used, is it like stitches? Will it hurt to get wet?"

"She should probably keep that area dry for at least another day," Allison replied. "But in the meantime, you can use some hydrogen peroxide to remove the blood….pour it onto some gauze or a towel and rub the stained parts of her hair. But let me check her wounds first; I think I should be able to un-patch her eye and let the air do its thing on those cuts."

"OK, great, thanks," Maggie said.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

"OK, got it, we're on the way," Carol said into her walkie. She then informed the others, "They're on the way back, but they need some help for the last part of the journey."

"Huh? What do you mean?" Noah asked. He was still dejected, but he had finally stopped sobbing and had somewhat mentally accepted the gruesome scenario he'd seen inside his childhood home.

"I'm not sure," Carol admitted. "Sounded like some laughter in the background….hope they didn't get into a stash of booze while they were searching..." she muttered as she led Merle, Eugene and Maggie off of the road en route to meeting up with Rick and the others. When she caught sight of the group, she understood the chuckling she'd overheard. The group was almost comically overloaded with bulging plastic garbage bags, not to mention the stacked platform truck that Glenn was pulling. Every time he hit a bump on the makeshift path they were following, bags would topple onto the ground, and Tara and Sasha kept picking up and re-stacking the sacks, only to have them fall off again moments later. Carol and the others rushed over to pick up whatever they could carry and brought back their booty to the area where their vehicles were parked.

"Wow!" Allison exclaimed as she relieved some of the group of the bags slung over their
shoulders. "What the heck did y'all find?!"

"A little bit of everything," an exhausted Glenn sighed as he sat down on the pavement. Maggie disappeared for a few seconds and returned with a bottle of water which she handed to her grateful husband.

"Here's something for you," Michonne said, digging through one of the bags. She produced a Yankees baseball jersey that she had found and removed from a large frame and handed it to Tyreese. "I think this will fit you."

"Before we start unloading all the bags and seeing what we have," Rick announced, "I think we should find some place to hole up for the night." He looked up at the setting Sun. "It'll be dark soon, and headlights on the road might attract Walkers or…" He left the rest of his statement open-ended.

"But where?" Glenn asked. "The walls around Noah's house are halfway destroyed… not enough protection…"

"The way I see it," Abraham interjected, "is we have a shit storm behind Door A and a shit storm behind Door Number Two."

"If you can take a break from mixing metaphors like a Cuisinart, Monty Hall," Allison said, trying not to roll her eyes at the man, "can you please get directly to the point?"

"I'm saying," Abraham drawled in an effort to emphasize his point, "is that I still think D.C. is our most viable option."

"I thought we'd dismissed that idea after Eugene admitted he didn't know the cure," Allison replied.

"Still," Abraham tried to persuade the others, "it's the Goddamn seat of the U.S. government. You don't think that would be the safest place in this world right now?"

"I think that any urban area would be low on supplies by now," Allison replied. "We've seen what was left of Atlanta, no?" She looked around for support from the group.

"What do you suggest?" Gabriel asked, with emphasis on the "you", as if he was skeptical of any alternative she might mention.

"I think we need to find a place, I dunno, sort of like where the prison was…some place where we can grow vegetables, and maybe with a well so we have running water…"

"But if it's too rural and far away from everything we'll waste fuel driving to whatever towns are nearby to get things we need, like diapers and baby food and toilet paper, and…other necessities…" Michonne's voice trailed off as she eyed the others in the group, particularly the women. She was hoping they'd catch her meaning. Even when the World had seemingly come to an end, females still required monthly supplies…

"We don't have to decide our ultimate destination right this minute," Rick interrupted. "I think that for now it's more important that we all find a safe place to spend a night or two where we can eat and get some sleep and then discuss our alternatives."

"We're all packed up and ready to go over here," Merle announced. He'd been busy directing Noah, Daryl, Sasha, Tara and Rosita while they'd packed their bags of supplies into their various vehicles. He was particularly proud of the fact that he'd been able to use some of the bungee cords they'd
scavenged from someone's garage to strap the platform truck to the luggage rack on top of the Roadmaster. "Might come in handy in the future," he'd said when Eugene had objected with a line of gibberish about unnecessary baggage, aerodynamics, fuel use and miles per gallon.

"OK," Rick said after a few minutes of considering their situation. "Everyone climb into their rides, follow our lead, and for now we'll just try to find a place where we can spend the night. Keep your headlights off and keep close to our tail."

The convoy departed and slowly made their way along U.S. Route 340. As the Sun set and dusk approached, the lead vehicle suddenly turned off of the highway and followed a small paved path. Rick's vehicle stopped suddenly (and the others followed suit) when it came upon a length of chain blocking the path with a "NO ENTRANCE" sign dangling in the center. Michonne exited the vehicle and unhooked the chain from the post on the right side of the road and the line of vehicles continued along the narrow road. The circuitous path winded up and down and around hills and trees….they seemed to be in the midst of a forest. Rick was starting to doubt his decision to drive down this narrow roadway when suddenly he drove into an opening with a tiny paved parking lot and a small group of buildings.

He parked his car and the others behind him did the same. They all exited their vehicles and slowly examined their surroundings with flashlights.

"What is this place?" Carl wondered.

Abraham was busy trying to read his roadmap while illuminating it with a cigarette lighter when Noah asked aloud, "How far are we from Richmond? This might be park of Shenandoah River Park…"
"I'm surprised that they have Fels Naptha soap here along with the boxes of Tide," Carol said as she browsed through the various cabinets in the communal laundromat. "Now what we could really use is a washboard or two," she added as she unwrapped a bar of the old-fashioned laundry soap.

"Hey, look what I found," Sasha called from some back room behind the washing machines. She walked out pulling what looked like a giant umbrella with the fabric removed behind her. "There's not only two more of these back there, but also a couple of bins filled with clothes hangers."

"A drying rack!" Maggie exclaimed. She ran to help Sasha pull the cumbersome contraption into the laundry room. "My mama had one like this in our basement. When it was raining and she couldn't hang up clothes outside to dry, she'd use this rack for the things she thought would shrink if she ran them through the dryer…"

"Looks like we have everything we need for laundry duty, then, except for the dirty clothes," Tara commented.

"We've got those in spades, girlfriend," Rosita called out. She happened to enter the room at just the right moment, armed with a backpack filled with soiled clothing. She glanced around quickly and plucked a large plastic laundry basket off a shelf. She dumped the contents of her knapsack into the container and told the group, "There's plenty more where that came from..." with a wry smile.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

"Got room for one more?"

The women paused from their scrubbing to turn around and see Michonne, fresh from guard duty, standing there holding a large plastic trash bag in her hands.

"Grab some soap and join the fun," Carol invited her. There was a row of six utility-sized laundry tubs in the room, probably used for drainage for the phalanx of washing machines along one wall. The women had four of the tubs filled with water in which they were taking turns to scrub their clothes, after which they rinsed them under the faucets in the remaining sinks.

"While our dainties are drying," Michonne remarked a few minutes later as she hung up a pair of distinctively male underpants on one of the clothes racks, "we should take some time later to rummage through those bags we hauled back from Noah's neighborhood. I didn't keep track of what all I dumped from all the dresser drawers and closets, but I know I saw a lot of socks and underwear."

"Do you regularly wear boxer shorts, or is someone doing Rick's laundry...?" Rosita asked with a slight smirk on her face.

"Oh, leave her alone," Sasha interrupted, rubbing a pair of her brother's socks with more vigor than necessary. "I do Tyreese's laundry, maybe Rick is like a brother to – "

"Hey, just chill, OK?" Rosita said. "I didn't mean nothin' by it. You know how long it's been since I've had some good girl gossip?! My God, I was on the road with just with Abraham and Eugene for so long, I was about ready to grow a penis. And then the second we met Tara and Maggie and Sasha we got herded into a damned cattle car. We've been on the run ever since." She paused for breath. "We don't know what's going to happen from one day to the next these days. So excuse me
for taking advantage of this 'down time' to shoot the shit with some friends."

"It's OK, it's all good," Michonne replied. "Hell, I feel you. After the prison fell, I was on my own for a while until I found Rick and Carl. It was just us three until we got to Terminus…and, well, we all know what happened there." She looked thoughtful for a moment as she soaped up one of her shirts. "I dunno….there might be 'something' between Rick and me… Sometimes I think he feels it, too, but – like you said – we've been on the run so much we haven't really had any time to, I dunno, talk about it."

"Carl seems to have 'adopted' you," Carol commented as she hung a pair of slacks on the clothes line.

"He's a great kid," Michonne agreed. "As hard as it is for all of us adults to adapt to this way of living – to always be on the run, to see people who you love die…" She paused and swallowed hard. "Imagine what it's like for someone his age."

"Poor kid not only saw his mother die," Allison remarked, "but he also feels like he has to be a surrogate father for Judith."

"He also constantly worries about not only his baby sister, but also his father," Michonne replied. "He's barely a teenager and he just carries the weight of everyone's safety on his shoulders…." Her voice trailed off. "And then…my God…what he endured with those evil men…"

"What? Who?" Maggie asked. "What evil men?"

Michonne paused and tried to distract herself by rinsing and wringing out a pair of socks. As she hung them over one of the lines on the dryer, she spoke without looking at anyone. She suddenly seemed to regret mentioning anything out loud. "It was just these men…I dunno the back story, apparently Rick had killed one of their group before I met up with him and Carl …" She turned back to the laundry tub and started scrubbing a shirt. "Like I said, they were just plain evil. Carl experienced things no adult should, much less a kid…"

"Oh…," Sasha said with such emphasis that the entire group knew what she was thinking. Well, sort of. And they were simultaneously curious about what had happened but also understood that Michonne wasn't in the mood to go into any gruesome details.

The room was silent for several moments. Allison remembered asking Daryl about all his facial bruises and his black eye when they'd finally found one another after the Terminus escape. He had pretty much dismissed her questions, saying it wasn't a big deal, just some bad folks he'd stayed with for a short time after the prison…. She had since learned that he had found Michonne, Rick and Carl before they went to Terminus and now she was slowly connecting the dots… He most likely had been involved in some way with whatever incident that Michonne had just semi-described.

"Um, excuse me ladies," a familiar flat voice interrupted the communal reverie. Eugene was standing in the doorway, fidgeting and hesitating, holding a small bag in one hand, with his other hand in the pocket of his cargo shorts. He alternately glanced furtively around the room and then at his feet.

Allison was the first to answer him. "Eugene, I thought I asked you before to take your hands out of your pockets when you're talking to me." She was only half-joking, but her comment elicited a round of chuckles from everyone else and helped to lighten the mood in the laundry room. (Truth be told, after hearing about how Eugene liked to spy on Rosita and Abraham, the guy kind of creeped her out. A little bit.)
"Um, I have some necessities that need laundering, and I just wanted to ask you to leave at least one tub full of water for my use when you all are done."

"No problem," Tara told him. "And we've been using this sink over here," she gestured, "for rinsing. There are hangers in that bin to hang your stuff up to dry when you're done."

"It's..." Eugene looked around the room, taking in the entire laundry situation, "a communal clothesline?" He seemed almost frightened as he asked the question.

"Oh, for Christ's sake," Rosita responded, "everyone here wears underwear, so it's no big deal to hang your shorts up in public."

"Yeah," Sasha, who was apparently suddenly feeling playful chimed in, "it's not like anyone of us would run around with them on our head or anything later, shouting 'Look at Eugene's underpants!'".

The women dissolved into giggles at her remark and Eugene started to back out of the room, his cheeks a bright shade of red.

"Dude, get back here, it's OK," Tara called. "We're just messing with you, OK? It's been a long, rough haul and it's just..." She sighed, suddenly reliving the tension of the past weeks.

"It's a stress relief," Maggie supplied. "It's nothing personal, you were just the first man than wandered in here."

Eugene visibly took a very deep breath and squared up his shoulders. "I certainly understand how levity can release melatonin, which provides a definite health benefit. And I appreciate your assurance that making me the butt of your attempted humor was in no way personal. I shall leave you to finish the task at hand so as not to crowd you and will return later to tend to my ersatz Speed Queen necessities."

"Whatever," Carol mumbled as Eugene exited.

"Oh, cut him some slack, he's weird but harmless," Tara told her.

"I'm sorry," Carol said in a very unapologetic tone, "but lately I've lost patience with the hemming-and-hawing folks of this world." She hung a pair of slacks on the clothesline and added, "I used to be one of them, a long time ago, but I've learned that to survive these days you have to shit or get off the pot."

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

As the women walked back toward their various cabins, they spotted Tyreese and Noah walking up the path, both of whom were grinning like the proverbial cat who'd caught the canary.

"Look what we've got!" Noah called out as he ran ahead. Both he and Tyreese were holding chain stringers in one hand, each loaded with freshly caught fish.

"That river's just loaded with Brook Trout," Tyreese announced when he got closer. "No one's been fishing it for a long time, so there were plenty to be had."

"I used to go fishing with my father," Noah said, his face a mix of sadness at that memory and excitement over his catch.

"Both my grandfather and my daddy used to take me fishing when I was a kid," Tyreese
reminisced. "The way my mama fried catfish, along with homemade hush puppies, and roasted Vidalia onions on the side….”

"I remember Mama's hush puppies," Sasha commented with a slightly sad tone as she took the string of fish from her brother. "I also remember," she added, "how Mama used to complain while she was doing what she called 'the dirty work' the whole time I was by her side – gutting and scaling the fish, mixing up her special brand of cornmeal breading…trying to keep the grease from spattering out of the pan… about how she went through all this work and everyone would just gobble everything up without a second thought about how much work she had put into making it."

"Outside of the whole kitchen preparation thing," Allison spoke up, "you are making me ever so hungry for some good ol' Southern-fried catfish." She sighed and then said, "But I also remember having to clean all the grease out of the iron skillet, and scrubbing the stove top and every nearby surface…. Darn, that hot oil just spattered everywhere!"

Noah suddenly looked almost apologetically at his catch. "Um, I can help y'all clean the fish, if you want…."

"No worries, dude," Tara spoke up, taking his string from him. "We're just thinking aloud." She turned and eyeballed Sasha and Allison. "Canned food isn't going to last us forever, and fresh fish will be a welcome treat compared to tuna and Ritz crackers."

Judging from the contented sighs of everyone at dinner that night, the campfire-fried fish was indeed a welcome change from canned pork and beans.

"It's been a long time since I've actually felt full," Gabriel announced, slouching back in his seat. "My compliments not only to the chefs," he picked up his cup of water to make a toast, "but also to the men who captured this fine feast for us all."

"Hear, hear!" everyone joined in raising their cups and glasses.

"It would be nice if we could stay here for a while," Glenn remarked. "I mean, I know it's not very secure without walls or fences, but so far we haven't seen any Walkers nearby…"

"It is nice," Tyreese agreed, "to have something of a home base. Sort of like what we had at the prison…a place to lay your head at night."

"We have running water, and plenty of fish and game for the huntin'…." Merle seemed to be thinking aloud.

"I guess it's something to think about," Rick said. He was secretly worried about their vulnerability. Sure, they were far off any beaten path (except for the ones that led to their campsite), but he found it hard to relax without anything like a fence or a wall between them and the forest surrounding them.

"If y'all are done, do you mind if I start collecting your plates?" Beth asked. "Be nice to get them all washed while there's still some daylight left."

"Aw, you don't have to do that by yourself, Princess," Merle told her. Allison, who was sitting nearby was frankly surprised to hear Merle offer to help.

"Gracie! Maggie! Rosita!" He barked. "If you're done eatin', why don't you help Beth with the dishes? For Christ's sake, she's still healing, y'know!"
Well, I guess he didn't disappoint," Allison amended her previous Merle thought as she began collecting the eating utensils.

"You know what would be the perfect topper to such a fine meal?" Abraham asked as he sat back and stretched.

"Another disgusting belch?" Allison replied, scrunching up her face as she removed his plate.

"Excuse me," Abraham belated apologized without much sincerity. "No, I was thinking about a nice cigar….

"Well, you've come to the right place, my friend," Merle told him. He left the table and returned a few minutes later with a box of Montecristo Media Coronas, which he'd taken from the fancy humidor at that house he and Allison had stayed for a few days.

"Hole-lee shit!" Abraham exclaimed. He couldn't remember the last time he'd enjoyed a cigar, and even then it had been an El Producto. "Well, if you're bringing these to the party, I think it's only fitting that I break out this…” His voice trailed off as he left the table and then returned a few minutes later with a bottle of Remy Martin cognac.

"Anyone else want to join us in some manly post-dinner relaxation?" Abraham asked aloud as he poured cognac into glasses for Merle and himself.

"Sounds like fun," Michonne replied in a tone that was tinged with disapproval, "but I've got to go on watch duty."

Daryl, who was accompanying Michonne for her shift, was tempted to warn his brother about drinking too much. He remembered back when he was a kid how Merle would get when he got drunk…. On the other hand, he had to admit that his brother had been showing signs of actual responsibility since their time at the prison. And he had kept Allison safe while they were out on their own…. He decided to just leave Merle to his own choices and let the chips fall where they may.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

"Why don't you go and sit with them," Maggie said to Allison as they stacked dishes in the sink.

"Huh?" Allison was confused.

"With Merle and Abraham, you know, just to keep an eye on things."

It took a moment or two but then Allison realized that Maggie had emphasized Merle's name… Of course Maggie still remembered what had happened at Woodbury, and how Merle had smashed Glenn's face to a pulp. And that was without the benefit of cognac.

"Sure, if you don't mind me skipping out on dish duty," Allison answered.

She approached the picnic table where Abraham and Merle were smoking and sipping.

"Hey, Gracie," Merle greeted her, "care to join us? Glenn's already gone to bed, and that kid, too… Noah…."

"They both have guard duty early in the morning," Allison replied.

"I wouldn't mind a relaxing smoke," a voice from behind startled her. She turned to see Tyreese
standing there.

"Sip of cognac wouldn't be unwelcome, either," he added as he took a seat.

"Since when do you smoke?!" Sasha asked. She'd brought a couple of lanterns to the table and was shocked to see her brother sitting there.

"You don't know every single thing about me, little sister," Tyreese replied after first swallowing a healthy shot of cognac.

"Broads," another voice chimed in, "what're you going to do with them?"

Everyone turned to see Eugene standing there with an expression on his face that said he was waiting to be invited to the male bonding experience.

Sasha rolled her eyes and left. Allison asked, somewhat hesitantly, "Mind if I join you?"

"Pull up a cigar and have a seat," Abraham said jovially.

"I think I'll pass on the smokeage," she replied, "but I wouldn't mind a sip of cognac." She didn't really feel like drinking, but she was mindful of Maggie's comment…. If there was one less shot left in the bottle, maybe Merle wouldn't get out of hand.

"So," she said after sipping the slightest bit of cognac from her glass after the burning sensation went away, "what do y'all do during these manly gatherings?"

"Well, since we don't have a big screen TV with ESPN," Abraham replied, "I used to enjoy a hand of poker or two."

"As it happens," Eugene stood up and reached into one of the pockets in his cargo shorts, "I found this pack of playing cards among the pirate booty that was carried out of Noah's subdivision." He then opened the box of cards and dealt them, face down, around the table. Allison, who was not an experienced card player, picked her hand up immediately as each card was dealt.

"Gracie, that's cheating," Merle informed her. "You're not supposed to look at your cards until all of them have been dealt."

"Well, we can look at her face and gauge her reactions since she's so inexperienced," Tyreese said. "We'll know that she might be holding a full house if her eyes bug out." He took another sip of cognac and added, "Any more than they usually do, that is."

The others laughed heartily at his comment, but then Merle (who'd spent enough "alone" time with her to be able to read her facial expressions) asked, "What's wrong, Gracie? Don't you know what beats what in poker?"

"Well, I'm not quite sure," Allison replied. "Does Lasso Larry beat Postman Pete?"

"What?!" Merle didn't understand what the hell she was going on about, and everyone else picked up their cards to look at them.

"Jeezus H. Christ on a popsicle stick!" Abraham yelled at Eugene. "This a deck of Old Maid cards!"
"I will admit that I grabbed said deck of cards without extensive examination," Eugene defended himself, "but I dare to suggest that amusement can be had with a good old-fashioned game of Old Maid."

"I played it a few times as a kid," Allison remarked, "but I don't exactly remember what the rules are, or how the game goes…"

"Luckily I am able to read the rules of play from the box the cards came in," Eugene replied, leaning toward one of the lanterns to shine some light on his reading material.

"Oh, this is just stupid," Merle grumbled impatiently.

"Maybe," Tyreese replied, "but it's all we've got for amusement at this moment, and I'm enjoying the cognac and cigars too much to just turn in for the evening."

"What the hell," Abraham chimed in. He shoved the cards that were still laying face-down on the table in front of him toward the middle. "Let's re-deal the cards, learn the rules, and play some damn game so we can friggin' relax."

"Someone is in obvious need of relaxation," Allison thought to herself as she added her cards to the deck in the middle of the table.

Eugene collected all of the cards and then shuffled them. He dealt to each player until all the cards were gone. "Each player puts down matching pairs on the table," he explained. "Then the player to the left of the dealer chooses a card from his hand, sight unseen, and puts down a pair if he has a match. The player on his left chooses from his hand, et cetera. The object of the game is to not get left with the Old Maid card."

"Like I said before," Abraham commented as downed another shot of cognac, "what the hell."

Much to Allison's surprise, the game eventually became as heated as if it was a traditional game of poker when there was actual money at stake.

"Oh, spank me with a shovel and call me Sally!" Abraham moaned when he lost the second game they'd played. "All I needed was a damned Clancy Clown…"

Allison left the men to their male bonding session after the fourth hand of Old Maid. No one was getting out of hand, so to speak, they were just being extremely focused and aggressive when it came to a child's card game. She'd conveniently forgotten the many times she'd been accused of being cutthroat when she'd played board games with the others back at the prison and at Mr. Charlie's place…

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

Merle had apparently not consumed as much cognac as she'd thought, because when Allison awoke the next morning he had already been out hunting with Daryl. She was just getting dressed after a quick cold shower when he pulled the door to their cabin open and called inside, "Lookit what we've got, Gracie!"

He handed her a pouch full of quail eggs and then announced, "And that's not all!"
She looked in the direction that he was pointing and saw Daryl, Noah and Glenn lugging a large buck that Daryl had obviously hunted in the early hours of the morning, with a little help from his friends.

"Oh, wow!" Allison was excited at this sudden fresh source of food.

"You can decide what to do with the eggs later," Daryl told her, setting down his catch. "Right now we've got to start skinning and gutting this deer…"

Before he could finish his statement Tara spoke up. Allison hadn't noticed that she and most of the others had emerged from their various cabins. "If you don't mind," she said, "I'd like to learn how to skin and butcher a deer. Maybe Allison could teach me how…"

"I should learn, too," Rosita added. "We don't know what could happen from day to day. And there may come a time that for some reason we get separated and there might not be men around to clean and cook large game for all of us…"

"Makes sense," Sasha murmured. She'd learned to be more than adept with a gun, but she had no experience in cleaning and dressing game animals. The closest she'd come to that sort of thing was watching her Mama clean fish, and, truth be told, even that used to almost trigger her gag reflex. Maggie and Beth had grown up on a farm and knew their way around plucking chickens and butchering beef. And Allison, surprisingly for a fancy doctor, seemed perfectly at ease when it came to carving up animals for dinner. But Sasha was a city girl, born and bred; as far as she ever knew meat came pre-cut and neatly packaged in cellophane. But this was a new world, and she hoped that shooting and stabbing Walkers with their unbearable stench and rotting flesh all these many months had strengthened her stomach enough to endure the actual game-to-table food preparation process.

"Are you sure you can…" Daryl was visibly uncertain about the small group of women wanting to not only haul off the huge deer carcass but also field dress it…. He knew that Allison was more than adept at it, but he'd always assisted her with the heavy lifting and such….

"I think we'll be OK," Allison reassured him. For the time being, when they were in a semi-secure location, it could be a good "teachable moment" for the others who'd never hunted before, she thought to herself.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

As they lugged and tugged the buck's body off to a place far away enough from their living quarters where they could begin the butchering process, Rosita was having second thoughts about her previous bravado.

"Maybe we should leave the big game to the men," she muttered as she tried to catch her breath.

"No," Tara said while she held the front quarters of the buck, "this is something everyone needs to learn – men and women."

"I think this is far enough," Allison said a few minutes later. They were a long way away from their living quarters; hopefully far enough so that if they just left some of the deer's innards on the ground – without taking the time to bury them – they'd be safe from any Walkers.

Allison instructed the others in the art of slicing the skin along the legs and belly and how to sever the membranes that held the animal's fur to the meat below. They tugged and pulled and toppled over a few times during the process, but eventually the women were able to remove a large enough
portion of skin to serve as a tarp on which to set out he meat that they were about to butcher from the carcass.

"Eeew, geez," Michonne muttered when Allison deposited the buck's heart, liver and kidneys into the bucket she'd brought with her. She and Sasha had accompanied the others to stand guard against any Walkers that might approach.

"Organ meat is rich in a lot of vitamins and protein that we're not getting with a regular diet of canned soup," Allison replied. "We can cook it in such a way that you'll never know that you're eating the heart..." She ended her sentence there, knowing full well that the liver had a very distinct "organ-y" flavor that was something of an acquired taste. The kidneys also had a taste that couldn't exactly be described as "Hey, just like chicken!", but none of them could be particular these days. Fresh food was at a premium, and they couldn't afford to waste any bit of their kill.

"The neck meat is very good for making stew," Allison explained to the others much later as she deftly wielded her machete like a Benihana chef, "if we only had some vegetables to mix in with it...."

"I saw some cans of Veg-All in that stuff that was collected from Noah's neighborhood," Tara interjected. "Would that help?"

"It might," Allison shrugged. "Anything in a pinch, right? Why not experiment?"

A few sweaty hours later, Allison, Tara and Rosita were each carrying a pail full of the non-useable bits and pieces of the inner-most part of the deer. They were already exhausted, so it seemed easier to just haul the offal far afield and dump it rather than taking the time to dig a deep enough hole to bury it.

"Think this is far enough away?" Tara asked when the trio paused for breath.

"Probably," Allison agreed.

"Look at this!" Rosita called. She had set down her bucket and had walked away a few yards while variously stretching upward and then bending over in an effort to soothe her aching muscles. Allison and Tara walked over to where she was pointing. It was a sign with some of the rules of the park posted on it, most of which warned that if you were reading this, then you had wandered too far off the marked hiking trails. But what had caught Rosita's attention was the words scrawled across it in rust-colored letters. The words had been exposed to the elements and had since been partially washed away by the rain over time.

"WOLVES NOT FAIR," Tara read aloud.

"What do you suppose that means?" Rosita asked.

"I dunno," Allison replied. "Maybe it was some sort of union problem... a labor strike by the park employees?"

"But that looks like it could be blood, not red paint," Rosita commented as she inspected the sign closely.

"Maybe the protesters were really serious about getting dental benefits, who knows?" Allison shrugged. "The message looks pretty old, and luckily we haven't seen anyone else around here, so hopefully it's nothing to worry about."

"I agree," Tara said, "besides, I'd like to just haul that venison back to camp and get everything that
needs to be done with so I can take a shower and maybe catch a nap."

Beth was humming quietly to herself as she hung up laundry on one of the drying racks that she'd moved outside. She'd always liked the smell and feel of clothes dried outdoors in the Sun.

"Should you be doing that?" a gruff voice asked suddenly. Her hearing was still compromised in one ear so the voice repeated the question more loudly.

Beth turned around to see Merle standing there with a stern look on his face.

"Doing what?" She asked.

"Laundry. Hanging up things. Manual labor. Is your arm OK for that sort of thing?"

"Oh," Beth smiled and waved a dismissive hand at him, "I'm just fine." When Merle's frowning face remained unmoved, she hastened to add, "Allison gave me a clean bill of health, honest!"

"What about the itching? Have you been using that Vaseline?"

"Look!" She held her arm aloft. "I've been applying it twice a day, and all that scaly lizard skin is pretty much gone!" She paused and then gave him a shy smile. "Thanks to you," she added.

He was a bit embarrassed by her praise, so he changed the subject. "I'm still looking for one of those tuning forks so that Allison can test your hearing. Maybe keep tabs on it to see how it's improving." He purposely didn't say "if" it was improving.

"Oh, Merle," Beth said, placing a clothes pin on one last garment, "you take such good care of me, and of everyone else…" She approached him until she was just inches away. "Do you ever bother to take care of yourself?"

"Huh?" He was stunned by her question. "Ol' Merle can take care of himself, no need to worry there…"

"Are you sure?" She asked, peering at him with her ever-so-blue, innocent, trusting eyes. Before he could reply, she picked up his arm — the one that he always wore his makeshift metal armor over… the one that had the insert for his "Little Merle" blade when necessary.

"Why haven't you ever let me see your arm without this…gadget?" She asked.

"It's not what you would call very attractive," he replied, trying to shrink away, but she held firm. "It wasn't exactly a proper surgical amputation…"

"Are you taking proper care of your stump?" She asked bluntly. Merle averted his eyes and glanced to the left and to the right, as if looking for an escape route.

"Please," Beth continued, with that genuine, trusting smile of hers, "I took care of my Daddy's stump after he lost his leg. I know it can chafe and get irritated… I promise you, however it looks, it won't upset me. Why won't you let me share that jumbo jar of Vaseline that you brought back for me?"

She gently stroked his forearm with her two hands as she spoke. "You are so considerate when it comes to the rest of us, it hurts me to see you neglect yourself…"

Merle blinked his eyes rapidly several times and then squinted, trying to stem the tears that started
collecting in his eyes. He couldn't remember the last time he'd cried. Even when his old man had 
beaten him almost to a pulp with his belt, he'd remained stoic and had never shed a tear. But this 
young girl, this perfect princess with the soft eyes and velvety voice touching him and talking to 
him as if he…. As if he'd never done all the bad, rotten, lousy things he'd done before in his life. 
Trusting him and wanting to care for him…. My God, he mentally shook himself. She's so young! 
Just a child! And you're a gigantic piece of shit who doesn't deserve a second glance from her! But 
he was enjoying her touch and her words, very much… "What the hell is wrong with me?!" he 
mentally tried to slap himself out of her trance.

Not that he believed in God, but he still counted it as some sort of Divine intervention when, at that 
moment, a voice called out "Hey, we could use some help here!" Tara, Michonne and the others 
were slowly lugging the butchered venison back to camp in makeshift bundles formed by the deer 
hide.

"Coming!" He yelled in response. He turned to Beth and said, "Can you go see who else is 
available to come carry all this stuff?"
Chapter 105

When they first returned to "camp" Allison silently worried about how they were going to preserve all the excess deer meat. But she hadn't taken into consideration how hungry their group was, particularly the men – Tyreese, Merle, Abraham, etc. – who had been doing so much physical labor over the past weeks and had been subsisting on canned food and crackers. Merle and Daryl served as outdoor chefs and grilled various cuts of venison over the fire pit, basting it with sauces they'd found in the cafeteria kitchen. Carol heated up cans of peas and whole kernel corn as side dishes.

"I have to say," Tyreese said after finishing his second helping, "that tasted just as good as a rib-eye steak."

"Some fresh meat does hit the spot every now and then, doesn't it?" Glenn commented as he happily munched on a rib.

"Do you y'all still have some of that cognac stuff left?" Noah asked after dinner was finished and the dishes were being cleared away. Allison silently wondered if Noah was even of drinking age and then just as quickly it struck her how sometimes her mind was still conditioned to such "Old World" thoughts. The legal drinking age in the U.S. had been raised to 21 simply due to political lobbying, after all. An 18 or 19-year-old wasn't affected any more adversely by alcohol than a 21-year-old was. And what did it matter? It wasn't like Noah was going to get behind the wheel of a car and hurt himself or anyone else.

"Sounds like Little Man wants to do some chillaxing," Tyreese chuckled. "I could do with some myself," he added. "If anyone cares to join us, maybe one of you will grab some glasses while I go search through our stash…"

Some 20 minutes later Abraham, Noah, Glenn, Rick (with a sleeping Judith in his arms), Tyreese, Maggie and Rosita were seated around the still-blazing fire pit, sipping Remy Martin. Eugene was sitting with them, staring into the fire as if mesmerized, but not partaking of the alcohol. Carl, Merle, Daryl, Gabriel and Sasha were on watch duty, while Allison, Beth, Tara and Michonne were getting some much-needed sleep.

"Wouldn't it be nice if we could somehow make this place secure, like the prison?" Glenn said almost dreamily.

"It was nice, having a regular place to eat and sleep…and shower," Maggie agreed.

Rosita chuckled. "Never thought I'd hear someone reminisce about living in a prison. You folks make it sound almost cozy."

"It was…well, home," Tyreese told her. "Everyone worked together and fixed it up right nicely over time. We even had a small farm…"

"And electricity," Glenn reminded him. "There was a generator that…some of our people figured out how to power with used cooking oil." He had more or less made his peace with Merle, but sometimes he was still reluctant to mention the man who'd handed over Maggie to the Governor by name.

Rick smiled and said, "It's kinda funny, isn't it? Once upon a time when we actually had hours to sit and think about the 'good ol' days', we'd talk about renting movies to watch on TV and using our
cell phones and pigging out at the Golden Corral's all-you-can-eat buffet." He looked down at the snoozing babe in his arms. "When Judith gets older, her fond childhood memories will be about playing with Solo cups and learning how to climb stairs in a jail house."

"The important thing is that she'll live to have memories, period," Rosita remarked.

"Do you think there's some way that we can make this place like your prison was? Make some pens to keep animals and raise them...? Plant some vegetables? There's lots of land around here..." Noah asked.

Rick thought for a moment. "One of the main advantages of the prison was that it already had tall fences around it. Over time we reinforced them so we could keep out both Walkers and, well, outsiders or intruders. Right now anyone could wander in just like we did."

Abraham took a sip of cognac and then surveyed the group as he spoke. "This place makes a nice stopping-over point...a place for us to rest and regroup. But I don't think it's very secure as far as long-term lodging goes."

"So what do you suggest?" Glenn asked.

"As I've said all along, I think our best bet is heading on to Washington D.C."

The group was silent for a few minutes, as if considering Abraham's words. None of them noticed Eugene's concerned expression as he stared into the fire. He remembered some of Allison's remarks from back when they were at Father Gabriel's church. Even though he had once thought that Washington would be the safest place after the world had Turned, some of her arguments now seemed very logical. Largely populated areas would most likely be short on supplies, whereas here in a sort-of wilderness they had a food source via hunting and fishing that only had to be shared between a group of less than 20 people. But he was hesitant to voice his concerns aloud to Abraham, ever since their violent confrontation after he'd admitted he didn't know a cause or cure. He had no desire to get knocked unconscious again any time soon.

"This is probably something that should be discussed and voted on by our entire group," Rick finally said. "But in the meantime, I think this young lady needs to go to her bed to get her beauty sleep." He said his 'good nights' to everyone and carried the slumbering Judith back to his room.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

"I'm goin' on a run tomorrow," Merle said to Daryl as they walked along the perimeter of their lodging area. "You wanna come along?"

"Huh?" Daryl grunted, keeping his eyes on the woods that surrounded them.

Merle removed a crumpled piece of paper from his pocket. "This place," he replied. "A pawn shop not too far a drive from here."

Daryl looked down where Merle was pointing to on a page he had torn from a Yellow Pages telephone book. "Why?" he asked. "What makes you think it ain't already been picked over?"

"I looked it up on the map," Merle told him, "it appears to be off most of the main roads." Daryl still looked skeptical. "As a rule pawn shops have weapons and ammo, and we could use both." What he didn't add was that in his experience pawn shops also had guitars and saxophones and other musical stuff for sale, which meant that maybe, just maybe, he might be able to find one of those tuning forks that Allison could use to test Beth's hearing.
"Yeah," Daryl finally agreed, "couldn't hurt to check the place out."

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

"Just the two of you going?" Allison struggled to understand after being awakened so early in the morning. Who knew that just a few days in a protected area with a comfy bed could make her so lazy?

"Yeah," Daryl grunted as he finished dressing and slipped his crossbow over his shoulder.

"Maybe it would be better to take someone else along," she said as she sat up in bed. "You know, someone who can keep watch while you two rummage through this place."

Daryl considered her words as he checked his weapons in their various holsters. "Might be a good idea," he said. "Lemme see if anyone's up and willin' to go with us."

When he went out into the "back yard" of their camp he found several members of their group just finishing breakfast. "Um, Merle and me are goin' to drive out to this pawn shop he found…might be some weapons and ammo there…um, just wondered if anyone would wanna come with us to stand guard while we're scavengin'?"

Several folks volunteered, but Glenn and Tara were the first to speak up, so Daryl gave them the nod.

"Please take care and stay safe," Maggie whispered into Glenn's ear as she hugged him good-bye. Glenn looked into her eyes and gently chucked her under her chin before giving her a kiss. "I'll be back before you even miss me," he joked.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

"This sorta reminds me of back when we first met," Tara commented to Glenn as the quartet headed down a series of marked highways then smaller roads. "Then we hooked up with Abraham and Rosita …"

"…and Eugene," Glenn finished. He didn't particularly care to reminisce about that period. Granted, it had had a happy outcome – he'd found Maggie – but the time before then was something he didn't like to think about. A time when he didn't know whether or not his beloved wife had escaped the burning prison. "Yeah, I remember those days," he finally sighed.

When they finally found the Kash King Pawn Shop, the four of them exited the vehicle after Daryl parked and assumed their traditional circular back-to-back defensive posture. They had their weapons poised and they remained silent, listening for sounds….whether of the living or the dead. When they were all confident that the outside area was safe, they approached the front of the store. The display windows had metal gratings protecting them, and the front door had a few pieces of plywood haphazardly nailed across it. Merle used his arm blade to quickly pry the wood from the door. He tried to peer through the glass, but it was dusty and he couldn't get a clear view.

Daryl kicked the door a few times with his heavy boot and he and Merle waited to hear any sort of reaction from inside, while Glenn and Tara kept watching the parking lot area for any signs of movement. "Sounds clear," Daryl grunted.

"Reach into my left pants pocket," Merle directed his brother. "Hand me that small kit."

Daryl did as ordered and brought out a small hinged box.
"Open it up and hand me that tension wrench", he said while bending down and observing the deadbolt lock on the door.

"The what?" Daryl was confused. He hadn't studied Lock Picking 101.

"That tool with the 90 degree bend at the tip," Merle clarified, not too patiently.

Two minutes later the door was open and the quartet cautiously entered the building. They quietly skulked around the different aisles, scoping out the situation before taking items off the shelves and stashing them in their backpacks. All was quiet at first, and then they heard Merle say aloud, "Hold up, we've got a couple of Walkers here…"

Daryl rushed to Merle's side, and saw two Walkers mashing their faces against the sturdy glass door that apparently led to a back room. Merle bent down and studied the lock. Daryl pulled the box out of Merle's pants pocket without being asked. "Gimme the L Rake," Merle said, then added, "the tool with the wide, flat handle and the pointed end." As Merle started to jimmy the lock he advised his brother, "Stand by to take care of these motherfuckers." When he heard the lock tumblers click into place he gave Daryl a nod. Merle pulled the door open and Daryl quickly kicked the Walkers back away from the door and then stabbed each one in the head.

"Seems like the rest of the place is clear," Glenn said moments later when he joined them. He helped Daryl and Merle drag the Walkers to the side of the room, out of their way, and then looked around the enclosed room. At first glance the shelves seemed to be stocked with iPods and diamond-encrusted Rolex watches, but as they explored further they found locked glass-front cases containing semi-automatic weapons.

"Rugers, Glocks, Barettas…" Merle mumbled as he took a quick visual inventory. Glenn didn't waste time waiting for the cabinet lock to be picked and simply told everyone to "stand back" as he smashed the glass doors of the cabinets. He and Daryl started grabbing weapons from the shelves, but took a moment to inspect each one as quickly as they could to see whether or not it was a "keeper". They both knew that some pawn shops polished up "clunkers" to make them all shiny and appealing to buyers, but those particular guns would make better paper weights than defensive weapons.

"Lookee here!" Tara called out. She'd found what looked like a large toolbox down in a floor-level cabinet. Instead of nuts and bolts it contained boxes of ammunition. She and Glenn emptied the contents into their backpacks.

"Why don't y'all take this stuff out to the car," Merle suggested, "and I'll be there in a minute."

Glenn and Tara stashed their backpacks in the back of the SUV and then stood guard while they waited for Merle. And Daryl. Daryl had followed his brother to see what was delaying him, since they'd pretty much cleared the place out of all usable items.

"Guitar strings?" Daryl asked in an irritated tone. "We coulda been halfway back to camp by now but we had to wait for you to pick up some guitar strings?" OK, he thought to himself, perhaps he'd exaggerated about being halfway home, but geez…what the hell was his brother doing browsing through the musical instrument shelves?

"I'm done, don't worry your pretty head about it, let's go," Merle said in a rush. What Daryl didn't know was that Merle had also found two tuning forks in a drawer under the counter where the guitars were displayed. They were of different sizes, and he didn't know which one would work best, but all he remembered were Allison's words that Beth's hearing could be tested with a tuning fork.
Chapter 106

Merle was hovering over Allison's shoulder as she prepared to test Beth's hearing.

"May we have a little breathing room, please?" She asked in a polite effort to get him to back off a bit. Besides, she needed room for her assistants. Tara was holding Glenn's pocket watch and Rosita sat nearby with a steno pad and pen in hand.

"Beth, during this first test I am going to strike the tuning fork and hold the base of it against your mastoid bone, that is, right behind your ear. I need you to concentrate on the sound and then raise your hand when you can no longer hear it." Beth nodded in understanding.

"Tara," Allison continued, "I will tell you 'go' when I begin the test, and then 'stop' when it ends. I need you to keep an eye on that second hand of the watch and then tell Rosita how many seconds elapsed from beginning to end of the test. And, Rosita, obviously I need you to write down the numbers Tara gives you. Is everyone ready?"

Beth tried not to giggle….it seemed so very technical, with someone watching the clock and someone taking notes. But she quickly got serious and sat up straight in her chair. Allison struck the tuning fork and said "Go" before placing the stem behind Beth's ear. When Beth raised her hand Allison said "Stop" and Tara announced the time between the two commands, which Rosita dutifully jotted down.

"OK, I need all of you to do the same thing – Beth, raise your hand when you no longer hear the sound, Tara make note of the Go and Stop times, Rosita, write them down. Are we ready?" She struck the tuning fork against the table edge once again but this time she held the fork side just outside of Beth's ear canal when she announced "Go". When Beth raised her hand Allison said "Stop" and notes were taken. Merle was fascinated and also skeptical – what exactly did all this prove? He asked Allison as much after she dismissed Beth.

"Oh, I do love to be second-guessed by an armchair physician," Allison thought to herself as she stowed her tools and notebook away. To Merle she replied, "The tuning fork tests two types of the ways we hear things – through our bones and through the air. As I'm sure you know, the three smallest bones in the human body – the hammer, anvil and stirrup - are located in the middle ear."

Merle noticed that she'd paused long enough to invite him to ask a question, as if she assumed he didn't know what she was talking about. Well, even though he didn't, he wasn't going to give her the satisfaction. He knew all about her condescending attitude whenever it reared its ugly head.

When Merle didn't speak up, Allison continued. "Placing the base of the tuning fork on the mastoid bone behind her ear was a test to determine whether there has been any severe or permanent middle-ear damage. Holding the vibrating end of the fork just outside her ear tests the level of air conduction. I will give her the same test every few days, and if her reaction time improves it means that there is probably no permanent nerve or sensory damage to her hearing."

"Oh," Merle drawled as he considered her explanation. "So it seems to me that because it was a loud sound – a gunshot – that's making her ear buzz, it might not have affected the bones?"

"It's very possible," Allison agreed.

"So does nerve damage ever heal?"

"It can," she allowed. "There are many instances where acoustic damage, or, say, damage after a
high fever, has repaired itself over time." Merle wasn't her patient, but nor even a direct relative, but she still found herself carefully treading the physician's fine line of giving hope without false promises while talking to him.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

"Hey, Princess," Merle said to Beth when he crossed paths with her on his way back to his room. "Allison says you did real good on your hearing test."

Beth gave him one of those looks that melted his insides. "Thanks to you for finding those tuning forks," she replied. "But I guess it will take more tests over the next week or so to see how I'm progressing." She then stepped closer to him and reached up to ruffle her fingers through his hair. He tried not to think about the tingles that shot through his body like electricity when she touched him. "You're getting kinda shaggy," she grinned at him, knowing how much he disliked his curly hair when it started growing out. "How 'bout you come over to my place and I can trim that mess, just like in the old days...."

Her gentle touch and her trusting, warm smile reduced the normally tough-as-a-junkyard-dog Merle to a complacent puppy who obediently followed her to her room.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

Allison was patrolling the perimeter on night watch along with Eugene and Abraham when she wondered aloud, "I wonder what month it is?" She'd noticed that the leaves on the trees were beginning to turn and that the early evening air was getting crisper.

"I'd venture to guess that it's late Autumn, more specifically October, based on the position of the North Star vis-à-vis the Big Dipper," Eugene replied.

"Or we could take a look at the calendar watch my daddy gave me back when I started high school," Abraham interjected. "I've been winding it as regular as a laxative every night before I turn in," he added. "And it is officially October 22nd."

"Well, I did say October," Eugene muttered.

"Getting close to Halloween," Allison commented. "Used to be one of my favorite holidays as a kid....getting to dress up in a costume at school, and getting all sorts of free candy..."

"Nevertheless," Abraham said, "doesn't mean we'll still be here a week henceforth. So don't plan any costume parties until I consult with Rick."

Obviously Abraham was still fixated on journeying to Washington D.C., Allison thought to herself. She noticed that Eugene did not speak up either pro or con, so she kept her thoughts to herself until Merle, Rosita and Tara came to take over their shift on guard duty. Allison returned to her room and kicked off her boots, socks and shirt before climbing into bed beside Daryl. Even though he'd been asleep, he almost instinctively turned toward her like a tiny puppy and nuzzled against her. Allison stroked his head softly, not wanting to wake him. But moments later he was grasping her breast and tonguing it, and she responded by pulling him closer. It had been so long since they'd been this close...and alone...her breathing started coming in short gasps as she reached down and grasped his manhood and reflexively started gripping and stroking it. Daryl opened his eyes – now fully awake - and stared directly at her as he climbed on top of her.

"Hope I didn't wake you," she murmured shyly.

"S'OK," he grunted, barely able to speak since the blood was flowing to regions of his body other
than his brain. He kissed her deeply and then caressed her breasts and rested his head between them. She first stroked his scalp and then smothered his face with her bosoms. "Oh, ooh," he grunted and then started grinding his hips against hers. She kissed him and made a slight "pause" sign with her hand as she tried to wriggle out of her trousers as gracefully as possible without spoiling the mood. Daryl assisted her with a guttural growl as he pulled off her clothing blockade and tossed them onto the floor in a single motion.

Allison wrapped her newly-freed legs around Daryl and pulled him close in silent encouragement. He pushed into her and they both gasped in such pleasure that seemed to transcend them into some sort of floaty cloud not of this world. He bucked and grunted like a wild mustang, and she responded like a bitch in heat. She had already experienced several whirlwinds of orgasmic pleasure before Daryl gave a final and emphatic "Ughhhhh!" and then collapsed on top of her. He lay there for several moments, eyes closed, struggling to catch his breath. Allison was likewise breathing heavily as she caressed his back with one hand and stroked his head with the other. After a few moments he caressed her cheek and kissed her gently before rolling over onto his back with a sigh.

"Sorry again to wake you up," Allison mumbled sleepily as she turned slightly to rest an arm across Daryl's chest.

"Love you, Angel," he barely managed to say before he started snoring contentedly.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

Luckily Allison was already awake and dressed and just pulling on her boots when Merle barged into the room after his watch duty. "You two just gettin' up?" He barked.

Allison turned to Daryl, who was sitting on the opposite side of the bed, lacing up his boots, and remarked, "Oh good, our oldest boy, Merle, is home."

"Look at what I found while on patrol," Merle said, ignoring her comment. He dumped out the bag he was carrying. "It's squash…maybe zucchini, maybe spaghetti squash…" he said encouragingly. "Stuff we can use to make some meals."

Allison stood up and started picking up the various vegetables that Merle had collected. "Not only spaghetti squash," she commented, "but looks like some butternut squash as well." Yes, she thought to herself, they could absolutely use these gourds to flesh out whatever meat they had left…or would find.

"Not only that," Merle seemed almost like an excited child as he spoke, "that same garden I found these in had a bunch of pumpkins, too."

"Oh?" Allison wasn't sure where he was going with this topic. "We've got some spices and stuff, but nothing to make crust with, in case you were thinking of pumpkin pie…"

"What I'm thinkin'," he interrupted her, "is that it's getting close to Halloween, and maybe the kids would like to carve Jack-o-Lanterns. And we can collect the seeds and roast them…good source of protein. And later," he continued, "we can put the carved pumpkin remains out in the field. It ain't strictly sporting, when it comes to hunting, but we can attract rabbits and deer and such….and we do have a lot of people to feed."

Daryl narrowed his eyes as he gazed at his brother. He was about to ask since when was he so concerned with amusing the two children in their group – one of whom was too young to appreciate a carved pumpkin – when Allison spoke up.
"Now that you mention it, I used to love Halloween when I was a kid. I remember planning my costume, and gorging on all the candy I collected after trick-or-treating…" She paused and then said, "We really can't spare any of the candy bars we've collected, but it might be fun to carve some pumpkins and have them on the tables for a Halloween dinner. We've got lots of candles, and it might be a fun diversion for everyone."

Daryl shrugged. "I guess." He didn't mind having a "fun" sort of activity for everyone, he was just still confused by his brother even suggesting such an activity. "I'm gonna go out and check the firewood supply…"

"I can get a couple of volunteers to collect pumpkins – and other edible gourds – from that garden," Merle told Allison after his brother had left, "and you can go to the kitchen and find some good carving knives.

Allison barely resisted saluting him at his directive and instead simply replied, "OK."

Carl, Eugene and Tara joined Merle in the garden to fill the bags he'd brought with him with as many pumpkins and other, smaller, squash that they could carry. Tara had remarked "Cool, dude!" when Merle had requested volunteers for his pumpkin-carving project, and chattered on as they walked about how much fun she used to love the scary decorations everyone in her neighborhood used to put up at Halloween. Merle was only half-listening to her babble….what replayed in his mind was something Beth had said to him long ago, back at the prison… It was late autumn, from what they could tell from the weather and the foliage, and she was making conversation as she trimmed his hair. "I think Halloween was my third-favorite holiday, after Christmas and Thanksgiving," she'd told him. "I remember how grown-up I felt when Daddy let me carve my own pumpkin, just like Maggie and Shawn used to do every year." She chuckled. "I guess he was worried about me handling a sharp knife. Who would have thought that one day we'd all be experts when it came to sharp knives."

He'd personally never celebrated Halloween as a child, other than the parties they had at elementary school when the teacher and the Room Mother would pass out bite-sized Hershey bars and such. So he was surprised to hear others in their group reminisce about what he thought of a non-holiday. What the hell, they'd get some food out of this mission on top of having a special Halloween dinner. Best they should relax and for a few hours shrug off all the tension that had come before and that probably lay ahead. He had a feeling that Abraham was not going to let go of that Jones he had about moving their group to Washington.
"Look what I found!" Beth exclaimed to the group as they were eating breakfast the next morning. She'd finished her portion of scrambled quail eggs and Spam before the rest of them and had gone on a hunting mission in the industrial kitchen while the Sun was still bright. Everyone turned as she spoke and saw that she was holding boxes in each hand.

"What exactly is that that you found?" Maggie was the first to ask.

Beth walked closer to the picnic tables so that everyone could see. "Brownie mix!" She held out her hands and grinned. No one reacted so Beth continued, "There are more boxes in the cupboard, and it looks like maybe some cake mix, too….”

"What cupboard?" Maggie asked. "I thought we went through all the cabinets in that kitchen when we first got here."

"We didn't check out every cupboard," Beth smiled, pleased to "one up" her big sister. "I found this stuff in the cabinets up over one of the refrigerators."

"Those ones so way up high?" Sasha spoke up, remembering the layout of the kitchen. They'd all noticed those cabinets, but they were situated in such an awkward place – in a nook nestled above the huge Sub-Zero refrigerators that jutted out of the wall. They were so out of reach that everyone presumed they were just there for decorative purposes.

"Yep," Beth nodded. "I found a small step ladder in one of the closets and decided to see if there was anything interesting in those cupboards."

"Hold on," Merle suddenly barked, "you climbed on a ladder?! What the hell were you thinking?!" He turned to Allison and yelled rather than asked, "Didn't you say that ear injuries can screw up a person's balance?"

Beth's smile faded and she involuntarily took a few steps backward. She'd thought that everyone would be excited by her find. She hadn't expected to be chastised in front of the entire group.

Allison saw the bright light fade from Beth's eyes, so she replied to Merle (truthfully), "Actually, it's a positive sign that Beth was able to go up and down a ladder without getting dizzy or falling down. It indicates that she probably has no permanent inner ear damage."

Beth's smile returned. "I thought that, you know, if we're going to carve pumpkins for Halloween maybe we could make a small party out of it. Have some brownies…or cake…." 

"That sounds like a nice idea," Tara agreed, "but don't those box mixes need eggs? I think we used the last of our eggs just now for breakfast."

"There are egg substitutes you can use," Rosita replied, as if she was thinking aloud. "I remember my Mama using applesauce in cake mixes instead of eggs…” Her voice drifted off as she recalled some occasions from her childhood…when her family was struggling financially but Mama would always do her best to keep things as "normal" as she could, and that meant making a cake for a child's birthday. Rosita helped her in the kitchen and remembered reading the recipe aloud off the box. "Pero no temenos huevos…” ["But we don't have any eggs"]. "No te preocupes, podemos usar puré de manzana," ["Don't worry, we can use applesauce"], Mama assured her. They had many Mason jars filled with homemade applesauce that Mama had made using Gala apples she'd bought cheaply because they were past their "sell by" date.
"We've got jars of applesauce baby food that we've collected," Sasha remarked, "but we should probably save those for Judith."

"Applesauce?" Beth spoke up as if she was suddenly hit with a flash of inspiration. "That cupboard that I found the mixes in…there were some huge cans of stuff 'way in the back, that I couldn't reach. I'm not sure what they were, but I think one of the labels said 'Musselman's'. Isn't that a brand of applesauce?"

"Only one way to find out," Michonne said, "we need someone with long arms to explore the dark reaches of those hidden cabinets." She smiled and stretched her arms forward and then clasped them over her head like a victorious prize fighter.

"If we're having a Halloween party," Tara said as she helped to collect the breakfast dishes, "maybe we could even make some costumes to wear…!"

"Don't seem like we need Frankenstein and Dracula outfits to be scary when we've got Walkers out there," Daryl grunted.

"Just sayin' it might be fun," Tara's voice trailed off.

Allison knew, from a medical perspective, that being able to entertain oneself was a vital part of just basic human existence. From soldiers in the battlefield (prior to cell phones) playing tic-tac-toe with a stick in the dirt to quadriplegics listening to music and singing along as a break from their physical therapy. The group needed something to give them some balance, a blow-off-steam event…they'd spent every waking hour hunting for food and supplies and being on guard against walkers and intruders for so many months…

"I think a party is a good idea," she spoke up. "And if some of us can find something to make costumes with, that would be fun." She looked around the table and saw some skeptical faces, mostly which belonged to the men of their group. "Hey, some of you guys have had your card-playing nights, which were a nice break from routine and I don't begrudge you one moment of your fun. But there are a lot of others here who haven't had a chance to just…I don't know…be goofy and have some mindless entertainment. Maybe an hour or two when we don't have to think about Walkers or where our next meal is coming from."

"I remember you taking me out trick-or-treating," Carl said, looking at his father. "Mom would stay home and pass out candy…"

"Yeah," Rick drawled, looking a bit wistful. "I remember that, too. The last time we went you were dressed like a pirate. You were really pissed that Mom wouldn't let you chop off your foot so that you could wear a peg leg."

"I was not, no way!" Carl protested as everyone laughed.

"OK, I made that part up," Rick continued when the laughter subsided, "but you did bump in to a lot of stuff and stumble and trip because of the eye patch you refused to take off."

"I just worry that a lot of noise might attract Walkers," Carol spoke up.

"I guess," Abraham ventured, "that anyone who doesn't want to participate can do guard duty…"

"Oh, no," Rosita replied, cutting him off at the pass, "You're not getting off that easy. We haven't seen Walkers near camp for days, and we'll all be armed in case any show up. But you're going to stick around and eat cake and dance with me…!"
"You need music if you're planning on any dancing," Tyreese pointed out.

Sasha took particular delight in shooting down her brother's argument. "No problem," she smiled smugly, "we found a nice-sized boom box in the Recreation Room, along with a couple of CDs. And we've scavenged plenty of batteries over the past few weeks, so…no excuses!"

"Gracie's got some CDs in her bag," Merle said with a slight smirk. "You should play your 'Who's on First' disc for 'em and let everyone enjoy that gem."

"For someone who always accuses me of being sarcastic," she muttered, glancing at him. "Anyway," she spoke more loudly, "if there are no further objections, what do you say we have our party, um, three days from today?"

"Or, more specifically, three nights after tonight," Tara amended. "Jack-o-Lanterns show up best in the dark!"

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

Later that day Tara, Rosita, and Beth were growing increasingly excited about the Halloween party as they browsed through the large plastic trash bags of clothing and other stuff that had been haphazardly gathered at Noah's subdivision. Everyone had just gathered whatever they could grab at the time and stuffed it into bags and a lot of it hadn't been sorted yet.

"Ooh, look at this skirt," Rosita held up a colorful, flowy knee-length skirt that was obviously fashioned to be twirled on a dance floor. "I could dress like as a gypsy or maybe a wild señorita, no?"

"Daryl collected a bunch of necklaces back when we were at that golf country club," Beth replied enthusiastically. "They would go perfect with that skirt…now if we could find a peasant blouse or something like that…"

"So there's where everyone went," Maggie's voice made everyone turn around. "I was wondering why the place looked so empty…"

"We're putting together some costumes for the party, if you care to help," Beth told her sister. "I dunno…" Maggie hesitated.

"What if you and Glenn found some kind of couple costume?" Tara asked. The party would be more fun if they could get more people involved.

"Well, maybe…" Maggie sat down and started digging through a bag. After a while she came upon first a camouflage T-shirt, and then a little later a similarly-patterned pair of sweat pants. "I guess this might work, even though it's almost a cliché…"

"What do you mean?" Rosita was confused.

"I could wear this T-shirt, and Glenn could wear these pants, and we could go to the party as – "

"'Upper and Lower G.I.'", Allison finished. She had just walked into the room, curious about the party preparations.

"I get it," Tara laughed. "That's perfect!"

"You think you'll be able to get Daryl to dress up?" Maggie asked Allison.
"Yeah, right," Allison snorted. "I have a feeling he might be one of those who chooses to stand guard for the evening."

"But you still came to look through the costume possibilities," Maggie remarked off-handedly.

"Well, just out of curiosity, to see what's available…" Allison shrugged. "Maybe I'll just dress up on my own…"

"If I recall, we found a whole bunch of cosmetics while we were scavenging," a new voice stated. Everyone turned to see Sasha approaching. "Carol just relieved me from watch duty, and I wanted to get here before all the good costumes were gone," she said.

"I've found foundations and eye shadows and lipsticks so far," Beth replied, setting the make-up aside.

"To be honest," Sasha said, "it's been so long since I've actually 'dressed up'…styled my hair, put on some mascara and lipstick… even just doing that would be a costume for me." She sorted through the mountains of garments and accessories that had been dumped out onto the floor. "Hmmmm, this might work…" as she plucked out what looked to be a man's business suit.

Tara was still purposefully rummaging through all the clothes they'd collected. She found a black-and-white vertically striped polo shirt; it looked like something a sports referee would wear.

"I've got a great idea!" She exclaimed, holding the shirt aloft. "But it would be better if your brother would cooperate and wear that hockey jersey we gave him," she said to Sasha.

"I suppose he wouldn't mind, since to him it's just a shirt and not a 'costume'", Sasha replied.

"Allison, try this on," Beth spoke up. She was holding a white dress that appeared to have once been someone's prom gown….or maybe someone's wedding gown. "Did women actually get married in something so slinky that it made you look like a mermaid?" Allison wondered as she tried on the dress. "It's a little big," Beth commented, appraising the overall look, "but we can pin it in the back. We can do your hair up and with some makeup you can be Marilyn Monroe!"

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

"I've done my part, so don't expect me to dress up tonight," Merle announced as he and Daryl returned from a hunting trip the afternoon of the party. They'd brought with them a half-dozen grouse, which Allison and Carol took from them to clean and prep them for dinner.

Later that evening everyone slowly gathered around the picnic area. The carved pumpkins set in line along the table smiled eerily at them with their flickering candlelit glow. Beth, dressed in someone's ballerina tights and tutu that were both a little too large for her slim figure, tended to the pans of brownies she was "baking" (thanks to tented foil) on the grill. Carol, who had elected to stand on guard duty after dinner, dished out the canned soup they were using as an appetizer to everyone.

"Save some of that soup for me!" Tyreese called. Everyone turned to look as he approached the table dressed in his hockey jersey, pushing Tara in a wheelchair. Tara was wearing that referee's shirt, had one arm in a sling, and thanks to the various cosmetics they'd found had painted a variety of bruises and contusions on her face. Everyone simultaneously burst out laughing and applauding.

"I think you two win 'best costume'," Michonne said. She was wearing a chef's toque and white coverall apron she'd found in the kitchen and declared that she'd come to the party as Chef Boy-Ar-Dee.
"Wherever did you get that wheelchair?" Rosita asked.

"Found it a few days ago while exploring around the place. It was just laying there on its side behind a building," Tara replied.

"We should dig in before our food gets cold," Abraham interjected.

"Mmm, this is delicious!" Carl exclaimed as he dug into the fowl. He was dressed as a scarecrow, wearing the most distressed and raggedy clothes the women could find in their stash, along with dried strands of grass stuck under his hat and up his sleeves.

"I do not remember ever eating this type of bird before," Eugene commented. "How exactly is it prepared?"

"We broke it to them gently that they were going to be our dinner," Allison replied. There were laughs all around as everyone continued eating.

"What are you supposed to be?" Carl asked Eugene. "I mean, what is your costume?" The youngster knew that his father, Merle and Daryl had elected out of dressing up for the party, but Eugene seemed the type who would play along.

"I'm an undercover operative for the CIA," Eugene replied.

Carl studied the man who was dressed in his usual cargo shorts and shirt and then remarked, "You don't look like one."

"That's the point of being a spy," Eugene told him.

"I guess you're a mummy," Carl said to Noah, who was wearing haphazardly torn strips of bedsheets over his clothing.

"Yeah," Noah muttered. "It coulda been worse – they found a yellow raincoat and wanted to dress me up as the Morton Salt girl!"

Baby Judith was wearing a pink furry headband with cat ears, and Michonne had painted whiskers on her face. Between the glowing Jack-o-Lanterns on the table and people wearing funny clothes, she was giddy with excitement. She clapped her hands and laughed in between bites of food.

"Save room for dessert!" Beth admonished everyone. It had been so long since any one of them had had a fresh-baked treat of any type; those three pans of delicious fudge brownies were gone within a few minutes after being placed on the table.

Shortly after dessert Rick, Carol, and Michonne excused themselves to go on guard duty. While Allison, Beth and Tara cleared the dishes and took them to the cafeteria sink, Sasha plopped a huge boom box on the picnic table and announced, "Now the party begins!" She pressed "play" and "I Gotta Feeling" by the Black Eyed Peas blasted from the speakers.

"I hope this noise won't attract Walkers," Rosita asked anxiously.

"That's why Rick and the others are standing guard," Abraham reassured her. He was having difficulty taking his eyes off of her, who'd found a man's white Oxford shirt that she'd donned and tied around waist. The colorful skirt, the strings of beads around her neck, the multiple bracelets… Rosita had always struck him as attractive, but he'd never really seen her as a "woman" before. Or as such a feminine-type woman. "You clean up real nice," he said to her. He clasped one of her hands and stroked her cheek gently with his other hand. "Would you care to dance?"
Sasha approached Gabriel, who was dressed in his regular clerical garb with the addition of "LOVE" and "HATE" written across the knuckles of each hand in eyebrow pencil. That had been Maggie's idea — "Just like Robert Mitchum in The Night of the Hunter!" "Care to dance, padre?"

Gabriel was likewise taken aback by Sasha in costume….she was wearing a man's business suit but her face was impeccably made up, which accentuated her almost feline eyes and her amazing cheek bones. Plus she had unleashed her curls, which she usually kept closely pinned to her head, into a wild mane. He joined her on the makeshift dance floor but then asked, rather hesitantly, "I must say you look very nice, but I don't recognize your costume…?"

"I'm Elaine from Seinfeld," she explained. She then imitated the famous "little kicks" awkward dance that Elaine had made famous. Gabriel almost collapsed with laughter. Sasha's goofy performance somehow relieved the urges that he'd begun to feel and were making him feel uneasy. She was a friend, after all, and it wasn't that long ago that she'd lost Bob. But now he knew it was just all good fun, and he danced with her in his own awkward way.

Carl was more than full after eating a hearty portion of brownies, and he retired to his room, taking his baby sister with him. Allison, Beth and Tara returned to the party area after washing the dishes. Eugene intercepted Allison as she headed back to the table where Daryl was still seated. "May I say, Dr. Allison, that you look very attractive in your Marilyn Monroe costume."

"Thank you, Eugene," she replied hastily, in a hurry to bypass him, "but I think my boots kind of detract from the slinky dress." She hadn't found any dressy shoes that fit her to wear with her outfit, so she ended up wearing her usual Doc Marten boots.

She scooted along side Daryl on the picnic bench and said "Dance with me." It was more of a command than a request.

"What?" Daryl was shocked at her statement.

"There's a slow song playing, and I have a sinking feeling that Eugene is going to ask me to dance. And I can't really turn him down unless I have another partner. Get it?" She grasped Daryl's hand and led him to the dance floor before he had time to digest what she was saying.

She pulled him close and wrapped her arms around his shoulders. He automatically grasped her around her waist and rested his head against her cheek. "I don't know how to dance," he said softly into her ear. "I only know the box step, 'cause Merle taught it to me when I was a kid by throwing a knife at my feet."

"S'OK," she murmured, trying not to laugh and/or cry. Poor Daryl. What he must have endured with Merle as his main guardian. "Dancing is just like standing still, only a little faster."

They rocked back and forth in time to the music and then Daryl said, "You look really pretty in your costume, in case I forgot to mention it before."

"Thank you," she smiled up at him, her huge blue eyes making his heart melt as always.

"Um," he seemed to struggle for words, "about the other night, when we, um, you know…" He heaved a sigh and then continued, "I'm sorry that we didn't, you know, cuddle and stuff. That it was so, well…"

Allison caught his drift and reached up to stroke his scalp. "It's all good, no worries…it's not like we have a lot of privacy these days, so we have to...um...attend to...you know...as quickly as possible." She lowered her eyes and smiled coquettishly, "And, for what it's worth, every now and
then I like it a bit 'animal'…"

Daryl smiled back at her and then pulled her head close against his, rubbing his stubbled cheek against her smooth one. Suddenly the music changed to Beyoncé's "Single Ladies". Daryl pulled back and held his hands up in a surrender position. "I've seen this video, and I absolutely cannot dance to this song!"

Allison laughed and replied, "I'm getting tired, anyway. What say we retire for the evening?"
"Beth?" Maggie called as she entered the laundry room a few days later. She was browsing through her shoulder satchel as she walked. "Do you know where Glenn is? I can't find my..." She suddenly paused and looked up in surprise when Beth answered her without turning around from the wet clothes she was pinning up on the drying rack.

"He and Abraham went out to see how much gasoline they siphon out of the cars around here," Beth replied.

"My goodness, Bethy!"
The blonde girl turned slightly around, arms still stretched up as she hung a shirt on the rack.
"What?" She asked in confusion.

Maggie's expression of surprise turned into a wide grin. Beth didn't even notice that not only had Maggie approached her on the side of her "bad" ear, she had also almost mumbled while looking down into her bag. "You heard me!" Maggie exclaimed. "You had your back to me and you heard me and understood what I said!" Maggie rushed forward and embraced her sister. It took a moment for Beth to understand the impact of her sister's words. "Yeah, I did!" She said slowly. "I heard you!" She paused and stared silently into the distance. "I hadn't really noticed it before, but I think a lot of that noise is gone!"

"When's the last time Allison tested your hearing?" Maggie asked.

"Right before the Halloween party," Beth replied. "She only does it about twice a week... she said something about being able to better tell my progress if she doesn't do it too often."

"Well, we need to have her test you again pronto!" Maggie said excitedly.

"Sure," Beth said with a small smile. She returned to hanging up the wet laundry. Somehow in her heart and mind she knew that she didn't need a doctor's opinion to tell her that she was getting better.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

"Hey, Carl," Maggie called out to the youngster who was patrolling part of the perimeter on guard duty. "Have you seen Allison lately?"

"She and Tara left a while ago," Carl replied.

"Left for where?"

"I heard Allison tell my Dad that she wanted to look around where Tara found that wheelchair... that maybe there might be other medical supplies we could use."

"Oh." Maggie digested this information. At least Allison had followed the loosely-described protocol among their group – never leave without telling someone else where you were going and why. She couldn't help but think, however, that had Daryl not been out hunting with his brother that Allison would never have ventured so far away from camp. Both of the Dixon brothers were very protective when it came to the only physician in their group.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡
"I dunno," Glenn commented as he held a plastic gas can while Abraham sucked on the hose and then siphoned the fuel out of an abandoned Buick, "are you really sure that D.C. is better than this place? I mean, we've got living quarters, running water and hunting grounds…"

"True enough," Abraham said after spitting the gasoline "taste" onto the ground. "But what we don't have is security. Safety. Walls. We are vulnerable from each and every side of this so-called haven."

"If there are walled communities, you know, safe places, in D.C.," Glenn asked, "what makes you think they would take us in? Especially a group our size?" He thought about the vetting process they had, such as it was, back at the prison.

"I was a Sergeant in Uncle Sam's Army," Abraham told him as they walked toward another abandoned car. "The U.S. Government always took care of me, and I pledged my allegiance to it long ago. I'm sure I'll have no problem gaining entrance for all of us." He removed the gas cap from a Toyota Prius and stuck the hose down into the tank. "Bingo!" He proclaimed. "I hate to say it about a rice burner, but God bless these Japanese hybrids, they do save on gasoline…" He proceeded to siphon fuel into the container and then continued his pro-Washington campaign. "It's the nation's capital, it's where the President lives…don't you think that when civilization starts to rebuild D.C. will be the hub of everything?"

"Maybe," Glenn was not completely convinced. He remembered Hershel's farm, where there were acres of land on which to grow crops and raise cattle. Would an urban area have anything comparable to sustain such a large population?

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

"It was just tossed aside behind this building," Tara told Allison, referring to the wheelchair she'd found.

They had been walking for a few hours and were quite a long distance from their camp, so this building had not been previously explored. "Maybe it was some sort of first aid station or something," Tara added.

Allison pulled out her trusty lock-picking kit and in a few minutes had removed the padlock that secured the main door. Before entering, the two women banged on the door loudly and then listened for signs of Walkers inside. When it seemed safe, they entered the building. It did, in fact, turn out to be some sort of infirmary…The cupboards contained rolls of adhesive tape and gauze pads and bandages. Tara slipped out of her backpack and opened the flap so that Allison could fill it with all the available first aid supplies.

"Excellent find!" Allison congratulated Tara as they left. "But what the heck were you doing so far away from camp?" She paused and mentally calculated how long they'd been walking. "This is almost an hour away from our base."

Tara shrugged as they headed back home. "It didn't seem that far away once I started exploring…And I got home OK, so what's the problem?"

"The problem is that we all agreed no one should venture so far afield alone," Allison reprimanded her as gently as she could. After all, thanks to Tara violating the "rules", she'd found a treasure trove of medical supplies.

They were still a long way from camp when they were suddenly confronted in back and front by two men. Both Tara and Allison stopped in their tracks in shock – they were used to the shuffling
sounds of Walkers, but these two men had somehow approached them in silence.

"Well, well, what do we have here?" asked the man confronting them, brandishing a large hunting knife. "Two lost maidens, armed to the teeth (noting the knives on their belts) but still ever-so-vulnerable…"

Tara started to reach for the knife holstered in her sheath, but the man behind her grabbed her by the wrist and wrestled her to the ground in one quick movement.

"What do you want?" Allison asked, knowing it was a rhetorical question at best, but she was trying to buy time as she assessed the situation.

"What we want is what you've got," the man in front replied. Allison noted that he had the letter 'W' written on his forehead. Her mind raced as she struggled to remember something….didn't Daryl say that the folks murdered at Noah's subdivision had similar markings on their foreheads?

"Well, before you take 'what we've got'," Allison told the man in desperation, using a more exaggerated version of her usual Southern accent, "you should know that the only reason we're out here is because we're looking for some medication. Some of that Monocil or Vagistat or whatever it's called. We've both been itching like crazy from some sort of female infection…"

The man grimaced and said, "No, that's not what we want. We're looking for food. Water. We've been on the road for a long time. Now sit your asses down and keep your hands where we can see them."

"And that road apparently hasn't included toothpaste," Allison couldn't help but cringe at the yellow, decaying teeth the man displayed as he spoke.

"Are you being a smartass with me?!" the man towered over her angrily, knife in hand.

"No, I'm being logical," Allison replied as calmly as she could. "For Heaven's sake, even in 3000 BC the Chinese knew to use tree twigs as 'chew sticks' to brush their teeth…"

Tara tried not to show how afraid she was… It was bad enough these two men had gotten the jump on them, but now Allison only seemed to be provoking them.

"We're not carrying much with us besides feminine supplies," Allison added. "I do have some Gummy Bears in my backpack that we just found, if you want them…" She lowered her eyes let her voice trail off.

The man in front nodded to the man in back, and he opened Allison's backpack and searched through it. "She's right, nothing worthwhile in here 'cept those candies."

"Better than nothing," the front man said as he took the bag from the back-up man and opened it up. "Sugar boost and all." He seemed to think that gobbling down the Gummy Bears right in front of Tara and Allison would add insult to injury.

"So what should we do with these two?" Back-Up guy asked the Front Guy as he chomped on the gooey candy.

"I think once we relieve them of their weapons," Front Guy replied, "they'll be harmless enough and we can just leave them to their fate."

"What's up with the 'W'?" Allison asked in an attempt to keep the two men engaged before they robbed her and Tara of their weapons and left them helpless.
"We are the Wolves," Front Guy replied with a mouth full of Gummy Bears.

The name rang a bell with Allison. "You mean the Unfair Wolves?" she asked.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Back-Up Guy asked.

"We saw a message on a sign somewhere," Allison replied, purposely trying to be vague when it came to the exact location of their camp, "that said 'Wolves Not Fair'. We thought it was some sort of Union dispute with management…"

"We wrote 'Wolves Not Far'," the Back-Up Guy said with a grunt as he was suddenly overwhelmed with a severe stomach pain.

"You OK?" Front Guy asked his companion before clutching his lower abdomen and groaning. "Ohhh, shit, what the hell…?!

"Quick, let's get out of here!" Allison said to Tara. The two sprinted off.

"Should we zig-zag or serpentine so that they don't follow us?" Tara gasped as they ran.

"No, I think they'll be too incapacitated for a while to follow us."

Some time later the pair paused for breath. "That package of candy looked like it was sealed. How did you poison it?" Tara asked Allison.

"No poison involved," Allison gasped. "Just some science. Those were sugar-free Gummy Bears that Merle and I found some time ago. They contain Lycasin, which, long story short, act as an extreme laxative if you eat too much of them at one time."

As they resumed their trek back to camp Tara commented, "So I'm guessing that in addition to diapers and other staples when we're scavenging, everyone should keep an eye out for diet Gummy Bears in case of emergency."

"Good call," Allison replied.
"Merle!" Beth cried out when she spotted him returning from his hunting trip. "You'll never guess what!" She was so excited that she jumped up into his arms, causing him to instinctively drop the string of fish he was carrying so that he could catch and embrace her. He couldn't help but hug her tightly for a moment so that the two of them didn't topple over. When her feet were back on the ground Merle held her at arm's length and looked into her grinning face.

"What the heck's got you so excited, Princess?"

"My hearing's coming back!" She exclaimed.

"What?! Really?"

"Yep," Beth nodded, her smile still wide. "Maggie spoke to me while I was doing the laundry. I had my back to her but I not only heard her, I understood her!" She grasped his hands (or his one hand and covered stump) in hers and almost danced in excitement.

Merle squeezed her hand and looked somber for a moment.

"What's wrong?" Beth asked anxiously. "I thought you'd be happy."

"I am, Princess, I am," he struggled to keep his voice from quavering. "I'm just surprised that it happened so soon." He paused and then smiled down at her and chucked her under her chin. "I's so proud of you, you are a true fighter." He picked up the fish he'd dropped and walked back to camp with Beth. "Pretty soon you'll be able to sing for us again, now that your hearing is getting better. Maggie and Allison try their best at our gatherings, but no one has the sweet voice that you do."

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

"We have to warn everyone," Tara told Allison as they got closer to camp. "About those Wolves."

"I guess you're right," Allison agreed, "but still, it appears that there were just the two of them, and we were quite a way out from camp when they found us…"

"But still," Tara argued, "they did find us, and what if there are more of them? I don't think that just two guys would bother leaving warnings on signs…"

Allison didn't immediately reply. She'd gotten somewhat comfortable in this new camp, and hated the idea of having to pull up stakes and move on to some unknown destination. But then again, that's what they'd all been constantly doing ever since The Turn…

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

"Tara and I found some good stuff while we were out…" Allison announced as she entered her room. She stopped short when she saw that Daryl and Merle were in the midst of some sort of argument.

"What the hell is wrong with you?!” Daryl was riled up enough to poke at Merle's shoulder as he spoke. "She's just a kid!"

"Where the hell do you get off telling me what to do?!” Merle replied, squaring off with his brother and circling him as if they were in a wrestling ring. "Besides, adolescence is a 20th century
invention!" As much as he hated The Governor, Merle thought that this particular mantra of his made sense in today's world.

"What's going on?" Allison shouted over the arguing voices.

Daryl relaxed his pose a bit and took a few steps back. "I saw him hugging Beth…"

"So what?" Allison shrugged.

"No, I mean she was up and around him clutching onto him," Daryl growled.

"I repeat, so what?"

"She's just a kid, an innocent kid," Daryl muttered. "She's got no business cozying up to someone like…." He flailed an arm toward his brother in a gesture of disgust.

"Not that it's any of your fuckin' business, baby brother," Merle huffed, "there ain't nothin' indecent goin' on between Beth and me."

Allison's mind was in a bit of a swirl at the moment….she'd come back to camp prepared to warn the others of the Wolves, but now she was suddenly confronted with her husband and brother-in-law almost coming to blows over Beth. She paused to collect her thoughts and recalled a conversation she'd had with Hershel, back at the prison...

"Can you both just retreat to neutral corners for a moment?" She asked. She paused before continuing. "Look," she eyed Merle, "I don't know what, if anything, is going on between you and Beth, but for whatever it's worth, if you'll calm down I have to tell you something that Mr. Hershel told me a long time ago…" Both men visibly relaxed from their fighting postures at the mention of Hershel and waited for her to continue. "He told me that, if something ever happened to him so that he couldn't watch over Beth, he couldn't think of a better person for that job than Merle." Merle looked at her questioningly, waiting for her to continue. "He felt that Merle would always protect and respect her."

"You're just making that up to stop us from fightin'…!" Daryl accused her.

"If I was going to make something up, would it be something like this?!" Allison countered in exasperation. "Seriously, Mr. Hershel told me that the age difference didn't bother him so much, because it meant that Merle had the skills and wherewithal to keep Beth safe."

Daryl grunted and exited the room. He needed some fresh air.

"You for real, Gracie?" Merle asked Allison softly. "I mean, did Hershel really say that?" He didn't even bother to mock her for using a word like 'wherewithal' (or asking her what the hell it meant), he was so surprised to hear this seemingly-from-the-grave tidbit of news.

"For real," Allison replied. "We were sitting in the dining area of the prison after Beth had taken a plate of food out to you while you were on guard duty at the front gate. Before I even had time to say anything about 'I think Beth might have an unhealthy crush on Merle' he almost read my mind. He told me about how he knew how 'rough around the edges' you were, but how he'd been the same way at one time. When he married Josephine he was still a heavy drinker until the day Maggie was born." She paused while she tried to recall the whole story.

"Go on," Merle prompted, looking at her intently.

"Hershel told me that his father was a nasty and violent drunk, and that he left home at 16 because
he needed to get away from the abuse. But that's part of why he started drinking – that was all he knew. Anyway," she attempted to abbreviate the story, "he eventually returned home to the family farm and, well, I told you about when he laid off of the booze…"

"But you said he mentioned me specifically?" Merle asked. He sighed and lowered his head slightly. "Hershel was a solid guy, I never had no complaints with him. If he ever talked to you about me, I'd like to hear about it…"

"To be honest," Allison spoke very deliberately, hesitant to bring up an old, possibly sore subject, "he even kind-of, sort-of forgave what you did to Glenn back at Woodbury…"

Merle visibly cringed, so Allison rushed to continue, hoping to ease his guilt: "He compared your situation to Viet Nam, the My Lai Massacre and Lieutenant Calley following orders…"

Merle started pacing the room, rubbing his face and head. His shoulders shuddered, as if he was trying to shrug away bad memories he'd thought were long ago forgotten.

"He didn't blame you," Allison repeated emphatically. "He even mentioned about you taking a shot at Michonne…how you could've killed her, but just winged her so you could report back to the - - "

"I don't want to talk about that!" Merle suddenly barked at her. So many memories came flooding back to him…driving Michonne in that car to offer her up to the Governor, and then her telling him he couldn't be all that 'bad' because he'd remembered how many people he'd killed. Then getting shot by the Governor, and figuring he'd die right there, in that abandoned house…and how much he deserved to die. But somehow Daryl had not only found him, but had also driven him back to the prison in time for Gracie to somehow magically save his worthless life. And after all of that… Hershel had actually defended him? After all the shit he'd done in his past? The old man thought him worthy of his precious daughter, that Slice of Heaven on Earth named Beth? He was this close to hyperventilating while trying to process the myriad of thoughts that were assaulting his mind.

"Well," Allison said softly, "for whatever it's worth, Mr. Hershel told me that he thought Beth had, you know, feelings for you and that it made him happy. That of all the folks we knew at that time you were the one who would always protect her and respect her…" She stopped short of saying "…and love her", since she sensed that Merle had severely conflicted emotions about that situation. "I have to go talk to Rick and Daryl now, I'll see ya later…" She left the room and Merle sat down on the edge of one of the beds and wiped at his eyes.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

"I think we need to pack up all of our shit and hit the road pronto," Abraham announced loudly. Tara had apparently found Rick and Abraham before Allison did and had detailed their encounter with the Wolves. The volume and urgency of Abraham's voice had attracted Glenn, Carol and Daryl.

"What's up?" Glenn asked.

"Tell 'em," Abraham said to Tara.

"Well, um, Allison and I were out looking for medical supplies, and these two guys with 'W' marks on their faces found us…"

"What do you mean, 'found' you?!” Daryl was getting prickly.

"There were two of them, and they sort of confronted us,” Tara replied nervously.
"We were a very long way from this camp," Allison explained. "We'd been walking for over an hour in a very non-specific route until Tara remembered the place where she'd found the wheelchair."

"Jesus H. Christ on a popsicle stick," Abraham exploded. "We saw how many dead bodies back at Noah's encampment with those 'W' marks on their foreheads?!"

"Are you OK?!" Daryl asked Allison anxiously. This was the first he'd heard of her encountering any outsiders.

"Yes, yes, I'm fine, we're both fine," she replied, even though Daryl continued to huff and puff about her wandering away so far and making herself vulnerable…

"All they wanted was food," Tara added, "and Allison gave them some candy that made them sick and gave us time to get back here."

"So they didn't follow you?" Rick asked.

"No way," Allison replied. "They were too busy being doubled over in digestive pain for a long time after we left them."

"I don't know if I'm comfortable with those kind of people nearby," Carol stated. "They sound dangerous, and even if they were some distance away, we don't have walls or any type of protection here."

"That's what I've been saying all along," Abraham chimed in.

"Abraham is convinced that Washington D.C. has some safe places," Glenn said. "Fenced or walled areas…"

Rick seemed to be considering their options even though he had remained silent during most of the discussion. He'd been comfortable for the past weeks in this camp, but he also had two children to consider. They were certainly vulnerable, no matter how many people they put on guard duty to patrol the area. His mind wandered back to the last time they'd been somewhat impenetrable from intruders… back at the prison, where they had tall fences protecting their living quarters and farming area. If, as Abraham seemed to be so sure, Washington had similarly protected areas, maybe that should be their destination.

"…and we've siphoned over a dozen full containers of gasoline," Glenn was saying. "Probably enough fuel to get at least halfway there."

Rick sighed and then said, "We'll bring it up at dinner tonight and then take a vote." He looked around at all the eyes that were searching his. "I think when it comes to the future of our entire group, we should rely on a 'majority rule' opinion."
Some of the group frankly found it difficult to consider leaving their current living quarters as they dined on fresh fried fish that evening. But there were others who agreed with Abraham, that they were too vulnerable and exposed here.

"I think that the decision to move, and if so, where to move to, is best left to a group vote," Rick stated after briefing the group both on Tara and Allison's Wolf encounter as well as Abraham and Glenn's gasoline-collecting efforts.

"A place with walls or gates sounds like a good idea to me," Noah remarked. Tyreese eyeballed the youngster, but stopped himself short of reminding him how much good a gated community did for his family.

"Those Wolves we saw," Tara remarked, "were a long way from here…and there were only two of them. And for all they knew, Allison and I were just wandering through the area; they didn't know we were living nearby. If we continue to have folks on watch duty, I think we'd be safe here for a while longer."

"We do have running water and working plumbing here," Sasha added, "and fresh game nearby." She paused and then asked the group: "If we relocate to some heavily populated area, will there be any source of fresh meat, like deer or rabbits or even fish, that we can hunt?"

"Or enough land where we can plant some crops," Maggie said. She was mentally and emotionally conflicted: she'd grown up on a farm and knew how important it was to have a constant source of sustenance. But she was also dedicated to her husband, and she knew that whichever way he voted, she would go along with him.

"I trust Abraham's gut," Rosita commented. "He was a soldier for a long time and knows a lot about the inner-workings of the U.S. government." She paused and looked around at the group. "Who know what might be there in Washington? We talk about the running water and such here, but what if they've got that and more in D.C.?

"I don't know if D.C.'s the answer," Glenn said, "but I do think that we should consider finding a safer place than here. No matter how much good hunting and fishing we have, none of us can still completely relax. We still have to maintain rotating shifts of folks keeping watch around our perimeter 24/7."

"Do you really think you've collected enough gasoline to fuel a convoy of vehicles that will accommodate all of us plus our assorted baggage?" Merle asked. "Extra weight means lower miles per gallon."

"What do you mean?" Tyreese asked.

"I mean," Merle explained, "that even though a dozen fully-filled gas containers seem like a lot, it's most likely not enough fuel to get us through the Blue Ridge Mountains. Then what do we do, when we get stuck in the middle of Bumfuck, Nowhere?"

"We could siphon more gas along the way," Noah suggested.

"If we find enough abandoned cars," Tara murmured.

"Walls or gates seems like it would be safer for us," Carl spoke up, looking at the slumbering
"What if it's a big settlement of some sort," Carol asked, "and they decide not to let us inside?"

"We used to let people into the prison," Daryl replied.

"But that was usually one or two or three at a time," Carol argued. "Small, manageable groups that we could interview and feel out." She swept an arm around, gesturing at everyone at the table. "Look at us. Sixteen people…16 sudden extra mouths to feed. Sixteen strangers they know nothing about…whoever 'they' might be when we find them…"

"I think Carol makes a valid point," Gabriel said. "I remember when y'all rescued me, but at that time I only brought you back to my church simply because you did rescue me when I was surrounded by Walkers. I must admit, though, after that initial burst of adrenaline wore off, I was questioning myself whether I'd made a wise decision…leading all these strangers back to what was my sanctuary."

"You were just lucky that we were all nice people," Sasha smiled at him. But just that quickly her smile faded and she turned her face away from the group. Gabriel's mention of those days back at his church reminded her of Bob…

"So how are we going to decide?" Beth asked.

"I told Abraham that I would leave it up to the group, to all of us," Rick replied. "I think that in this case we should go by a 'majority rule' decision."

"Can we maybe sleep on it?" Maggie asked. She was not completely convinced of the wisdom of moving on, and she wanted the option of discussing with Glenn in privacy later.

"That sounds like solid logic," Rick agreed. "Why don't we postpone the vote until sometime tomorrow?"

"But," Abraham interjected, "just in case the vote goes pro-Washington, might I suggest that everyone starts collecting and packing their belongings into convenient carry-on bags in case we decide to bug out at short notice?"

"It wouldn't hurt to re-pack all of the canned food and some of the clothes and stuff we hauled from…" Daryl paused, noting Noah's sad face, "that last place we went to."

Allison smiled, understanding immediately that Daryl had stopped short of mentioning that their last big food and clothing raid came from Noah's old neighborhood. "Whichever way the vote goes," she agreed, "it is a good idea to have our vehicles packed with some food, water, medicine, clean clothes and such."

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

"Are you really on board with this whole D.C. thing?" Maggie asked Glenn when they were alone in their room. She was collecting socks, underwear and other clothing to take to the laundry room.

Glenn bent over and pulled a pair of discarded boxer shorts from underneath the bed. He deposited them into the bag Maggie held out to him. "I don't know for sure that Washington is our best bet, but I do think that we're too exposed, too vulnerable here. We have to keep so many people on rotating guard duty…"

"But it was the same way at the prison," Maggie pointed out. "We always had people watching out,
"True," Glenn agreed, "but maybe that's my point." He searched his mind to explain what he was thinking. "At the prison, we did have people on guard duty, but we had the benefit of those tall towers. Anyone up there could see in all directions. We don't have that sort of panoramic view here."

"OK, I get that. But we also had a constant rotating list of people working the fence…killing the Walkers that never seemed to stop approaching…"

Glenn sat down on the edge of his bed and rested his forehead in his hand. "Exactly…" he sighed. "That's the continuous dilemma going on in my mind…" He looked up at her. "We had crops and livestock at your dad's farm. But in the end, we didn't have any sort of barriers to protect us from Walkers. At the prison, we had fences that kept the Walkers out. Sure, we had to have a team of people working the fence to kill Walkers, but in the end it's just one of the jobs that someone has to do, right?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that wherever we go, everyone has to have something to do. Whether it's hunting for food, or cleaning our clothes, or tending a garden, whatever. Something to keep them busy in a way that contributes. Hell, even before the Turn, all I did was deliver pizzas, but it still kept me occupied and it provided a service for other people."

"Everyone has a job to do," Maggie murmured. She smiled. "I can't remember how many times Daddy told me that while I was growing up…"

"…and I can't count how many times I've heard Beth repeat it," Glenn added.

"So, bottom line," Maggie tried to mentally summarize what Glenn had told her, "you think we'd be better off if we can find some place with gates, similar to the prison? A place like that would be more secure, yeah?"

"Yeah," Glenn replied.

"And the less people that have to stay on guard duty means more people can work in the garden or hunt for food…? But," Maggie asked hesitantly, "isn't Washington D.C. an urban area? Remember how Atlanta looked? All concrete and pavement. Buildings back-to-back, with not much land to cultivate other than those grassy bunkers they put in parking lots."

"I know," Glenn again bent down and held his head. "I actually get a headache when I think too much about it. I do like this place, but we are very vulnerable… Maybe we could find some sort of place while we head toward Washington….there might be some sort of fenced-in place in the suburbs….I don't know, I've never been anywhere near there…"

Maggie walked over to her husband and gently caressed his face. She then lifted up his chin so that she could meet his lips in a kiss. "I'm sorry that have to carry this kind of weight on your shoulders," she told him softly. "But whatever you decide, I'll always be 100% with you."

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

"You're supposedly the genius of our group," Tara said to Eugene as they patrolled the area during their turn on guard duty. Eugene was still not an expert when it came to weaponry – he'd only killed a few Walkers – but he provided an extra set of eyes and ears while they walked the perimeter. "What do you think about leaving here to go to D.C.? Seriously, dude, what are the pros
and cons?"

"The key to survival is allowing oneself to be shaped by the assigned environment," Eugene replied.

"All your fancy-ass double-talk aside," Tara took a moment to roll her eyes before she returned her attention to scanning the horizon, "what do you think? Will we be better off shaping our current environment...maybe eventually building some sort of fences or barriers around it? Or do you think that there's a better environment in Washington?"

"I am not a prognosticator, so I cannot say yay or nay that all will be hunky-dunky wherever we end up, whether we stay here or relocate."

Tara shook her head slightly. "If we do eventually end up in D.C., and eventually government somehow or other gets back to 'normal', you would make an excellent speech writer for the President."

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

"Hey, can we get some help here?!"

Allison recognized Merle's voice calling out. She stepped out the front door and saw Merle, Noah and Carl approaching, carrying a large carcass between the three of them.

"What the - ?" She reacted in surprise. She'd overheard Merle talking about going out hunting earlier that day and taking Noah with him because "that boy needs to grow a pair" as well as Carl, because the youngster was always anxious to help out with something other than "routine" chores.

"Feral pig," Merle told her as they set down their catch. "They were called a nuisance by park officials at one time 'cause they were eatin' all the precious non-native species of plants. But I call 'em dinner!" He laughed heartily. "You know how to butcher a hog, Gracie?" He asked.

"I've only done deer, rabbits and smaller game," Allison admitted. "Maybe you can teach me."

"This here is enough meat to last us for at least a week," Merle added, "once we cut it up properly."

Allison almost read Merle's mind. "So we should probably postpone any plans of moving until we use up all this fresh pork, right?"

"Right," he said emphatically.
"We need a couple of buckets of soapy water, and one of clean water to rinse," Merle began issuing directives like a drill instructor. "We could also use a hand meat saw, but if we don't have one we could use Carol's Sentry knife."

Beth and Noah ran off to the kitchen area to prepare the prescribed pails of water. "What does a meat saw look like?" Michonne asked. "There are a whole shitload of knives and cooking implements in that kitchen."

Merle described the saw and Michonne's face lit up. "There's a couple of those hanging on the peg board!" She grinned and then made her way to the industrial kitchen.

Carol was in her room minding Judith, and Carl, Tyreese, Abraham, Rick and Daryl were patrolling the area on guard duty. Glenn, Maggie, Tara, Sasha, Allison, Eugene and Gabriel surrounded the carcass, listening to Merle's instructions. Some with less enthusiasm than the others.

"We need the soapy water to wash the belly and the inside of the legs," Merle explained. "You don't want any dirt to get into the meat once we start skinning."

Eugene started making odd gulping sounds, as if he was choking or about to vomit.

"You OK there, Junior?" Merle asked him.

"I was just wondering if perhaps there was some other task I could perform that would contribute to this particular mission but wouldn't necessitate me being present for the skinning process."

Merle resisted the urge to call the man whose face was getting paler by the moment a "pussy" and instead told him, "We'll need containers. Bowls, plates, trays, whatever you can find. Tupperware things with lids would be ideal."

"Check that," Eugene almost saluted before he departed to search through the kitchen and individual rooms. Anything that would be helpful but would also delay him having to see that hog carcass again any time soon.

"We brought you some sponges and shop towels, too," Beth explained when she and Noah returned with their pails. "We weren't sure what you needed to…. " She paused and gave a quick grin that made Merle smile in return, "wash the pig."

After scrubbing and rinsing the necessary areas, Merle started skinning the hog from the back legs up. Once Michonne returned with two meat saws, she and Merle started cutting the carcass into various pieces - and handing them off to Maggie and Glenn, who placed them on the large trays that Eugene had found. Tara and Sasha carried the large hams and slabs of ribs and other cuts to the kitchen, where they rinsed them off with cold water. Gabriel followed them with a variety of containers that Eugene had found.

"Damn, if we only had a smokehouse," Merle commented, covered from head to toe in pig blood, "we could cure ourselves an awesome slab of bacon from this big guy…."

Allison giggled as she looked at Merle. "What's so funny?" he asked.

"Nothing… it's just like right now you look like you could be Carrie's prom date."
"Take a look in the mirror, Gracie," Merle replied. "You look like a Kotex commercial gone bad."

"Eew, oh geez, oh no, gross, just stop….!!" Merle guffawed at Allison's reaction.

"Anyway," Allison remarked, still shaking her head and trying to get Merle's imagery out of her head, "even without the bacon we've got some ham and ribs and loin to keep us fed for…well, maybe a few days, considering how long we've gone without pork." She looked down at her blood-coated arms and muttered, "I'm going to go and take a three-day shower now."

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

Rosita, Sasha and Beth browsed at the various food products that the others had brought back in overflowing bags from that raid at Noah's subdivision. Beth and Maggie had previously tried to arrange items in groups – canned soups and vegetables in one area, packaged side dishes in another. They hadn't bothered to put their supplies up in the cupboards since they knew they might possibly have to gather these supplies up at a moment's notice and hit the road. They'd instead simply stacked them up on the counter.

"What would go best with pork chops?" Rosita murmured, thumbing through the packets of mashed potatoes and rice dishes.

"It's been so long since we've had anything besides venison or rabbit," Sasha replied, "I think I'd even eat the wrapper these mashed potatoes are packaged in."

"Maybe it's best to see which of these side dishes don't require milk," Beth suggested.

The three of them started examining the cooking instructions on each package and eventually narrowed their options down to several pouches of variously flavored mashed potatoes, as well as some rice dishes and a package of Teriyaki noodles.

"I don't think anyone will care if we mix sour cream and chive potatoes with smoky bacon, do you?" Sasha asked. "As long as we have enough to go around…"

"Yeah," Rosita agreed. "And we can flesh it out with some green beans….look how many different cans we have of green beans! French cut, fancy cut…."

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

"Mmmm, this is truly a gourmet delight," Rick commented as he savored a piece of roasted pork. He scooped up a forkful of mashed potatoes and again made a satisfied "mmm" sound.

"Don't forget, we now have fresh ham for breakfast," Beth added.

"I'm sure Daryl and I can scrounge up some more quail eggs to go with that ham," Merle replied.

"Are you sure?" Allison asked with concern. "You two have done so much guard duty lately, you haven't had much sleep. Shouldn't you get some rest rather than hunt for eggs?"

"That's what I've been saying," Abraham interjected. Even though he was enjoying a healthy portion of pork loin, he was still skeptical about staying in their current location. "We are always going to have some people who are sleep-deprived or who miss out on these wholesome meals because they are busy patrolling the perimeter and protecting our asses."

"We take plates of food out to them," Beth said, referring to the folks on guard duty. It was a task that she took very seriously, having done it ever since they'd been at the prison.
Abraham shrugged his shoulders. "I'm just saying that in some protected community, everyone could enjoy dinner together."

"You don't think that even in a gated community they wouldn't need people on guard duty?" Glenn asked.

"Well, um," Abraham seemed to be nonplussed by Glenn's question. "Maybe so, but at least there would be a lot more people to rotate on said watch duty than we have now."

"Even if we decide to head elsewhere," Tyreese said, "I think it only makes sense to stay here until we finish all of this hog meat. Who knows what might happen on the road... how scarce or plentiful food might be?" He looked around the table. "I don't know a whole lot about biology, but it seems to me that if we spend a few days filling up our bellies, maybe we'll accumulate, I dunno, some body fat to sustain us if we hit some sort of godforsaken area where there's no food to be found..."

"We do have an assortment of side dishes to go with the pork," Rosita commented. "It would be a shame to waste all this fresh meat."

"So I guess it's a consensus that we stay here at least for the next few days to enjoy this pork and then, in the meantime, go over the map and play our route when we leave here?" Rick proposed to the group.

"Sounds like a plan," Maggie acknowledged, glancing sideways at her husband. Glenn gave her a slight nod to indicate that he was on board with whatever she thought was the best for their group.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

Merle returned from guard duty and made a routine check of the nearby buildings before he retired for the night. He saw a light in the communal kitchen and went to investigate. He found Beth all alone, washing the dishes from that night's dinner.

"Princess!" he barked, startling her. "What are you doing here all by yourself?!!"

Beth recovered from her initial shock at hearing his voice and then smiled at him. "Just cleaning up..."

"It ain't right that you should get stuck with all the cleaning-up duties," he grumbled as he picked up a towel and started drying the dishes (as best he could with one hand) as she washed them.

"I volunteered for dish duty," Beth told him as she handed him a large serving platter. "Michonne and Sasha and the others have to get some rest before they go on guard duty." She scrubbed out one of the large bowls they'd used to make mashed potatoes. "Everyone has a job to do, and this is what I can contribute until my hearing gets better..."

Merle took the bowl from her and commented, "Seems like your hearing is getting close to normal."

"Actually, I think so, too," Beth replied. "I don't have that ringing noise so much anymore, and I can hear people when the talk to me from behind." She smiled as she scrubbed the last of the dishes. "I really don't mind doing the washing-up...as I said, everyone has a job to do, and someone has to do it while the others are out hunting and such. That's what makes up a family, right?"

"Right," Merle replied, even though he had no idea what made a "family". His mother had resorted
to alcohol thanks to his poor excuse for a father who'd cheated on her and used his belt to beat both him and Daryl for no particular reason. It still constantly confused his mind and his heart, seeing all these people working together and caring for one another. He'd tried to adjust to this environment ever since the prison, but it was hard to undo a lifetime of abuse. But despite all the one-night stands and random hook-ups he'd had over the years, and his longtime categorization as all women as "whores", there was something different about Beth. She was so perfect and pure and he felt daggers stabbing his heart when she looked up at him with that smile and those trusting eyes. She was so much younger than he... but then... did age really matter anymore?

"I guess we're done here," Beth said as Merle placed the last bowl in the draining rack. "Thanks for helping out."

"You probably shouldn't be walking alone in the dark; I'll walk you back to your room," Merle said, trying to control his voice.

When they arrived at Beth's door she impulsively hugged Merle and kissed first his cheek, and then she backed her face away for a moment while still maintaining her clutch on his shoulders. She gazed into his eyes and then closed her eyes and tenderly kissed him on his lips. Merle returned the kiss before his brain could tell him everything that was wrong with this situation.

"Thanks again for all of your help," Beth whispered as she gently stroked his right cheek with her hand and then disappeared into her room.

‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡ ‡

"Can I ask you something?" Merle said to Tyreese as they patrolled the perimeter of their camp the next night.

"Sure, anything to pass the time," Tyreese replied.

Merle hesitated. His brain and heart had been conflicted for some time now, but never more so than after last night when Beth had kissed him like that. He felt like he needed to discuss the situation with someone, to try and make sense out of it. To see if his feelings were OK or normal or bordering on pedophilia. He already knew that he couldn't talk to his brother about it; Daryl had just about tore his head off when he'd seen him and Beth hugging. And Glenn was out of the question since he'd beat him to a pulp back in Woodbury. True they'd had something of an unspoken truce since then, but he was not the most likely candidate to ask about romancing his teenaged sister-in-law.

"I don't mean to bring up a sore topic, but I remember back at the prison you and Karen had a 'thing', right?"

"It was more than a 'thing', we loved each other," Tyreese said gruffly.

"OK, stand down, I didn't mean to speak out of turn, OK?" Merle tried to calm the man down. "This is why I'm asking your opinion...because I don't know a shit-ton about, y'know, romance and courting."

"No offense taken," Tyreese replied in a monotone. The mention of Karen had triggered so many feelings that he'd managed to store away in some remote part of his brain since they left the prison.

"I just wondered..." Merle continued, "Well, you two were very different. Did that bother you?"

"Different how? Because she was white and I'm black?" Tyreese was getting his dander up again.
"Well, to be honest, partially yeah. Hey, I don't mean any offense, I was just wondering if, back before The Turn, would you have gotten together with someone like Karen?"

"I dunno," Tyreese shrugged. "What's your point, man?"

"I don't know, I'm just confused," Merle sighed, turning away from Tyreese and looking over the horizon through binoculars. "I sometimes wonder if it's 'right' to get together with someone just because they're in our group. Just because there's slim pickings. And they might be too different from you…"

"You mean like hooking up with Beth?" Tyreese asked with a slight smirk.

"Hey!" Merle shouted, always defensive of Beth. "We've never done anything even close to that – "

"Calm down," Tyreese said, gazing through the scope of his rifle. "It's been pretty obvious for a long time that that girl has feelings for you." He glanced at Merle, who was actually blushing. "And maybe vice-versa, huh?"

"OK, well," Merle struggled to control his previous anger, "maybe she's sometimes been kinda affectionate toward me." He closed his eyes in anguish and then continued, "Isn't it wrong for me to feel the same way? She's just a kid, for Christ's sake, I shouldn't feel this way for her! Is there something wrong with me?!"

Tyreese waited a moment and then approached Merle. He gently placed a hand on Merle's shoulder. "Beth is what, 19 years old now? That makes her an adult. And I don't know if any of the rules of our previous lives still apply right now. One thing I learned when I was with Karen is that you should go with your heart. In today's world, we don't know what's going to happen tomorrow. If you think you've found love, true love, then my advice is to go for it." He paused and added, "I'll never regret all the time I had together with Karen."

Merle was simultaneously embarrassed at having bared his soul so much to another person, but he was also grateful for the advice. He took a moment to compose himself and then said simply, "Thanks bro."

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!