

## Sweet & Sour

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/7164734) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/7164734>.

Rating:	<a href="#">Not Rated</a>
Archive Warning:	<a href="#">Graphic Depictions Of Violence</a>
Category:	<a href="#">F/M</a>
Fandom:	<a href="#">The Walking Dead (TV)</a>
Relationships:	<a href="#">Merle Dixon/Beth Greene</a> , <a href="#">Amy/Daryl Dixon</a> , <a href="#">Maggie Greene/Glenn Rhee</a> , <a href="#">Rick Grimes/Michonne</a>
Characters:	<a href="#">Merle Dixon</a> , <a href="#">Beth Greene</a> , <a href="#">Daryl Dixon</a> , <a href="#">Amy (Walking Dead)</a> , <a href="#">Rick Grimes</a> , <a href="#">Hershel Greene</a> , <a href="#">Maggie Greene</a> , <a href="#">Glenn Rhee</a> , <a href="#">Andrea (Walking Dead)</a> , <a href="#">Michonne (Walking Dead)</a> , <a href="#">Carl Grimes</a> , <a href="#">Shane Walsh</a>
Additional Tags:	<a href="#">Beth and Merle</a> , <a href="#">Beth Lives</a> , <a href="#">BAMF Beth</a> , <a href="#">Protective Merle</a> , <a href="#">Amy lives</a> , <a href="#">BAMF Amy Eventually</a> , <a href="#">Merle Being an Asshole</a> , <a href="#">Good Brother Merle</a> , <a href="#">Good Merle</a> , <a href="#">Younger Merle</a> , <a href="#">AU sorta</a> , <a href="#">Zombies</a> , <a href="#">Psycho Shane</a> , <a href="#">Sophia Lives</a> , <a href="#">Character Death</a> , <a href="#">Not Everybody Lives</a>
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2016-06-11 Updated: 2017-07-31 Words: 16,588 Chapters: 5/?

# Sweet & Sour

by [The\\_Morrigin](#)

## Summary

Beth was 16 when she ran away from home, a bruise on her cheek and a fire in her heart. She never looked back, well, she did, sometimes, but it never made no difference. For three years she made it on her own, going from meal to meal until she struck a little luck. Unfortunately that's just when the world turns to shit. Fortunately she meets one Merle Dixon along the way. Maybe she doesn't see that as so much a blessing at first.....but she decides he's not so bad after all.

# She Bites

## Chapter One: She Bites

Beth shaded her eyes with her hand, squinting against the sun as she looked down the long line of cars blocking the highway into Atlanta. The traffic hadn't moved for hours, and as she stared down the road, she decided it probably wasn't gonna move at all. Biting her lip she looked at the group of people farther up the road, wondering if she should approach them. They'd been there for a couple hours now, big group of seven or eight. She thought she spotted one guy that screamed cop, even from this distance. Should she go see if they knew what the hold up was?

She'd avoided talking to people for such a long time, even before this whole disease scare, that her heart balked at the very idea of just strolling up to so many people. But if they knew what was going on it would be worth while. She huffed irritably at herself, disliking the way her heart thudded just thinking about approaching them.

There really wasn't anything for it. The blonde tossed her hair over her shoulder, the long length heavy on her back, and began making her way through the mass of cars. There were other people on the road, sitting in their cars, but she passed them without so much as a word. The only reason she thought about approaching the group was because there were women and children mixed in the bunch. Menfolk normally acted nice and proper when there was more than one or two women and a few kids. She'd learned that the hard way.

As she made her way closer she studied the group carefully. Observing people had saved her hide on more than one occasion in the last three years and she didn't intend to stop now. Especially when it seemed like the world was falling down around her ears.

There was an older lady and her daughter, her face worn and nervous as she kept going between her old beat up station wagon and the group of people. Her husband, Beth was assuming, sat in their car, looking like a fat toad with an expression on his face Beth recognized. Mean. Gotta watch him. The daughter was small and thin, with a shy expression as she chatted with the boy beside her. She looked maybe eleven.

The cop and his wife stood in the center of the group, pride of place. So they were obviously acting as some kinda head honchos. The woman kept glancing over her shoulder at the brunette boy, so it must be their son. Kid didn't look much like the dad but he did take after his mother. The cop was a big guy, his shoulders and arms broad enough to make her nervous. He had a confident face and his stance was strong, arrogant. To be watched.

An older man with white hair stood to the side, near an older RV, with a blonde at either shoulder. One was only a few years older than Beth and the other looked in her late twenties to early thirties. All three were frowning and the man and the older blonde stood with their arms crossed, looking up the road. All three were dressed nicely. Harmless. Upperclass.

An Asian guy, tall and thin, was kinda dancing around the edges of the group. His expression was nervous and flighty. He was tall but didn't have any real muscle mass. A runner not a fighter. Not a real threat either.

A Mexican family stood close by too, with two young kids. The couple stood close together, their hands linked. Based on their stressed but mild expressions, she doubted they'd be a problem. Beside them a large black man and a black woman stood, both discussing something serious between them. The guy was beefy, but they were driving a Christian groups van. Didn't cross him off the threat list but it lessened his threat level for sure.

There were a few others, standing off to the side but nobody that really caught her attention. A guy in a mechanics coveralls. A couple of younger guys that looked like string beans. Nothing too serious on the threatening scale.

What really caught her attention was a pair of rough looking guys at the edges of the group, leaning up against a old rusted pickup truck. The younger looking one was chewing on his thumb and staring off to the side. He looked scrappy and unshaven, but not violent. The way he hunched his shoulders just slightly and avoided looking at anyone else told it's own story. So she wrote him off as a threat, unless he was pushed into a corner. It was the scrappy ones that always fought back the most viciously, she would know.

It was the older one that made her radar blare red. He looked like every type of violent redneck stereotype she'd ever seen. He was maybe in his late thirties, but looked worn, like the way she'd seen drugs do to people. He was big, with broad straight shoulders and massive arms. A leather vest and a tight black cut off t shirt just added to the image. He was attractive, no doubt, but he had that manic flaring to his eyes that screamed druggie. And druggies would do anything when they were pushed, sometimes even when they weren't pushed at all. He was a big blaring red alert.

Unfortunately they were directly in her path to the group. And they'd notice if she made a point to go around them. Beth had some experience with his type of people and she knew if she let him think he was making her run scared he'd give chase, if for nothing else but to see her shake. That's what those type of people did, fuck with others just to see how long they could poke. No, her best bet was to act unaffected by his bullshit. Stride right up to them and act like she didn't notice how big he was or how rough he looked. When he saw that then he wouldn't make such an effort to get at her. Oh, she had no doubt he'd try to get at her but he wouldn't try so hard if she didn't run.

So she took a deep breath, tilted her chin up and strode right up to the pair, keeping her face pleasantly bland. "You guys know what's the hold up?" She asked, drawing more than a few eyes. She noticed that the two rednecks shared the same bright electric blue eyes. Brothers then, maybe.

"Shit, baby doll, you old enough to drive let alone be out here on yer own?" Red alert called out with a lewd little whistle. As he did he ran suddenly heated eyes down her body, taking in her unfortunate choice of shorts and tank top with way too much skin on view. She knew she looked all of fifteen but she wasn't no fifteen year old, to blush and let him bother her. No, she'd had enough of people like him in her life.

“I ain't a baby and certainly not a doll, asshole, I'm nineteen and I asked you a question.” She said blandly, not showing an ounce of fear as she raised a brow at him, feigning boredom. She caught the cop approaching at the corner of her eye. Which made her anxious all over again, what with both guys being big and bulky.

“Look'it that, Darylina, this one heres got bite, and she's even legal.” He drawled, straightening from his slump against the truck. She suddenly realized she might have made an error in judgment.

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Merle gave the little Blondie another look over, feeling his cock heat up sudden like. She was sweeter than a peach, she was. She had on a little tiny pair of shorts and a scrap of a pink tank top, showing skin everywhere. Despite being a short little firecracker her legs looked about a mile long, disappearing into a pair of worn cowboy boots. He decided the smooth firm skin of her thighs would probably taste just about like heaven. Her blonde hair, lookin' nearly white in the sun, would look something hot clenched in his fist as he found out if she was just as fiery in bed as out. Her tits filled out her top real nice like, not nearly as big as he normally went for, but the rest of her more than made up for that. Her big blue eyes were lookin' back at him right in the eye, proving she was either brave or an idiot. The cynical set of her pouty pink lips said she had a set of brass tacks hidden in those tiny shorts.

“Yeah, I bite all right, and you won't like it none.” She told him, her eyes flicking over him and then Daryl before returning to his face. Like she'd just dismissed him entirely as a threat. The little turn of her mouth said as much. He found that bothered him. More than it should.

He took a step closer, ignoring the restraining hand Daryl set on his shoulder. “I don't know, sweetness, if it was you doing the bitin', I just might find it in me to like it.”

“There a problem here?” The cop butted in, stepping up like he was gonna get between Merle and the little blonde peach. His face was hard as he met Merle's eyes but Merle just grinned back at him. Cops like this one hated nothing more than being ignored as a threat.

“Nah, there ain't no problem here, I can defend myself, thank you.” Blondie put in, drawing the cops eyes. She tilted her chin and met the bastards eyes straight on. Merle and Daryl were probably the only ones that noticed the way she shifted so she faced both Merle and the cop more squarely. Easier to defend herself. He was sure he'd seen a twitch of irritation pull at her lips too. Seemed like Blondie didn't like cops either.

“This one here bites, pig, said so herself.” Merle said in sudden amusement. It seemed like it wasn't only Merle the little spit fire liked to bite at. He leaned back into the truck, Daryl's hand falling away as he did so. His irritation was gone, his mood fickle, like it always was when he was high as a fucking kite.

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Beth wanted to scowl at the damn cop but only just managed to keep her face bland. That's all she needed, a white fucking knight that she didn't order or want. She flicked a look at Red Alert, who now looked relaxed and fully amused at the cops expense.

"Biting...aside." She said slowly, crossing her arms and returning her gaze to the cop. "Do you guys know what the hold up is about?"

The cop looked at her for a long moment, his dark gaze speculative. She liked it even less than she liked the looks Red Alert was giving her. At least in his eyes was the honest heat she was used to. The look the cop was giving her was significantly different.

"Nah, can't tell what's causing the problem." He finally said, jerking his head towards the rest of the group, an indication to follow him away from the red necks. She didn't like the sneer he gave the two men as he turned and she felt almost reluctant to follow him.

Glancing at Red Alert, she caught his sardonically amused eyes for a second. He looked like he'd never seen anything more amusing. He looked relaxed and confident, sprawled back on his truck in a pose she found reluctantly attractive despite his piss poor personality. Little Brother was already chewing on his thumb again, his eyes only meeting hers for a split second before looking off to the side again. She gave them one more look over before following after the cop, who headed straight for his wife at the center of the group.

"Let me introduce ya to everyone." He said as he strode into the group like the king of the castle. "This here's Lori and her son, Carl." So not his kid then. She met the woman's thin smile with a nod and a polite turn of her lips. The son waved and her smile widened into a grin as she waved back. "That there is Carol, her daughter Sofia, and her husband Ed....." And around and around the introductions went until she'd been introduced to the whole circle. "And I'm Shane." He added last with a charming smile, or what might have been charming if she didn't know better.

"Beth Greene." She said to the group at large. She felt about like she was five at a summer camp.

"Where are you coming from Beth?" The older man, Dale, asked smiling at her pleasantly. Like this was a typical meet and greet or something.

"A town 'bout twenty miles thata way." She said vaguely, jerking a thumb over her shoulder.

After that it was just a bunch of chit chat. The talk really grated on her nerves but she tried not to let it show. She just wasn't used to being around this many people at once anymore. At one point she mighta been the social butterfly but after the last three years on her own, she'd more than learned her lesson. People were sketchy, they did bad shit all the time. There weren't any stopping that. So these people could be polite and chit chat all they wanted, they just weren't showing their true colors yet. Granted, there were good people out there, but she sure as hell hadn't met any in the circles she ran in. Not for three long years anyway.

All the while she could feel Red Alert's eyes drilling into her back.

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“Now that's a fine damn ass, baby brother.” Merle muttered, watching little Blondie as she was introduced to the group by Mr. High And Mighty Cop. His eyes were on her ass, which looked just about perfect from his angle. He imagined it looked perfect from just about any damn angle. “Like ta get my hands on that ass, bet it's nice and tight.”

“Keep yer fuckin' hands ta yerself, Merle.” Daryl grunted, spitting to the side and aiming a glare at him. “She's way past yer league, old man.”

“Nah, little girlyies like that love ta jump in the sheets with ol' Merle.” He told his brother with a cocky grin. His eyes tracked her ass and he groaned as she shifted her balance onto her other foot, making that tight ass do amazin' things. “sides, she's not as sweet as she looks, got herself a fiesty side. You see that look she gave the pig when he stepped in?” She'd looked about like she wanted to take a hunk out of the bastard, and not in the good way.

“She been done wrong 'fore.” Daryl told him, still glaring at him, but it'd been years since Daryl's glares had been anything more than an annoyance. “Ya saw it jus' as well as I did, you don' need ta be addin' yer shit in there too.”

But fuck if baby brother wasn't right. Girl'd been done wrong by somebody. And the way she made sure nothin' with a dick ever went behind her back, he was guessin' it was the not takin' no for an answer type of wrong. Which didn't that just fuck up all ah Merle's fantasies? He may be a grade A asshole, he admitted that with no small amount of pride, but he weren't no rapist, and that was a fact. Not even on his highest methed out trip had he ever gotten with a girl that said no. Girl wants ta be a slut and sleep with anythang that moves, that's one thing, but takin' when it's not offered? That's taboo and there weren't no changin' that.

“Fucking shit.” Merle growled with a grimace and Daryl turned away with a nod, knowing he'd deflated Merle's interest for now.

Merle just kept looking at the sweet little blonde thing. She was one mighty fine piece of ass, she was. But she was damaged goods, and that meant hands off. Not 'cause she was any less attractive but 'cause he knew she had baggage. Emotional baggage. Involving feelings and shit. Things that Merle never, ever, ever got involved in. Commitment was out the window, it was just never ever gonna happen. Fuck that shit. He liked one night stands and being so drunk he couldn't remember who he was.

“Can't hurt ta look at the sweet thang though.” He added after a minute, his brows furrowed like he was in pain. Which he was. Her ass was getting' him all kinds of fired up and his jeans felt just a little too tight all of a sudden. Fuck, since when did he pop one up just lookin' at a girls ass?

Daryl blew out a breath besides him but he ignored him, still looking at sweet sugars fantastic ass. Really she had to be the hottest little number he'd seen in years. He wouldn't mind being bit all to hell and back, long as it was her sweet mouth doing the bitin'. So he'd look and he'd tease, and he'd talk up a good game, but he wouldn't be touchin' her. She probably wouldn't want no piece ah shit like him touchin' her anyway. She weren't like the girls in the bars he picked up like flies. No, she was a class above all them. There weren't no worn lines on her face, no makeup cakin' up her skin. She looked healthy, not fat and not too skinny, not like she'd just shot up or had a joint. She was a sweet little thang despite her bite and Merle didn't ever let himself touch sweet thangs. Not ever.

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Then Atlanta was bombed and the world went to shit fast. Beth was undecided for a long moment whether she should follow the group up to the quarry or continue somewhere else on her own. But she'd learned that prey was easy to pick off when it was alone, especially a girl, so in the end she followed them up the gravel road, her little Toyota pickup taking the road easy. If it took watching Red Alert go up with the group to make her decision, well, ain't nobody gonna know about that but her.

A/N: So obviously I really changed things around. Beth will be with the group from seaspn one on instead of later. Also I made Merle younger than he was in the movie. I did this not because I think he was too old, cuz ya know, love is love no matter who it's between, but because I think a younger person would last a little longer in a Zombie Apocalypse. I mean Merle in the series is like pushing 50 when he dies. And he was one handed. I think any 50 year old would be pretty freakin worn out after all that so I changed his age to like 35 and Daryl to like 30. So, yeah. And obviously Beth is gonna be a little different in my fic. She's lived through different things than the canon Beth and so she's not gonna be the sheltered sweet girl she was in the show. So, yeah, all of that. Enjoy!



# He Watches

## Chapter Two: He Watches

Merle could see that she hated it in the quarry. That was plain as fucking day on her face every single day. Not that he blamed her. Whereas Merle and Daryl got left to themselves, on account of nobody trustin' them much, her pretty looks and big blue eyes played against her. Instead ah being left alone she was press ganged into doing laundry and cookin' and basically watchin' after men that weren't even her's.

Now Merle was no future minded prick, but even he didn't make no random woman do his laundry and cookin'. Hell, his grandmam woulda whooped his hide raw if he'd ever done that. It'd be different if she was his, if she was his he'd keep her fed and well cared for and she'd do his laundry and cook what he brought her. If she could hunt, that'd be another thing, but she couldn't so she'd do the stuff he didn't while he hunted. If she could hunt maybe they'd trade off who did what. But she weren't his, so it wasn't no never mind what he'd do or not do if she was.

It kinda got his feathers up though, seeing that pinched look on her face anytime she was denied a chance at watch or got passed a basket of somebody elses laundry. She didn't mind the work, he'd made sure to watch for that, not even sure why he was watching in the first place, and she didn't mind work. It was the division of labor that was buggin' her pretty little head. Everybody in camp was lookin' at her like she was this little sweet dandelion fluff, but she weren't.

Hell no she weren't no little bit of fluff. Kevin, one ah the snot nosed little brats around camp, had been harassin' her something fierce since they'd got here. Merle'd been watching when she'd suddenly smiled all coy like at the kid and lead him behind one of the tents. Merle'd followed, not cuz he was jealous or nothin' just cause sugar was a fierce little thing and it was amusin' watchin' her. So he'd been the only one that seen her grab ah hold of the little snots nuts just as casual as you please. Her smile had stayed nice an' soft as she leaned into the brat. He hadn't been able to hear what she said into the kids ear but he'd heard the kids high pitched squeal of pain as she squeezed. The kid hadn't come near her since and Merle didn't think he'd ever been that fuckin' turned on so fast in his entire life as he was right then.

Of course he noticed all this while he was watchin' her pretty little ass and those perky little breasts. Weren't no other reason why he was watchin' her. And it weren't like there was some other ass to be watchin', least not one as fine as hers. Hell, there was sugar tits and her little sister, but both paled in comparison to little sweetness. There was Lori but Merle wouldn't touch that bitch with a ten foot pole let alone his dick.

In the end he decided maybe watchin' little sugar pie was a good thing. Otherwise he wouldn't of been there when it happened. He was an asshole, more than admitted that, was proud of it even, but no man hits a woman while Merle was watching and got away with it.

Besides that, if he didn't watch her, alls he had to look at were Daryl and rocks, and she was mite prettier site.

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Beth tried to keep her scowl to a minimum as she set to washing some of the laundry. Again. For the second time this week. She was sure she'd seen everyone undies but Merle and Daryl's by now. It made her feel close to boiling just looking at the clothes. Did no one around here know how to wear something more than once? And couldn't everyone do their own laundry? Apparently not, apparently men couldn't be bothered to handle there own things. Or cooking. Or cleaning around camp.

She hated to admit it but Merle and Daryl seemed to be the only men around camp that actually pulled their own weight without any help. One or both of them always brought back game to feed the group. They both took turns doing their own laundry. They both cooked their own food. They kept their part of camp almost military clean, on account of Merle, who she'd seen tidying things even while he was high as a kite. It was odd, but the pair that she'd labeled her biggest threats were actually proving to be the least annoying males in camp. Except maybe Glenn, who was so eager to please, almost puppy like, that it was ridiculous.

Tossing a glance over her shoulder, she met Merle's eyes for a long moment. The older man was further up the bank, a pile of sticks on the ground beside him and his knife in hand. She assumed he must be making more of the bolts used in Daryl's crossbow. He'd wandered on down not long after they'd started on the laundry, parking himself within view and he'd been there since.

She wasn't sure why he was down here but she'd felt his eyes since he'd come down. So she assumed he was ass-watching again, in specific her ass. He seemed to be fascinated by it. And it amused her more than anything really, normally she hated being watched with a passion, but Merle hadn't ever really pushed her for nothing. Hell, he didn't even stand too close to her. He just watched, said perverted things and verbally teased the living shit out of her anytime she was within hearing range. But he never pushed, never got too close, never tried to touch, so she'd gotten used to it. Hell, now it amused her more than anything.

She blinked when he winked at her, blatantly leering, then made a lewd kissy face. Snorting Beth shook her head, unable to stop her grin as she turned back to the laundry. She'd decided that Merle may be big, he may be an asshole, he may be rough and he was sure as shit a druggie, he wouldn't hurt he the way she feared most men would. He and Daryl had made that perfectly clear in everything they did. Maybe if she took their words into account it wasn't so clear, but Beth believed actions spoke louder than words, especially in this case.

With a little shake she let herself pay attention to the conversation around her again. The women normally always ended up talking about something they missed or something they could really use right now. It sorta irritated Beth. They had what they had and that was that. Talking about things you missed or wished for was stupid unless you planned on going out

and getting it yourself. But it seemed to make them feel better, which she guessed was a plus in all this crap.

“I miss texting.” Amy sighed dreamily. Which nearly made Beth snort. Texting? Really? She liked Amy, she really did, but some of the stuff the other girl said really let on to how sheltered she'd been.

“I miss my Bentley.” Andrea echoed her sisters sigh, bumping the younger girls shoulder. The pair were close, but Beth thought it was more a forced closeness than anything. Amy had admitted to Beth that she hadn't even seen Andrea in the six or more months before the outbreak.

“I miss my Maytag.” Carol added a little mournfully, staring at the shirt she was currently wringing out.

“What d'you miss, Beth?” Amy asked, looking around her sister at the younger blonde, making Beth look up with a blink.

“What do I miss?” She repeated, cocking her head to the side to think. Plenty of food, the feeling of safety, sleeping a whole night though.....All those were honest answers, but grim and she had a feeling that wasn't what they were looking for. “Starbucks.” She answered at last with a nod and a quirked lip. She'd picked on of the most frivolous things she could think of on the top of her head. That seemed to be the right answer. It wasn't a complete lie either.

“Oh Lord yes, coffee, from my coffee grinder in particular.” Jacqui chimed in, rolling her eyes in remembered ecstasy. In the sun light Beth suddenly decided the dark woman was actually rather pretty.

“I miss my vibrator.” Andrea suddenly added in a stage whisper, making the women around her giggle. Beth smiled, although she'd never seen what was so great about sex or masturbation honestly.

“Me too.” Carol blushed, ducking her head with a shy smile. This time all of them laughed, the image of Carol of all people with a vibrator?! Beth tried to imagine it and just couldn't, instead she threw her head back and laughed harder.

“What are you lot laughin' at? Get back to work!” Ed's voice cut straight through the laughter, making every one of them tense.

Beth hunched her shoulders automatically, much like Carol did beside her, but she shook it off a second later. Scowling at herself she straightened her shoulders and lifted her chin as she turned to look at Ed. He stood above them on the bank, arms crossed and his expression smug. Like he was king looking down at his slaves and he had every right to be. The look brought back memories and made her boiling mad, made her want to claw his disgusting eyes out something bad. She barely stopped herself from jumping to her feet but Andrea had no such restraint. And that was when Beth knew it was gonna get bad.

It was one thing Beth mouthing off, it was an entire other thing for Andrea to do it. Beth knew the risks. She'd rated Ed as a scum bag the second she'd seen him and a wife beater in

the next. She knew exactly how short his temper must be and exactly how he reacted to being mouthed off to. It was in everything Carol did and said, even if she never came right out and said it. Andrea was different. Andrea thought the world was still structured and normal. She thought the world still cared every time a woman said no. Beth knew that wasn't the case. Andrea was mouthing off with the blatantly stupid assumption that Ed wasn't gonna hit her. Beth knew better.

She'd seen guys like Ed all too often. Guys that thought being a woman was somehow less. Guys that thought that just cause you were their woman they had every right to beat on you. Beth didn't stand for that shit, never had, never will, but she'd paid for it more than once. Been hit more than once. And she sure as hell knew the risks of getting into a scuffle with a guy like Ed.

As Andrea chucked a wet shirt at the man, Beth found herself anxiously glancing over at Merle, coming to her feet as she did so. The red neck hadn't looked up yet, hadn't seen the way Ed was standing. And he was just outta ear shot. He wouldn't know there was something happening unless there was shouting or he happened to look up. She wasn't sure how she knew he'd put a stop to Ed's bull shit but she did. He wouldn't let Ed hit any of them. Not because she thought he cared but because he was old fashioned in the sense that no man hit a woman. He'd never said as much but she knew it anyway.

"How 'bout we all just calm down for a minute?" Beth said, trying for soothing, as Carol tried to step through the other women to get to Ed. Beth stepped a little closer, coming up on Andrea's right. Lori had a tight grip on Carol's arm and Jacqui was holding onto the woman's shirt.

"How 'bout you stay out of my fucking business?" Ed demanded, turning his squinting eyes on her. "She's my wife and she'll do what I tell her. Come on, Carol." He looked to Beth's eyes very close to losing his temper completely.

"No, she won't!" Andrea shouted, glaring at him.

"Carol, now!" He growled, his eyes shifting from Beth to Carol to Andrea and back again. She knew he was likely assessing who would be the easiest victim. Up till now it'd been his wife.

"What so you can hit on her some more?" Jacqui's snapped, breaking her silence. That nearly made Beth groan in dismay. So much for cooling Ed's temper.

"That ain't your fucking business!" He hissed, sounding almost like a boiling tea kettle.

"I think we all need to calm down and take a step back. Carol don't gotta leave if she don't want and we can't make her stay, it's her choice." Beth kept her eyes on Ed, knowing he was gonna blow any second.

"Beth-" Amy protested sharply enough to draw Beth's eyes away from Ed, which was her own fucking mistake cause that's exactly when he moved.

Beth hit the ground, dazed, face down as his punch sink her spinning, barely able to catch herself with one hand. Her entire face burned, his fist wide enough to strike her from eyebrow to jaw. Vaguely she heard the others gasp, but she didn't register them. Instead she was up two seconds later, surging to her feet as adrenaline kicked in. Beth had learned the hard way that in a fight you never stayed down longer than you could help. She spun, preparing to hit him back. But instead of Ed she saw Merle Dixon's leather clad back, standing between her and Ed. Blinking, she swayed, one hand coming up to hold the side of her face.

"I don't know what yer mama done taught you but mine sure enough said no man hits on a woman. Least not a real one." Merle drawled, voice low, as Amy appeared at her side, wrapping an arm around her and tugging her farther away. He'd caught Ed's second blow, still holding the man's wrist in his hand.

"Shoulda stayed outta my business." Ed sputtered, looking surprised that of all people Merle had stepped in.

"And ya should have kept yer fuckin' hands of ah Little Sweetness." Merle growled, his voice getting even lower and grittier than normal as he glared at the man. He sneered and dropped Ed's wrist, shoving the man away hard enough to send him sliding to his ass.

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Merle sneered down at the piece of shit, feelin' his blood boilin' under his damn skin. That this sac of shit thought he had the right ta be beatin' on Little Sugar Pie made him feel angrier than he'd felt since before his Pa had done died.

Tryin' to smooth his expression, Merle glanced over his shouder ta give Little Bit a look over. And not in the more pleasurable way he normally went about it. Her entire left side of her face was red and beginning to bruise and her big blue eyes were dazed when they met his. Damn son of a bitch had really gotten in a good hit. Looks like her whole eye might end up swolled up.

Merle's glanced up just in time ta see her go spinnin' ta the ground and he didn't think he'd ever moved so fast in his god damned life. While the other useless womenfolk had gaped Merle'd gotten there just in time ta catch that second punch, that woulda landed just as Little Sweetness was jumpin' back ta her feet. If he'd have hit her a second time, Merle'd have guaranteed he was a dead man. As it was he was gonna have ta beat some ever living fucking sense into the little shits head.

But not now, bot when the women was watchin'. Normally he wouldn't care none about them watchin' him beat Ed ta hell and back but the stunned look on Sugar Pie's face made him hold back. Only just though.

Turning back ta Ed he made sure the other man could see the hell waitin' fer him in Merle's eyes. Oh, fuck yes, Merle was gonna be catchin' up with him later. "Ya best get yer ass outta here 'fore I decide ta beat it proper right here." He told the sniveling coward, wanting to laugh as the piss ant scurried backwards on his ass before scrambling up the back. He knew he'd be catchin' up with the fat ass later anyways.

"Ya okay, sugar pie?" He asked, the uncharacteristic question feeling like sand in his mouth. He weren't askin' for no other reason than he liked lookin' at he pretty face on the regular and with it bruised ta shit..... well it just weren't as pretty ta look at.

"I'm fine, fucker hits harder than I thought he would, is all." She told him, blinked away the dazed look in her big baby blues. The other blondie had an arm around her protectively, lookin' at ol' Merle like he was suddenly gonna start whalin' on the Little Sweetness too.

"Shouldn'a done that." The assholes wife said, starin' after her husband, who'd already done disappeared over the ridge.

"Ain't gonna let that fucker hit on womenfolk that ain't his." Merle grunted, spittin' ta the side. Miss Queen of the Heap gave him a disgusted look but her ignored her easily enough.

"We got a problem down here?" The pig called, coming down the bank, the little boy just a few steps behind. He was eyein' Merle like he was gonna try an rape one of 'em right there on the bank.

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Beth stepped away from Amy, trying to ignore the stinging pain in her face. "Yeah, we got a problem, but why don't ya look where the real problem is." She told Shane sharply, not about to sit around and let Shane accuse Merle like he was fixing to. She gestured to bring the cops attention to her rapidly bruising face. "Ed did this, not Merle, if it wasn't fer Merle he'd of got a second shot off too."

"If Merle wasn't here we'd of been in real trouble." Amy agreed, making Beth send her a surprised look as the other blonde came to the Dixon's defense. Amy just met her eyes for a moment, stepping up to her side again and then frowning at Shane. "So you can stop lookin' at him like that."

Andrea was looking at her sister as like she'd grown another head but she stepped forward too. She studiously did not look at Merle. "The real problem is Ed, he needs a talkin' to. He's been pushing it but he crossed the line this time."

Shane studied the line of blondes, pursing his lips as his eyes came to rest on Beth's face. He gave no indication he even remembered Merle was there. "He'll get a talkin' to." He nodded, both his hands resting on his hips and his feet spread in what Beth liked to call his arrogant cop stance. "Don't worry about that, this won't be happenin' again."

“It's not anybodies business!” Carol suddenly said, her stance hunched in the middle of the group of women. Her face was scared and Beth had no doubt she was thinking about the next time she was alone with Ed.

“Carol, please.....shut the fuck up.” Beth ignored the other women's gaping faces, turning so that the gray haired woman could see her face fully. “I'm not married to that piece of shit and I don't have to stand fer being afraid of him. You don't either. You let yourself be beat on, Carol, and you need to stand the fuck up and stop it already. Before that fucker turns his sight on little Sofia. How you think her face would look if he'd ah done this ta her?” She waited until Carol's eyes came up to look at Beth's face, the woman's eyes widening in horror. “Ain't nobody gonna fault you fer getting away from that bastard. You have every right to leave him. My tent has extra room fer two bodies if you manage to straighten yer fuckin' spine.” With that she turned and left, climbing the bank without a single glance back.

No doubt they'd all think she'd been too harsh on poor little Carol. But Beth didn't think so. If there was one thing Beth couldn't stand it was men hitting on women, especially women that they were supposed to be caring for and loving. Beth had never stood for it, not ever. And the last three years had only compounded that view into a steely hard core inside her. She'd had more than a few licks in her life, and she knew this was an uphill battle fer Carol. But something needed to snap the woman out of it, because obviously the woman wasn't gonna do it herself. So she'd been a little harsh, so what? The woman needed to have a reality check, especially before little Sofia started to get bruises.

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Merle was still chucklin' over Little Spitfire's speech over his fire that evening. Shit, but she was a firecracker, she was. Daryl gave him an odd look but Merle only shook his head. He knew what Daryl thought about his interest in Little Sweetness and Merle weren't gonna hear it tonight. Not when he had better things ta be rememberin'.

He couldn't remember ever being as surprised as he was when not only Little Sweetness stepped up ta defend him but sugar tits little sister too. The fire spittin' from Little Sweetness' eyes had been damn near intoxicatin' and he'd had an instant fuckin' boner right there and then. She was somethin' else, that's for fuckin' sure.

“What happen ta her face?” Daryl suddenly said, his eyes focused across the camp, where Little Sweetness was tellin' some kind ah story ta the Chinaman. Her hands were movin' every which way and she actually had a grin on her face. The bruises had spread and darkened, making half her face look like some horror movie extra.

“Old ladies piece ah shit husband.” Merle said, his lips turning in satisfaction as he thought on his earlier little 'chat' with the man. He'd caught him while he was takin' a piss and shown him exactly what it felt like ta get the shit beatin' outta him.

“Ya take care ah it?” Daryl was still starin' across camp but Merle realized he was starin' at sugar tits little sister now. His face was blank like it always was but Merle knew that look better than anything. He knew when somethin' caught his baby brother's attention.

“Took care ah it alright.” He confirmed, sitting back with a smug grin and crossing his arms. Daryl didn't even notice his starin' fer a whole fuckin' minute. “Nice piece ah ass, course not got such a fine body as Little Sweetness, but still pretty god damned fine.”

“Got no idea what yer talkin' 'bout.” Daryl muttered, returning his eyes to his crossbow.

“Sure ya don't, baby brother, sure ya don't” Merle chuckled, shaking his head at his brother.



# She Skins, He Gives

## Chapter Three: She Helps, He Gives

Beth took a deep breath, scanning the camp one more time. Lori and Andrea were down at the water bathing. Amy was seated beside the dead fire, chatting with Glenn. She seemed enthusiastic about her story and Beth didn't think she'd notice if Beth was gone. So it was now or never. She was gonna do it whether anybody gave her hell for it or not, but it was easier without Lori and Andrea looking down their noses at her.

Tilting her chin she headed towards the far end of camp, where Daryl was sitting with at least a dozen squirrels, just starting the process of skinning them all. Merle and Daryl did the hunting and they shouldn't have to do the skinning and dressing too. Her mama had always done that part for her daddy, before she'd passed away, and it seemed like the right thing to do. Something a good person would do.

Daryl spotted her half way over and his expression didn't shift one little bit as he tracked her. She tilted her chin higher and just kept on coming. Daryl wasn't violent, least not that she'd seen a hint of. He also wasn't a druggie, so that took out the unpredictability that made his brother a threat. He didn't talk much, she'd heard him say maybe a dozen words, only a quarter of those strung together and all of them directed at Merle. He wasn't harmless in the sense that he couldn't do damage but he was harmless in the fact that he wouldn't do no damage to her.

"You mind if I help ya out with those?" She asked bluntly as she came to a stop a few feet away. She locked her eyes with his and for once he didn't look away. She pointedly didn't glance towards their tent, where she could just see the tip of Merle's boot out of the corner of her eye. He'd announced rather loudly not an hour ago that he was going to take a nap in the shade of his tent. She was sure what he really meant was 'I'm gonna shoot up so much drugs I can't stand.'

"Ya know how?" He squinted up at her, his eyes brilliant, just like Merle's, nearly blazing in the sun. If she said nothing else about Daryl she could say that his eyes were definitely bright.

"Used to help my mama when daddy brought home his kills. Only ever done deer and rabbit but I don't imagine a squirrel'll be much different." Beth said honestly with a shrug. The blood and guts didn't bother her, which counted the most she figured.

Daryl grunted, hooking a overturned milk crate with his boot and shoving it towards her. She imagined that was his way of saying he didn't mind her help.

"Got a knife I can use?" She sat down on the crate, eyeing the various buckets around them. One for the guts, one for the finished squirrels and one for the rest.

"Ya ain't got a knife?" Daryl asked incredulously, his words for once not muffled. He eyed her skeptically. "What kinda southern girl ain't got a knife?"

“Well, I got a switchblade, but it won't do me no good with this.” She'd purchased it two weeks after she'd run away from home, using the last bit of her cash so she could have something to tuck under her pillow at night. When she'd left home she hadn't even thought of arming herself but it hadn't taken her long to correct that.

Daryl grunted again, this one a little different than the last as he began to rummage in one of the backpacks at the end of his tent. She imagined if she knew him long enough she'd begin to discern exactly what each grunt meant, as there seemed to be several different ones. Merle certainly had it down to a science.

“Here.” He tossed her a large knife in a dark leather sheath. The handle was a dark rich wood, polished smooth and obviously well used, with the shape of a tiny snake carved into it and filled with crushed abalone shell. It was pretty, not something she'd imagine either Dixon to carry.

“Thanks.” She left it at that, reaching for her first squirrel. The fur felt gross and stiff under her fingers but other than a little grimace she ignored that. World wasn't a place where you could be squeamish, especially not anymore.

“How's yer face?” Daryl asked after a strained few minutes of silence between them. Strained for Daryl anyway. She'd come over with the knowledge that he probably wouldn't make a peep while she helped him.

Beth shrugged one shoulder, concentrating on the cut she was making. In truth her whole face ached, especially her jaw. She suspected that Ed had come real damn close to breaking her jaw with that one blow. “It's alright. Healin' fine, and I've had worse so...” She shrugged again.

“Bastard got what he deserved.” The younger Dixon muttered, fixing his own eyes on his squirrel.

A grin twitching the corners of her mouth Beth risked a quick glance at the one boot visible through the tent flap. Ed had certainly got his, and Beth suspected exactly who'd given it to him. Ed's face had looked like minced meat and since he'd been hiding out in his tent, Carol bringing him food and water.

“Might have ta thank whoever gave it to him.” Beth said, her lips pursed to hide her smile. She met Daryl's startled eyes for only a moment before looking back down at the finished squirrel in her hands. She thunked it down in the finished bucket and reached for the next.

“Y'all mind another set of helping hands?” Amy's voice startled Beth but she noticed Daryl didn't jump at all. The taller blonde was stood a few feet away, her hands tucked into her back pockets and her shoulders up around her ears as she looked at the pair. She looked hesitant and uncomfortable, but she had a little smile on her face too. She looked hopeful. “I mean I don't really know how...you'd have to show me....but I'm a fast learner! It just only seems fair since y'all do the huntin' and you know....I never said thank you fer all of that.” She cut herself off, a light blush staining her cheeks that almost made Beth laugh. The way Daryl's eyes seemed fixed on it though, seemed like he liked it just fine.

“Guess I could show ya.” Daryl replied gruffly after a long pause. His voice seemed gruffer and Beth wondered suddenly if he was trying to hide a little crush on Amy. “Ya better not be squeamish 'bout it.”

“No, I won't be!” Amy smiled her thousand watt smile at Daryl and Beth could swear he swallowed in the face of it. “I used to watch my dad do it all the time, I've just never done it myself.”

“Sit.” Daryl pointed his knife at the third milk crate, his eyes lowering to his squirrel and not coming up again. “I'll show ya on this one, then ya can do 'em on yer own.”

“It's easy once ya got the hang of it.” Beth reassured her friend as Amy plopped down onto the crate. Amy was still smiling at Daryl, even though he wasn't looking anymore and didn't see Beth's amused face.

As Daryl showed Amy how to skin the squirrels, Beth continued on with her own, glad that Amy was finally breaking out of her shell. Since they'd made camp Amy had been pulled along in Andrea's wake, letting Andrea direct her and tell what to do and what not to do. Beth knew for a fact that Andrea had ordered Amy to stay away from both Dixons.

Thing was though, Amy wasn't at all like Andrea, not really. They were almost twelve years apart and as a result Amy had been raised quite a bit differently than Andrea. Amy had told Beth all about it. Andrea had always been too busy for her tomboy little sister and as a result Amy had cleaved to their father. Gone on hunting trips, went fishing with the guys, played with boys, been on the baseball team. Amy had told Beth that she felt like Andrea had always been in her own world, where everyone revolved around her and it had only gotten worse when Andrea became an attorney.

Until now, of course. Now the world was different. Andrea was all Amy had anymore. Amy'd said just yesterday that she loved Andrea to death but she was Amy and she had to start acting like Amy again. She wanted to be Amy again, not the way Andrea thought she should be. She wanted control of her life and be who and what she wanted to be. Amy had said she knew Andrea was just trying to protect her but what was the point in living if you couldn't be you while you were doing it. Beth had told her to pull her panties up then and stop letting Andrea boss her around. That had made Amy laugh and agree.

“I'm sure I can do that!” Amy said brightly, tearing Beth's attention back to reality. Amy was sitting a little more confidently now and her knee was almost brushing Daryl's, which made Beth smirk to herself. “Do you have a knife I can use?”

“Ya ain't got a knife either?” He seemed doubly baffled this time, which made Beth laugh.

“No matter what you think, Daryl, women don't normally carry around large hunting knives.” She told him cheerfully, grinning at him as Amy started to smile too.

“Well, I have one, but it's just a little one. It was my dads.” Amy shrugged with a smile when Daryl squinted at her.

“That ain't no help.” He grunted, leaning over to dig through the same bag as before. Beth was beginning to wonder exactly how many knives he had in that back pack. With types like

Merle and Daryl, one just never knew. A few seconds later he pulled out another knife identical to the one he'd given Beth, only with a pearl handle and light wood.

"Thanks." Amy took the offered knife and examined it for a moment before gamely reaching for one of the six squirrels left. She shuddered in disgust when she touched the fur but just like Beth she continued anyway. "So I cut here?"

Beth smiled discreetly as Daryl watched Amy with the squirrel, a confused expression on his face. Obviously Daryl Dixon had a big fat ol' crush on Amy, it was clear as the sun in the sky. Which just thrilled Beth to no end. She'd had to deal with Amy's sighs and dreamy smiles whenever Daryl walked by in camp for the last week and a half. It was about damn time the two of them talked to each other. Daryl was about as introverted as a clam, though, so it was a damn good thing Amy had more confidence than any three people combined. Especially when it came to the male of the species. So Amy'd throw the line and all Daryl had to do was bite.

"Did I do it right?" Amy questioned lightly with a silly smile as she presented the finished squirrel to Daryl. Daryl in turn gave the squirrel a once over. The cuts were rough but not bad for a first timer.

"Did alright." He said as she sat the squirrel in the finished bucket. The words might as well have been high praise, Beth knew enough about him to know that. Amy apparently did too, the way she beamed back at him. He blinked and looked back down at his own squirrel.

"Cool." She said brightly, starting on her second as Beth started on her third. Beth could tell Amy already felt more at ease with this one. "So what'd both of you do before all of this?" She waved the knife in a little circle as she asked.

"Used to sing in a couple bars." Beth murmured after Daryl didn't say anything for a minute. Despite knowing each other for a little over a week, neither had ever really asked about what life was like before. "Made enough to get by. I'd just signed a deal with an actual record label when all this hit the fan." Her mouth quirked into a bitter smile as she thought about that. She'd begged them for over a year to listen to her tape and when they finally did and liked it, the world went to shit. Figures.

"Really?!" Amy bounced in her seat, her eyes wide in her face. The look made Beth smile more genuinely, and even Daryl's lips twitched. "That's so cool!"

Beth shrugged a little uncomfortably. She sang alright but she didn't think it was really anything she should accept praise for. God had given her her voice, God should be the one that she thanked for her voice. He should get the appreciation. "It was alright. It made money."

"What'd you do, Daryl?" Amy turned her attention to Daryl, obviously seeing how uncomfortable Beth was with the conversation.

It took if a long drawn out minute to answer and for a depressing minute neither blonde thought he would answer. Then he shrugged. "Tile work." He finally answered, continuing

with his squirrel with quick efficient motions. Like he'd done it a thousand times. For all Beth knew he had.

"That's cool." Amy glanced up at him with a coy smile and Beth nearly snorted when he didn't seem to know what to do with it. He shifted uncomfortably and Amy transferred her eyes back to her squirrel. "I was half way through school to be an architect. Damn lot of good all those student loans are now." She snorted and shook her head.

It was silent after that and Beth noticed after a while that Daryl seemed less tense than she'd seen him since she met him. He always seemed to be wound tighter than a spring, shoulders hunched and thumb clamped between his teeth. She sent a glance at his expression and decided that he really was attractive, in a feral sorta way. He was as tall, if not taller than Shane, at least when he wasn't hunching, with broad shoulders and muscled arms. His eyes were bright, intense and he seemed to be the type that never did things half way. All in all, not bad looking at all. She could see why Amy was interested.

She took another glance at Merle's boot, which was moving slightly now, bobbing to some beat only he could hear. The brothers were about as different as night and day. Merle was more confident in himself than just about anybody she'd ever seen, showing none of Daryl's uncertain almost shy attitude. The older Dixon was taller by a few inches and broader too, his chest wide with muscle. Barrel chested, she'd heard somebody say before. Merle had a big personality, like if he was so busy throwing everything out there nobody would bother actually looking at him.

Despite herself she found Merle, the more dangerous brother, more attractive than Daryl. Maybe not in looks, Merle's face was a little too rough for that, but there was just something about the older brother..... Maybe it was the way he watched Beth all the time. She could almost always feel the heat from his eyes, no matter where she was in camp. And it wasn't the invasive heat that she was used to from men.....more like the way the sun made her skin warm. Pleasant and tingling, which she was sure no one had ever applied to Merle Dixon before. Maybe it was the way Ed's face had looked, bruised beyond recognition. She knew who'd done it. How could she not? She also remembered the concern on his face, when he'd seen the rapidly growing bruises. Maybe that was it.

Whatever it was she couldn't help but be attracted to him. Oh he was an asshole, and she didn't necessarily like him, heck most the time he annoyed the living shit out of her, but he was attractive. She had to give him that one. She hated drugs, thought druggies were despicable and unpredictable, but even with that, something in him, some quality, kept him from being crossed off her list totally. Something about him just pulled on her, even when she wanted to claw his eyes out or stomp on his stash until it was nothing but dust. Merle Dixon was just something she'd never come across before.

"You know what I really miss?" Amy said suddenly, starting the game the women liked to play as they did their washing. This time she didn't give her standard snobby answer. "I really miss skittles."

"Skittles?" Daryl echoed like he couldn't help himself, looking over at her like she'd grown another head. He looked like she completely baffled him.

“Yeah, I have a like monster craving for skittles right now.” She replied with a light laugh and a shrug, unbothered. “I used to get them all the time, before. But I always hated the green ones, so I'd give them to my dad. He used to call me a dork, said one skittle tasted just like all the rest.” Her smile turned a little painful on the memory.

“My guitar.” Beth said, drawing attention from the painful expression on the taller blonde's face. Returning the favor for earlier. “I had to leave quick and I didn't have time to go to the bar and get it.”

“Ice cold beer.” Daryl chimed in unexpectedly after the silence had lapsed over them again. “Could use ah ice cold beer right now.” As though in explanation he wiped a bead of sweat from his face.

Amy threw her head back and laughed, and Beth couldn't help but smile too. Mostly at the besotted expression of Daryl's face as he watched Amy laugh. Oh, it was only there for a second but she'd definitely seen it.

“You're right!” Amy agreed with him readily. “An ice cold beer would be real nice about now.”

“You even legal?” Daryl asked gruffly, his face closing down again. “Wouldn't want Officer Shane ta arrest ya.” A bitter turn curled in his words, not that Beth blamed him. Shane made it pretty obvious he didn't like the Dixons.

“I'm 24.” Amy said promptly, not letting Daryl's tone effect her at all. She smiled in the face of his frown instead. “I think it's Beth here we should be asking about being legal! She's only 19!” She teased.

Beth smirked, shaking her head at her naive friend. Some of the things Amy said made it plain exactly which side of the tracks she'd been born on. Beth had been born on that same side but she'd had her eyes opened for her real quick. “There's always a way to get alcohol, no matter what age ya are.” She said, sharing a speaking glance with Daryl, who smirked. They both knew that fact personally. “Don't like alcohol much though, just ain't got a taste fer it.” She shrugged.

“Oh! Look, we're done!” Amy exclaimed suddenly as Daryl dropped the last squirrel into the bucket. “See how much quicker that was with helping hands?”

Beth smiled at her friend, deciding that Amy was one of the good people left in the world. She was always so genuine it was ridiculous. “She's right. Why don't you come find us next time you get back from hunting and we'll do this part for you? It's only fair.” Beth offered lightly, with a brow raised.

“She'd right! We can totally do this part for you.” Amy added with an enthusiastic nod. She was about as sick of doing laundry as Beth was. Mostly because it involved being bossed around by Andrea and Lori.

Daryl glanced between the two of them for a long moment, like he was trying to gauge their sincerity. “You wanna do it, ain't no skin off my nose.” He finally settled on.

“Great!” Amy beamed as she popped to her feet. There was a streak of blood across her forehead that Beth was sure she'd be horrified about. “I'm gonna go wash off and I told Andrea I'd meet her down by the water, so I better hurry before she sends a search party.” After a grunt from Daryl she was off, her gait as close to skipping as a grown ass adult could get.

Daryl stared after her for a long moment and it took Beth about that long to realize Daryl was giving Amy about the same heated look Merle always gave Beth, only the Daryl version. In other words blank with a side of scowl but just that little bit of interest around the edges. She full out grinned this time, dipping her hands in the wash bucket Daryl had sitting beside him. She didn't think Any had even noticed it there. No doubt if she had she would have used it as an excuse to get closer to Daryl.

“Here, all clean.” Beth said to draw Daryl's attention. She presented him with the large hunting knife he'd loaned her. Amy had left her's on her milk crate chair and Beth moved to clean that one too.

She barely caught the glance Daryl sent towards Merle. From his position closer to the tent she imagined he had a pretty good view of Merle's face. “Keep it. Girl with no knife ain't smart.” He grunted, jerking his eyes away from Merle. “Ya can give that one ta the other girl too.”

Beth stared down at the large knife, tapping the sheathed blade against her knuckles a moment before she stood. “I'm sure Amy will be thrilled.” She went to turn away then paused. “You know, she told me the other day that she thought ya had the nicest eyes.....and that maybe yer ass came from the angels....was that how she put it?” She teased, her grin turning into a smirk as Daryl choked and turned fire engine red. She didn't think she imagined the snort of laughter from the tent either.

“Get goin'!” Daryl barked with no real bite, shooing her away with one hand. His ears were even the brightest pink.

“Thanks fer the knife, Merle, I 'ppreciate it. Oh, and I love Ed's new look.” She shot flippantly over her shoulder as she strolled away, pleased as all get out with herself.

# She Stays

## Chapter 4: She Stays

Beth watched the key slip through the grate with horrified eyes, unable to quite believe what she was seeing. The keys to Merle's freedom. Merle who was chained to the roof behind her, completely helpless and with no way to run. Merle who'd beat up Ed because he'd hit her. Merle that gave her a knife so she could protect herself. Merle who seemed absolutely obsessed with watching her ass. The Merle that she actually sorta might have thought was actually attractive. His freedom, right down the grate, completely inaccessible.

Lifting her horrified eyes, she locked stares with T-Dog, who looked sick with terror. He knew just as well as she did what that meant for Merle. Merle would be stuck here, left behind to rot in the sun. Or even worse, become chow for some undead bastard.

“What did you do?” She nearly shouted, taking a step off the walkway, towards Merle. Merle, who knew exactly what was gonna happen as soon as the key disappeared. He was going wild already, pulling at the cuff, struggling wildly, shouting. He knew.

“I didn't mean to!” T-Dog muttered, clutching his ribs as he rose to his feet, turning to look at her, eyes wide with horror.

“Shit, shit, shit!” Beth stumbled, her brain freezing as she tried desperately to think of some other way, besides leaving Merle behind to die. But there wasn't anything. The plan they'd had was desperate and halfassed as it was.

“We gotta go! We gotta go!” T-Dog ran past her, jolting Beth's brain out of it's momentary stupor.

“What?!” Beth turned and went after him, Merle screaming behind her. “We can't leave him like this! He'll die up here!” Her heart was thumping wildly in her chest and she felt breathless, like her lungs were being squeezed by an invisible fist.

“Ain't nothing we can do for him now, Beth!” T-Dog flung the door wide as he went, ready to tear down the stairs after the others. “We gotta go!” He repeated.

“I can't leave him like this!” She shouted, her voice hoarse as she stumbled to a stop in the door way. Over her shoulder Merle was screaming, desperate, wild, like a dying animal. The thought made her mind blinked, like it was a computer just turning on.

Turning she glanced back at Merle, just able to see his struggling form over the pipes of the roof. Her heart was in her throat and she looked wildly around, trying to think of some way other than this. Her eyes locked on a heavy chain hanging up beside the door, a heavy padlock dangling from it at the end. Beth lunged forward and caught T-Dog's sleeve before he could go any farther, her brain coming up with a desperate crazy idea.



“Stop! I need you to lock the door behind you!” She grabbed the chain as she hauled the large black man around, his eyes dropping to the chain in her hand.

“Yeah, yeah, we'll chain the door.” He muttered, immediately catching on to her idea. He went to pull her out of the way, so he could close the door behind them but she resisted.

“No!” She pushed him away and took a step back out onto the roof. “He needs someone to defend him in case they get through.” If they got through she already knew they were both dead, and from the look he gave her, T-Dog knew it too.

“You're gonna stay here for that asshole?” T-Dog nearly shouted, throwing a glance over his shoulder, towards the stair well, expression harried.

“Yes, now lock the door and go!” She swung the door closed in his face before he could say anything else. She could hear him curse as he threaded the heavy chain through the handle and then the heavy click of the padlock as he closed it. After that there wasn't another hesitation, his footsteps echoing back to her as he ran down the stairs.

Beth swallowed, staring at the door, her heart in her throat as she felt the finality of what she'd just done. She was stuck up here now, her fortunes tied to Merle whether she changed her mind or not. No way she could go back now. Taking a deep breath Beth firmed her chin and turned away from the door, that avenue was closed to her now, no matter what.

Merle was still struggling wildly as she ran back across the metal walkway and he didn't even hear her come back. She needed him to shut up. With the racket he was making he was gonna draw every one of those bastards as soon as they got in the building.

“Merle! You need to be quiet!” She hissed as she came up behind him, making him startle and whirl back around to face her, throwing his back against the pipe behind him. His eyes were as wide as she'd ever seen them as he stared at her.

“Ya can't stay here!” Merle near shouted as she came to crouch beside him. “Go, 'for they leave yer ass behind!”

“Just a second ago you were shouting at T-Dog not to leave you!” She retorted, bending to look at the piece of re-bar that the cuffs were linked to. “And I just told you to shut up, you'll bring every one ah those bastards right up the stairs if ya keep shoutin' like that.” The re-bar looked thick and set firmly, no way to wiggle it free.

“That was that dumb black asshole, not you!” His voice didn't lower even a notch as he yelled at her, his eyes blazing. It was the first time she'd seen him look at her with anger and Beth found herself not afraid at all, not even a little. “You need ta go!”

“Merle, you need to shut up!” She growled, slapping her hand over his mouth and leaning in close, so her eyes were only inches away from his. “I can't go anywhere, I had T-Dog chain and padlock the door on his way down. Can't leave that way no more, and nothing should be gettin' in either. We're safe for right now, so you need to be quiet so we stay that way.”

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Merle blinked, his mind reeling as he registered Little Sugar's words, spoken so close to his face. She'd stayed here. With him. Knowing they were going to be trapped. Knowing they could both die, probably would die. If not from the dead then from the goddamned heat. She'd stayed though. Here. Trapped on the roof with him. For him. She was likely to die. To stay with him. The fuck?

No one had ever so blatantly stood with him before and Merle just couldn't wrap his mind around the damn thing. Daryl'd always been with him, 'cept Merle's short stint in the military, but Daryl was blood. He had no other choice. Blood stayed with blood, that was the way it was. Blondie had no reason to stay. By all rights she shoulda been outta here so fast her damned ass was on fire. But she wasn't. Instead she was crouching beside him on this God forsaken roof, baking in the heat, waiting out the end of the fuckin' world with him. Instead of high tailin' it outta here, back to camp where it was nice and safe.

Merle felt his eyes begin to burn, mother fuckin' tears, real god damned tears, pushin' at the backs of his eyes. He hadn't cried since he was knee high to a fuckin' grass hopper, yet here he was, about ta bawl like a baby in front of Little Sugar. Clenching his jaw, Merle refused to let himself cry.

“We gotta be real quiet, okay?” Little sugar was saying in his ear, her hand still covering his mouth. Her big baby blue were dead serious as she met his eyes, stare for stare. “If they don't know we're up here, they won't think there's nothing interesting up here. Ain't like their gonna come for the view.” Here she cracked a little grin and Merle huffed behind her hand, feeling the burning behind his eyes begin ta let up.

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It took thirty minutes of sitting in the sweltering heat before Beth realized she was gonna have to do something about it. There was no way Merle was gonna be able to stay out here in the heat with no water. It was only barely passed noon and already both of them were melting. Merle in particular, his body no doubt still swimming with whatever drug he'd shot up. He was suffering something awful, his head lolled back against the pipe and his eyes closed.

Wiping her forehead with her thin tank top, Beth pushed herself to her feet. Shading her eyes she looked around the roof, trying to find anything that could give Merle some shade. There had to be something she could use. It was a big roof, there was surely something.

“What you doin', doll face?” Merle slurred, rolling his head to look at her. His eyes were unfocused and dim as he looked up at her and she realized that his face and shoulders were already beginning to turn red. He was also shaking slightly and she thought maybe the sweating was already detoxing him a little.

“I gotta find somethin' to give you a little shade. We ain't gonna make it long up here if we get heat stroke.” She told him, squinting at him through the sun. Really he didn't look so good at all. She needed to think of a way to get them off this roof, is what she needed to do. But shade first. “I'll be right back, okay? Make sure you remember ta stay quiet. We don't want those bastards knowin' we're here.”

“You got it, Sugar Pie.” He saluted her and she thought he meant it to come off more playful than it did. Instead it came off as dreadfully listless. His eyes were closed again before she even turned around.

She blew out a breath as she turned away. She really wasn't sure how withdrawal worked. She'd seen some examples in some of the scummier bars she'd played in but she didn't have any personal experience with it herself. She wasn't sure how long after the high that the crash came but she was thinking that's what Merle must be going through now. It was his own damned fault but she couldn't help but feel worried for him. In this heat it must be a living hell.

It took her another 30 minutes to figure out that she could pry one of the side panels off the AC unit. The other three sides were firmly attached but with some kicking and pulling she finally managed to get one off. By the time she stumbled away from the unit, prize held awkwardly in her arms, she was sweating and her face was red with exertion.

“Found something that should work.” Beth huffed, as she made her way back across the room. The panel was heavy but it was more awkward to carry than anything.

Merle was mumbling to himself by that point and she hurried to prop the large panel over them, balanced on the pipes, so that it shaded the man. There was barely enough room in the shade for her but she sat almost touching Merle's side, letting her legs lay in the sun. It was still hot as hell but at least she was wearing jeans and her head wasn't in the direct sun.

“You know, I spent 16 months in the stockade for that stunt.” He told her as she sat beside him, his head lolling sideways to look at her. He was clearly hallucinating, that or he'd somehow forgotten that she'd left and he'd been talking to her this whole time. “Now that was hard time.” He nodded solemnly at her, eyes bleary but somehow staying focused on her face.

“I imagine it was.” She agreed mildly, relaxing back into the partial shade. But at least Merle was completely covered. He needed the shade more than she did at this point.

“But you know what, Sugar Pie? Watching him spit all five ah those teeth out was worth every damned minute.” A smug tired little smile was on his face now and Beth couldn't help but to grin with him.

They sat there for a long time after that. Merle rambling on about all sorts of things and Beth listening at first because there wasn't anything else to do, and then because most of his stories were genuinely funny. A lot were sad, like some he told about his ma and pa, but a lot more of them had to do with Daryl and some scrape or another the two brothers had gotten into. The whole time Merle's eyes were focused on her face, with the kind of unwavering intensity he usually used to stare at her ass. The only reason she knew he was lucid was the damned nicknames he threw into his stories. Sugar pie, little sugar, doll face, they were the only reason she knew that he knew who he was talking to. It mighta been two or three hours but eventually Merle trailed off, a dazed look crossing his face. Beth blinked, her eyes focusing in on his face again.

And then a look flashed across his face that made Beth's heart leap to her throat. His hand jerked, the cuff rattling and then it was like he didn't know where he was anymore. One

moment he was sitting beside her in the shade and the next he was wildly struggling again, yelling and pleading. Beth jumped up, not sure what to do. She found herself fluttering there uselessly for a minute, watching him struggle in a reckless frenzy. She was sure somehow the cuff had set him off, something in his mind snapping at the sensation. That combined with how much drugs he had in his system, the heat and being trapped? Well, it wasn't any picnic, that's for sure.

It was the door to the roof rattling and the ragged moans that finally jerked her into action. Fear speared into her heart and she unfroze, scrambling forward to throw herself on top of Merle's struggling body. He'd seen the walkers too, and he'd gone into another wild frenzy. As a result she got an iron elbow to the ribs but she ignored the pain, trying to ride out his reckless flailing. Grabbing at his face she clamped her hands on both of his cheeks, wrenching his head around to force him to look at her.

"Merle!" She shouted it, the walkers knew they were there, wasn't any point in being quiet anymore. His pupils contracted and his movements slowed but didn't stop, so she shouted his name again. "Merle!" This time he stilled completely, his blinking eyes focusing in on her face. By that time she'd scraped her knee, gotten another elbow to the ribs and a knee to the thigh. She'd definitely be bruised later.

"Sugar?" He muttered faintly, then he tried to swing his eyes back towards the ragged moans echoing across the roof.

"No!" She forced him to keep his eyes locked on her. "Don't think about them, there's a chain as thick as my arm keepin' that door closed, they ain't gettin' in any time soon, ya hear me?" By this point her entire body was stretched out over his, belly to belly and her legs between his.

He stared at her for a long time and Beth wasn't sure if he was fully with it or not. Then he huffed out a breath, and wrapped his free arm around her, big palm coming to rest on her behind. "Darlin' if you wanted ta go feelin' me up, all ya had ta do is ask."

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"So we have a coupla saws, a hammer and a few other tools here." Beth said to Merle nearly an hour later. She'd had to stop him from panicking three more times since the first and the moans from the door were still going strong. She'd decided that come hell or high water they were getting off this roof.

"Them saws ain't gonna work on the chain." Merle grunted from beside her, looking over their meager tools with her. He threw a nervous glance over his shoulder towards the door but otherwise kept his cool.

Beth sighed gustily, throwing her own glance over her shoulder. It'd become pretty clear to her that the group wasn't coming back for them, at least not today. Maybe not at all. Not without Daryl or maybe Amy to lead the charge. The sting of that lingered but she tried not to think about it. She had no doubt at all that Daryl would come, but would he even be back from hunting before tomorrow? Amy would want to come, but she was only one person, and without backup what good was she gonna do?

So there really wasn't much of a choice. Merle had to get off this roof or he was gonna die. There wasn't any ifs, ands, or buts about that. He was already delirious half the time and he was starting to turn an alarming shade of red, even under the meager shade she'd made. He needed to get off this roof, the sooner the better. So they were gonna have to come up with some way to get off the roof themselves, since they didn't have any back up.

“Can cut my hand off.” Merle suggested grimly, his mouth set in a very tight line as he stared off to the side. “Saw’ll get through, might have trouble with the bone, but it’ll get through eventually.”

Beth gaped, horrified by the very suggestion. “I am not turning you into some kinda zombie apocalypse Captain Hook, it's just not gonna happen.” She told him firmly, keeping her eyes and chin set when he glanced over to meet her eyes.

“I think I might be pretty fuckin' dashin' as Captain Hook myself.” Merle huffed, giving her a weak lecherous eyebrow wiggle. Despite that he seemed relieved that she'd discarded the notion.

“You think if I used this flat head like a pick and I hit the back with the hammer it'd break the chain?” She held up the battered flat head and the hammer, demonstrating the motion of hitting the flat head.

“Might take ah coupla hours but I think it might do.” Merle confirmed with a wince as he shifted in his spot. Beth had to admit, staying in one spot so they stayed in the shade was becoming more than a little uncomfortable. She wanted nothing more than to stretch her legs but she also didn't want to leave Merle alone even for a second, not acting the way he was. She had no doubt he'd do something stupid like actually cut his hand off if she wasn't watching him.

“Well, then, lets get to it.” She carefully placed the head of the flat head against the chain and brought the hammer down for the first strike.

## She Slept

“So you’re telling me you left Beth and Merle out there?! Trapped on a roof?! And you didn’t go back for them?!” Amy had to fight to keep herself from yelling, her voice trembling with fury as her eyes swung between her sister, Glenn and then a circuit of the faces returning to camp. None of them but the newcomer would meet her eyes. “Did you at least leave them water?” Based on their expressions they hadn’t.

“Merle was going crazy, drugged out of his mind, yelling and screaming!” Andrea defended sharply, glaring.

“Is that enough reason to chain a man to the roof of a building and then leave him there in this heat? Is that enough reason to leave Beth behind, the only one willing to stay and defend him? One woman against those things?!” Amy clenched her teeth, blue eyes spitting.

“Merle is a drugged out criminal. Sounds to me like they did the only they could.” Shane pointed out, hands on his hips and his expression self righteous. “It’s a shame that Beth got caught in the middle of it but she made a choice to stay behind.”

Amy took a deep breath in, fighting back the urge to claw at the arrogant asshole’s face. “And what do you plan on telling Daryl? I’m really kind of curious. How are you going to explain that no one had the balls or the morals to go back for his brother?”

“We barely got out as it was!” Andrea defended herself sharply. “There was no way we could have gone back today!”

“This is all on me, I should be the one to tell Daryl.” T-Dog said somberly, holding one arm tightly to his middle.

“Yeah, that’s gonna go over great. A black guy telling that red neck racist asshole that his brother got left behind.” Shane scoffed loudly, making it clear what he thought of the Dixons.

“No, I should tell him. I’m the one that cuffed Merle to that roof, that’s on me.” The newcomer, Rick, who was apparently Lori’s not dead husband, said firmly, shaking his head at T-Dog. Although she wasn’t much inclined to liking him at the moment she had to admit he looked genuinely upset and his eyes were kind.

“He’s just gonna have to deal with it, man, sounds like Merle was out of control and you didn’t have any choice.” Shane clapped one hand to Rick’s back in solidarity, making Amy want to literally start screaming. The way they were all trying to pass this off as anything less than prejudiced nonsense was maddening.

Amy cleared her throat, mostly so she didn’t start screaming, getting the attention of the entire group. When she spoke her voice was deceptively mild. “So you’re telling me that when Daryl gets back you’re going to tell him that you left his brother on a roof to die of heat stroke or be eaten by those god forsaken things, while you all came back to camp, safe and sound, when you had hours of daylight left to double back for him?” She let her eyes drift over the group pointedly, making Glenn drop his eyes and Andrea shift on her feet. “You’re going to tell the man that’s been bringing in half our meat supply that you left his brother, who brought in the other half of our meat supply, behind to die miserably. And then what? Do you expect him to just keep hunting for you like everything in all hunky dory? The Dixons are all well and good when they’re providing you with food but god forbid one of them cause you any trouble! Is that how it’s going to be? Somebody becomes too difficult so they get cuffed to a roof?” Her words were pure acid by this point and she was sure her glare would burn stone she was so god damn mad.

“Amy...” Andrea started but ended up trailing off as her Amy’s glare turned on her.

“Daryl and Merle may be red necks and Merle may be loud and obnoxious but no one deserves to be left behind like that. The fact that Beth was the only one of you that thought Merle deserved better makes me absolutely sick. Merle and Daryl have both more than pulled their weight in this group. They both bring in food on a regular fucking basis and Merle is the only reason Ed isn’t beating on Carol anymore. They keep to their side of camp and they never fucking even question sharing their food with the camp.” Amy firmed her jaw, feeling her eyes sting with angry tears. The sheer injustice of this whole situation was nearly making her shake with frustration. “The fact that you all let fucking prejudice convince you that it was okay to leave a man behind makes me ashamed to even look at you.”

Amy scanned over the group, more than one of them dropping their eyes, refusing to look at her. Rick had his son tucked close with his face pressed to Carl’s hair and Lori was glaring right back at her. Shane met her gaze head on, a forbidding frown on his face and Amy glared for a long moment. Even Dale was frowning at the ground, unable to say anything. No one else seemed to want to say anything and she let the silence settle for a long moment before coming to a decision.

“Daryl will be back from his hunting trip tomorrow. You’re going to draw up a map and then Daryl and I are going back for Beth and Merle.” She said firmly, because there was absolutely no way she was ever going to leave Beth down there. And Merle, he was worth saving. She remembered the look in his eyes when he’d seen the bruises blooming on Beth’s face and she knew that Merle more than deserved to be saved too.

“Amy-“ Andrea protested sharply, stepping towards her.

“No!” Amy cut her sister off sharply, raising a hand to stop Andrea from coming closer.

“Beth is my friend and she deserves someone to come back for her, no matter what. Merle is a human fucking being, he deserves a second chance too.”

“You won’t need a map.” Rick said suddenly, finally looking up from his son with a firm expression on his face. “I cuffed Merle to that roof and it’s my responsibility to get him.”

Amy breathed a sigh of relief, ignoring the arguments that immediately broke out from Shane and Lori. She knew the whole thing would go much smoother with Rick along, who’d already been to the department store. Beth and Merle would both have a better chance, so long as the chain held and they didn’t get heat stroke out in this heat. The trouble would be breaking the news to Daryl. She wasn’t naive and just because she thought the man was attractive didn’t mean she was stupid. She knew Daryl had a temper and she was only hoping that his temper didn’t cause any problems tomorrow.

“Hold on, Beth, we’re coming.” She whispered to herself half-heartedly, looking towards Merle and Daryl’s tent. She could only pray that everything turned out alright in the end.

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Beth checked the apartment for the sixth time, huffing out a sigh as she ended up back in the bedroom, looking out the window into the dimming city street. The door was barricaded and they hadn’t seen a single walker on the way up the fire escape. Nothing was getting in for tonight but still, even as exhausted and sun burnt as she felt, she couldn’t find it in herself to go to sleep. God knows Merle hadn’t had any difficulty falling asleep, not that she could blame him. He’d passed out the moment she’d helped him stretch out across the mattress. But then, she supposed, he really couldn’t help it.

She glanced over her shoulder at his wrist, bandaged thickly with strips from his shirt. He'd lost an ungodly amount of blood, enough to turn even her cast iron stomach, that and whatever kinda withdrawal he was going through. She supposed she should just feel lucky he hadn't passed out on that roof, otherwise they'd have been shit out of luck. He was more than twice her weight and a mass of solid muscle, there was no way she would have been able to get him down off of that roof by herself. Instead in typical Merle fashion he'd gritted his teeth and stubbornly made it down to the street and over several blocks, then up the fire escape to this apartment on the seventh floor all by himself, with only light touches from Beth to guide him. She was actually pretty impressed he'd made it this far, probably through sheer stubborn will.

Rubbing her face wearily, Beth turned her eyes back out on to the street, scanning for anything that caught her eye. The light was dimming quickly now so she couldn't see much but if she squinted she could just make out the department store they'd been on top of. She'd picked this apartment building for that very reason, so she could keep an eye out for Daryl or Amy, because she knew without a doubt they'd both be coming as soon as they found out. From this vantage point she could see the entrance to the department store, where they would be going in, and she had a good view of the street too. If she moved to the back of the apartment she had a pretty fair view of the side alley and the back street too. It was the perfect vantage point for right now. Of course night was falling soon so her visibility was rapidly disappearing.

Staring blindly out at the street, Beth tried to breath slow and deep to calm herself down enough to sleep. There was only one bed in the entire apartment and she knew it was safest to stay in the same room as Merle. So soon she was going to have to set aside her phobias and climb into that bed with him. The very thought made her heart jack rabbit but she sighed and tried to ignore it.

They had two options really. Either stay and wait until Daryl or Amy came back with a ride. Or find some vehicle on their own and make their way back to the quarry. Either way had it's own variety of risks. Merle was going to need water sooner rather than later. She'd found one water bottle in the fridge, but that was it and he'd already drank all of that. And there was no guarantee that Daryl was going to be back from his hunt tomorrow. He'd said it was likely he'd be back tomorrow but she hadn't been sure and he'd said it could even be the day after. So did she risk waiting here with Merle? Or should they find their own way back, hoping that that would be the quicker way to water? Blowing out another breath, Beth shifted uneasily on her aching feet. What to do?

"Stop yer damn huffin' and puffin' over there and git yer purdy little ass in bed." Merle suddenly piped up from the bed, nearly making her leap out of her skin as she whipped to face him, heart pounding. Merle, who she'd thought for sure was dead to the world, was propped up on his elbow, looking at her through glassy eyes. "Ain't gonna be no good to nobody if ya don't git no fuckin' sleep." His accent was thick and heavy with sleep, making his words more gravel than anything.

"I-yeah, you're probably right." Beth grimaced, beginning to tug her hair tie from her hair as she edged around the mattress to the free side. She never could sleep with her hair up. "Guess I'm jus' a little hopped up still, is all."

"Lie yer ass down, Sugar." Merle demanded again, flopping back onto the mattress and throwing one muscled arm over his face to cover his eyes. "Close yer eyes and 'for you know it you'll be nappin'"

Beth hesitated, biting her lip hard as she surveyed the little bit of free space on the mattress. The mattress wasn't the biggest and Merle was a big man, taking up quite a bit of the surface.



She'd be in pretty tight quarters with him and she hadn't been in close quarters with a man since.....well, in quite a damn while. She contemplated the ugly plaid couch out in the living room before dismissing it. Sucking in a breath, Beth shook her head at herself and shucked off her boots and crawling onto the mattress. She left the covers at the end of the bed, more than warm enough in the Georgia heat. Curling up on her side she kept her back to the wall, eyes on Merle. As she lay there she made herself breathe calmly and slowly, eyes tracing over the parts of Merle's face she could see. She could feel his body heat, less than an inch away in some spots, and she focused on his even breaths, allowing them to lull her into a state of semi relaxation.

Thirty minutes later she was still awake, staring into the dark at Merle's face, listening to him breathe. Each blink was longer than the last. She knew right down to her core that Merle had a policy against hurting woman, it was in everything he did. He may say some pretty crude things but he'd never pushed physically, not ever. Just the feel of him, asleep and heavy beside her, made the bad nightmarish memories seem distant. It was a sort of comfort, knowing that Merle would never hurt her and he lay between her and anyone who would, keeping her safe. Finally her eyes remained closed and she focused of the delicious heat Merle radiated, making her body relax muscle by muscle.

When she was fully relaxed, mind drifting into sleep, his voice came out of the dark. A rough gravel that seemed to seem into her mind and follow her down into the dark. "I ain't never gonna hurt ya like that, Sugar Pie, never ever like that."

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