



Protected

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Description: Two years after the world fell apart, I'm entirely alone, a twenty-four-year-old woman scrounging for food and barely surviving. My only choice left is to hook up with a group of roaming scavengers. They're not good people, but it's safer with them than on my own. Deck immediately makes himself my silent protector. He never speaks, but he doesn't have to. He keeps me alive, and I try to communicate with him. We eventually learn to trust each other. The world after Impact is rawer and bleaker than what it used to be, and we've lost most of what made life worth living. But maybe we haven't lost everything. Maybe love still lurks in the ruins.

Protected is a standalone post-apocalyptic romance set in the near future after a global catastrophe and is part of the larger Kindled series world.

Total Pages (Source): 78

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:45 am

1

Year Two after Impact

A caravan of vehicles arrives at the old Walmart late in the day as the sun is sinking low over the hills.

A midsize group. Two Jeeps, three large pickup trucks, and several ATVs of various size and quality. Mostly men.

Never a good sign.

I'm in my normal hiding place across the road. It used to be a Burger King, but the building has completely collapsed. There's one sheltered spot where a piece of the roof fell on top of a larger counter and an overturned refrigerator. It's stable. It hasn't budged even an inch in the year since we discovered it. And amid the rubble of the old building, it's completely out of sight unless you know to look for it.

The spot offers the perfect view of the Walmart, which is the most tempting target for travelers for miles in all directions.

Everything worthwhile in the store has already been looted. Last year, Hal and I spent four days digging out all the remaining canned food. But the building is in relatively good shape for being abandoned after Impact, so everyone passing through thinks there might still be worthwhile provisions to scavenge there.

That's their mistake.

A man in the Jeep at the front of the caravan steps out and starts calling out orders to the others. He's got brown hair with gray in it, pulled back at the nape of his neck. He appears competent and mature—not bad to look at—and younger than the gray in his hair would indicate. He's not huge or intimidating, but there's something about him that makes me hesitate.

Like it's a bad idea to cross him.

There are about twenty men and only four women, but the women aren't captives. One is driving a pickup, one is on an ATV, and the other two are armed with similar weaponry as the men.

Trying to get the feel of this group, I watch a mountain of a man climb out of the bed of one of the pickups. He was standing up as they drove, a rifle at the ready, but now he has it strapped to his back. Physically he's probably the strongest of the group. He's wearing a T-shirt with a sweat spot on the back and army-green cargo pants. He looks kind of like Bigfoot joined the Army with his untrimmed hair and long, full beard.

When he approaches one of the women, I tense up, watching carefully. But all he does is lean over to pick up the gun cartridge she dropped and hand it back to her.

I let out a breath.

If the strongest man in the group behaves himself with the women, then it's worth the risk.

I wait in my hiding place, growing still when Bigfoot scans my rubble. He can't see me from where he's standing, but it makes me nervous anyway.

He finally turns away, so I relax again.

The group spreads out to search the ravaged discount store, leaving only one guy to guard the vehicles. He's up at the front, and my target is the Jeep at the back. It looks like it's stocked full of supplies.

I move carefully through the ruins of the Burger King, making sure not to draw attention to myself. When the guard turns his back, I run from the rubble to the Jeep, silent and as fast as my (short) legs will carry me.

When Hal was alive, he never would have let me take such a risk. But he died four months ago from what I assume was food poisoning, and I'm entirely alone now.

It's been a full week since anyone passed this way, and all I've had to eat in six days is a can of baked beans—one of the few cans remaining from our stockpile.

I need to get my hands on more food, or I'll starve.

I'm small, both short and thin, but I know what I'm doing. I'm fast and nimble, and I've climbed into the back of the Jeep before the guard even turns his head.

As I hoped, the rear of this vehicle is filled with crates full of provisions. I grab some packages of beef jerky and stuff them into my bag, one of my mom's old ones with a drawstring closure that has managed to survive two years of rough usage, followed quickly by some cans of tuna and creamed corn.

I'd like to do some more searching. Some of these other crates might hold even greater treasures, but time is an issue here, and the delay is not worth the risk. I pull the drawstring and hook the bag on my shoulder as I climb out of the Jeep.

Just as I've turned to run back to my hiding place, I'm grabbed from behind by an arm like a tree trunk. It lifts me all the way off my feet.

It's Bigfoot. I know it even though he's holding me in a position where I can't tilt my head high enough to see his face.

He has both my arms trapped by one of his huge ones, but my legs are free. I kick out instinctively, flailing for all I'm worth in the vague hope of accidentally landing my heel somewhere that hurts him.

I don't. I'm entirely helpless, lifted off my feet and unable to do more than writhe futilely. I haven't felt such perfect desperation since the months around Impact, huddled with Hal as our neighborhood, our town, our region, the country, and the world crumbled irrevocably into chaos around us.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:45 am

When the asteroid approaching our planet was first announced, I had parents, a little brother, friends, a boyfriend, and a community I was born into to worry about, to fight for.

Now I have nothing worth protecting. Except myself.

No matter how much I've lost, I still matter to me. My body. My heart. My selfhood. I care about what happens to me, and I've fought too hard for too long simply to stay alive. I need to get away from this man and this group of dangerous strangers, and I need to do it right now.

But there's absolutely nothing I'm capable of doing to make that happen.

I let out a loud, infuriated sound as I keep flailing.

"Deck!" The voice comes from the older man in charge. "Is she alone?"

Bigfoot—maybe named Deck—sets me down on my feet, keeping one big hand on my right shoulder. I jerk out of his grip, but he scowls and grabs me again, this time by the back of my shirt, an oversized blue Henley that used to be Hal's.

I could pull away again, but it would rip my shirt to shreds. And it's one of the only three shirts I own that are still wearable.

"Who are you?" The leader again. He's walked over to stand right in front of me and Bigfoot.

I stare at him without answering. There's no telling how he expects me to answer that question.

He moves his eyes to the man holding me. "What did she take?"

Bigfoot grabs for my bag. I resist—it's a silly, futile gesture but one I can't help making—until he scowls again and yanks the strap of the bag from my grip. He rifles through it, showing the other guy the jerky and tuna I snatched from their Jeep.

The older man gives me a sharp look before he focuses on Bigfoot. "There's nothing else in there?"

Bigfoot searches the bag once more and then shakes his head. He's clearly not much of a talker.

"Are you hungry?" the first man asks me.

"What do you think?" Strategically, I know I should play nice, but I've long since lost that ability. This world hasn't been kind to me. I'm not inclined to be kind back.

"Are you alone?"

"Of course not." That's a lie, but a woman alone is entirely vulnerable. If he thinks I have people lurking around somewhere, he might hesitate.

"What's your name?"

I give him that stony glare again.

"Tell me." He's not loud. Or angry. He's entirely in control of himself—just as he's in control of this group. It's some sort of innate authority rather than physical force.

Half the men who have surrounded us are bigger than him.

There are too many of them. And Bigfoot has moved his grip to my hair. I wear it in a braided ponytail to keep it out of my way, and that makes it easy for him to wrap his fingers around.

I might be always angry now, but I'm not utterly without basic sense. Complying is my only option if I want to survive until tomorrow. "Lilah."

"Lilah. You live around here?"

I nod. It's true and it's the only thing to say.

"And you're not alone?"

"I'm not alone."

The man scans our surroundings with those sharp, intelligent eyes. Then he asks Bigfoot, "Where did she come from?"

The man holding me gestures toward the ruins of the fast-food restaurant. There's no way he could have known my hiding place unless he was watching me the whole time.

Somehow that makes it worse.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:45 am

“Show me.”

I’m not sure whether he’s speaking to me or to Bigfoot, but the large man strides toward the rubble, hauling me with him by my hair.

He finds my little den so quickly it’s obvious he saw me sneak out of it.

The main man leans over to look inside. There’s nothing much there. A couple of old blankets and towels. The threadbare remnants of my wardrobe. And the few cans of food I’ve been living off for a month.

He straightens up, looking between me and my hiding spot for a minute. Obviously thinking.

“You’re not alone?” he asks at last.

“No. I told you.”

He mulls it over for another minute. Then he gives Bigfoot a nod.

I have no idea what it means, but the guy holding me obviously does. He pulls a gun out of the holster on his hip, clicks off the safety, and aims it at my head.

The wave of fear that hits me is so powerful I almost vomit. I sway slightly on my feet.

Bigfoot notices and grabs me by the waist with his free arm, holding me up.

“If anyone is out there,” the man in charge calls out, his voice loud and echoing in the gray, barren landscape, “come out now or she dies.”

In different circumstances, I would like the sound of his voice. It’s clear and resonant. He sounds educated—with a slight accent that reminds me of my college roommate who came from rural Missouri.

When nothing happens, he calls out again. “One more minute, and she dies.”

Ironic that this is how it ends for me, after scrabbling to survive for two years and watching all my friends and family die, one by one.

He waits the minute and then looks back at me. “Okay.”

I don’t know what that means, but the man holding the gun to my head clearly does. He holsters it again without a word.

The one in charge continues, “You are either alone or you’re with people who don’t give a damn about you. Either way, you’ll be better off with us.”

“What?” I almost choke on the word, so surprised am I.

“You can stay here. On your own or with people who will let you die. Or you can come with us.”

“Come with you how?”

“Like everyone else who joins up with us. If you’ve stayed alive this long, you’re obviously capable. You’ll contribute in any way you can.”

“I’m not going to fuck you. Or any of the rest of them.”

“You won’t be asked or expected to. Not with my people.”

For some reason, I believe him, although in the hellscape this world has become, it’s implausible that a woman joining a group of so many men wouldn’t be expected or forced to offer herself sexually.

I’m not particularly beautiful or sexy, but I had a decent amount of male attention in high school and college. I have long, straight, dark hair, tan skin, and hazel eyes. I’ve always been smaller than average, but I used to have noticeable curves at the hips and breasts. But those were the first things to go when food got scarce, so now I’m pretty scrawny.

Hal didn’t care. We’re from the same hometown but only got together in college. We stayed together until he died a few months ago. He always said I’m beautiful and acted as though he believed it. But that was because he loved me.

A stranger isn’t likely to find much about me that’s appealing at the moment, but that doesn’t matter. A lot of men now will take a woman—no matter her age or appearance—simply because he can.

“You can ask Burgundy.” The main man nods toward a very pretty woman who appears around my age. She’s standing next to a man who looks enough like her that he’s got to be her brother. She meets my eyes and nods.

If it wasn’t for that one gesture, I’m not sure what I would do. It’s a risk. Such a huge risk. I’ve survived this long on my own. I could probably manage to keep doing it.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:45 am

But I'm constantly scared. Constantly angry. Constantly hungry. And I don't want to stay that way for the rest of my life.

Hooking up with this group might not be any better, but it's not likely to be much worse.

And at least it will be different.

I lick my dry lips. "Okay. I'll help however I can, but I'm not fucking anyone."

"Understood. I'm Logan. You can meet the rest of us along the way."

I tug on my braid, but Bigfoot won't loosen his grip.

"Let her go, Deck," Logan says in a crisp tone.

Bigfoot—definitely named Deck—finally lets me go. I whirl around to face him, and we scowl at each other.

He's manhandled me, lifted me off my feet, grabbed my shirt, grabbed my braid, and held a gun to my head. I don't like him at all, and I hope I won't have to exist in close quarters with him.

Without a word, he moves to the back of the Jeep and returns the food I stole to its place. Then he returns and thrusts my bag at me, still scowling slightly.

I take it since it's one of my few remaining possessions. "You don't have to be an

asshole about it.”

He just scowls some more.

“Deck doesn’t speak,” Logan says, evidently noticing the brief byplay.

“What?” I look from Deck to Logan and back. “What do you mean?”

“He doesn’t speak. At all.”

I had a cousin who was deaf, so I learned enough American Sign Language to communicate with her. Without thinking, I sign and mouth out the words, “Are you deaf?” to Deck.

His scowl lessens, and he gives his head a brief shake.

“He can hear,” Logan tells me. “He just doesn’t speak. He used to. He worked for me before Impact. But he hasn’t said a word in almost two years. If you get nervous, stick close to him. He’ll take care of you.”

I’m wise enough not to say so, but that’s definitely not going to happen. I’m curious about Deck now. I want to know what job he used to perform for Logan. I want to know why he stopped speaking. I want to know if it’s an emotional block or if it’s an intentional choice.

But I still don’t like him, and I don’t trust him. I’m definitely not going to cling to his shirttails no matter how scared I get.

“Grab any of your stuff you want. We’re heading out in five minutes.” Logan speaks the last sentence loudly, evidently as a warning to the whole group.

I duck into my hiding spot and put my clothes in my bag with the remaining cans of food and the least worn blanket and towel. Then I straighten up, jerking in surprise when I discover Deck is standing right behind me.

“Why are you hovering like that?” I snap before I remember I really need to start playing nice if I’m going to make a place for myself in this group.

Deck isn’t scowling now, but his expression is utterly sober beneath his beard. He nods toward Logan, who is standing next to the front Jeep and having a discussion with Burgundy and the man I assume is her brother.

“You’ve got to be kidding,” I mumble, instinctively understanding the small gesture as clearly as if he spoke words. “Logan told you to watch out for me, didn’t he?”

Deck inclines his head in a nod. He’s got brown eyes—lighter than the brown eyes I normally see.

“I don’t need watching out for. I can take care of myself.”

He shrugs, his body and his expression completely unmoving.

I let out a sigh that comes out almost as a groan. “Fine. You do what you have to do. But give me a little space, okay? I don’t like being crowded.”

He takes one small step backward. Then gives me a speaking look, cocking his head just slightly.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:45 am

I almost—almost—laugh.

“Great.” I hook the strap of my bag on one shoulder and start walking toward the line of vehicles. “What the hell have I gotten myself into?”

Deck ignores the question, exactly as I expected. He gives me a little push to get me moving faster. When he lowers the tailgate of the truck and waves me in, I climb up obediently, moving out of the way when he steps up after me and moves into the guarding position he was in when the caravan stopped.

After a minute, Burgundy and her brother end their conversation with Logan and climb into the back of the pickup with me and Deck.

Burgundy gives me a little smile and lowers herself to a kneeling position in one corner. I do the same since it appears much more secure than trying to stand in a moving vehicle like Deck.

It doesn't take long before Logan's Jeep at the front of the line starts moving.

And that's it. I'm leaving behind the Walmart, my hiding place, and the life I had before.

2

We've been driving for a few minutes—fairly slowly, it's not difficult to keep my balance—when Burgundy catches my eye. “You're Lilah?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m Burgundy. And that’s my brother, Micah.” She gestures to the big, pleasant-looking man who’s positioned near the cab beside Deck.

Micah gives me a brief, two-fingered salute, but his focus is obviously on our surroundings. He and Deck are both fully on guard, searching for threats.

As far as I can see, we’re the only people for miles around, but I understand the instinct to be wary. No one without that instinct would have stayed alive this long after Impact.

Violence erupted all over the country immediately following the announcement about the asteroid’s impending approach more than two years ago. At first theriots and looting were limited, occurring primarily in large cities and halfway contained by law enforcement and the national guard.

After I was sent home from college, my family and I would watch the chaos on the news every evening. My mother got real quiet, and my father tried to reassure us that things like that happened in cities but not in small towns like ours. People in our region of western Tennessee emptied stores of their stock of toilet paper and started buying more guns, but we all assumed we’d never have to deal with the same kind of violence as the big cities.

We were wrong. Of course we were wrong. People are people no matter where they live. And when they get scared, some will get mean.

A local militia group had always been holed up about thirty miles from our town. They were small and weird and isolated, and no one paid much attention to them. In the first month after the asteroid was announced, they tripled in size. And by the second month after Impact, they started raiding.

After they attacked and wiped out a nearby discount store distribution center, more people joined up with them. Those who opposed them—including my parents and seventeen-year-old brother who all took their hunting rifles to help defend the borders of our town—were killed. Hal's family lived two blocks from mine. He went to defend the town too and barely got away. He came to find me.

Hal and I stuffed whatever food and supplies we could fit into our backpacks and ran into the woods that bordered my family's property just in time to avoid the group of militia who were hitting and looting every house on our street.

We ran and kept running.

For a full year we ran, squatting in any shelter we could find, scavenging food from abandoned houses, stores, and restaurants, and defending ourselves primarily by staying out of sight.

The main highways were too dangerous to risk traveling on, full of roving gangs and even larger groups that people called droves, so we stuck to hiking trails and back roads. Last year, when travel of any kind became too treacherous, we found the Walmart and stayed, scraping by on the remainder of our scavenged food and anything we could sneak from groups moving through the area.

It wasn't much, but it was a life. There were some good times amid the bad.

But that life ended when Hal died, and all that's left for me is this.

"How old are you?" Burgundy asks. When I hesitate, she adds, "I'm twenty-two."

"I'm twenty-four." I glance up toward Deck for some reason, but he's not paying any attention to me.

“Were you in college?”

I know exactly what she’s asking. “Yeah. Second semester of my senior year. I was almost done.”

“I was in college too. Majoring in education.” She gives a wry huff. “I wanted to be a first-grade teacher.”

It’s a poignant, bittersweet thought. A future that died with everything else.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:45 am

I know the feeling.

“I was in prelaw. I was going to be a lawyer.” This time when I feel someone looking at me, I turn my head quickly and catch Deck’s eyes moving back to the hills on the horizon. “Oh well. Now we’re this.”

Burgundy smiles. She’s remarkably sweet. The smile goes all the way to her eyes. “Yes. Now we’re this. Oh wait. Micah has a gun for you. Logan said you’d need one.”

Thus summoned, Micah lowers his rifle and pulls a small pistol out of an ankle holster beneath the leg of his jeans.

He smiles at me—warm but not as sweet as his sister—and says, “Like this.” He shows me how to insert the magazine, take the safety off, and pull the trigger.

I’ve used guns before—mostly Hal’s hunting rifle, which was the only weapon we had until it fell as we were crossing a river—but I’m not any sort of expert. I’ve survived by being smart and safe. Not by fighting or killing anyone.

I’ve never killed anyone, and I hope to never be forced to.

But using the gun is clearly necessary in this group, so I don’t hesitate. I practice a few times until I get the hang of loading it, and then I aim at passing trees to make sure I can handle it.

I don’t pull the trigger. One thing no one ever does anymore is waste ammunition.

When I glance back, I see all three of them watching me. Micah gives me a quick, approving nod, and Deck levels a sober stare at me before he turns away.

Burgundy smiles. "You're going to do fine," she tells me.

I don't know if that's true, but it's still nice to hear.

By my best guess, considering the number of vehicles in the caravan and the poor condition of the roadway, we only average about twenty-five miles an hour for the rest of the afternoon.

We drive a few hours and pass a couple of abandoned buildings that are quickly checked and dismissed as scavenging targets, and the only sign of living people we encounter is a farm in the distance.

It's a relatively small farm with a makeshift wall around it and guards at the gate. In the fields, they're clearly attempting to grow fruits, vegetables, and grains despite the layer of dust in the sky thrown up by the asteroid impact that is still affecting climate and sunlight two years later.

My stomach clenches as Logan's vehicle slows down in front of the turnoff toward the farm. There are clearly people living there. Trying to survive. Yes, they likely have food and provisions, but that doesn't mean they're ours to loot.

I don't want to be part of a group who would do that to people who have done us no harm.

I blow out a long sigh when Logan makes a waving gesture out of his window, clearly indicating that we're to move on. We aren't going to hit that farm.

Whether it's because the people there are innocent or because it's too well guarded to

risk, I still don't know.

Otherwise the afternoon passes uneventfully. Burgundy occasionally initiates a short chat, but our focus is supposed to be on guarding, so the conversations aren't too deep or too long. I keep rearranging to find a comfortable position where I can have a line of sight but not have to brace myself tensely to keep from falling over at every bump and turn of the truck.

I'm exhausted, sore from the tension, and slightly queasy when we come upon an old shopping center. It's not very large—none of the retailers in this rural region were—and it's been abandoned like everything else around. The grocery store and drugstore have already been pillaged. Nothing worthwhile remains. But there's gas in the underground tanks at the gas station.

I've gotten out to stretch my legs like everyone else, and I watch with interest as several of the others efficiently pry open the tanks and use commercial-grade siphon pumps to draw out all the gasoline into the large transfer tanks in the back of each pickup.

This is clearly how they operate. They travel only to find new sources of food, supplies, and fuel, and they stop to scavenge whenever they encounter a possible target. Hal and I saw many such groups pass through by the Walmart. At least Logan and his group don't kill or assault everyone they meet like some do.

It's fine with me to survive by scavenging. It's basically what Hal and I were doing but on a larger scale.

One of the men I haven't met calls out while they're finishing with the gas, summoning us over to his discovery.

He found a furniture showroom with one side of the building collapsed but the other

side intact and barely pillaged. Chairs and tables and made-up beds are still in position with only two years of nature creeping in to damage them.

We decide to stay there for the night.

It's disorienting to be around so many strangers in unknown circumstances after being on my own for so long, but it's also weirdly exciting. I watch wide-eyed as a few of them circle couches and easy chairs around a large grill in which one of the guys makes a small fire to heat up our dinner.

Our meal consists of a stew made of canned soup, canned meat, and a variety of additional seasonings they have in their stockpile. It smells incredibly good to me, but I'm nervous about taking one of the comfortable chairs. I'm new here, and I don't want to look pushy or entitled.

So I wait until everyone has sat down except the four men posted as guards and Deck, who is lurking in the background.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:45 am

Then I go over to take a seat on the edge of a bench near Micah and Burgundy.

I accept my bowl of warm stew happily and start digging in like everyone else. It tastes better than anything I've put in my mouth for at least a year.

I eat as much as I can, but my stomach has shrunk from deprivation. I can only get down half. I glance around when I'm done and see Deck still hovering behind me. Standing instead of sitting like everyone else. He's already finished his bowl, so I pass him the remainder of mine.

He's so huge he probably needs extra food.

He stares at me gravely but accepts the offer and starts spooning out the stew immediately.

Logan is on the opposite side of the circle of seats from me. I notice him watching me with a thoughtful expression.

It makes me self-conscious. I'd rather no one look at me. I'd prefer to fade into the background.

I'm about to get up to move out of sight when one of the several faceless men I haven't made note of yet comes over and sits on the bench beside me.

He's an average-looking man. Suntanned skin, regular features, and a lean, wiry body. He's also got bad breath, body odor, and long, greasy hair. "I'm Pete," he says, leaning toward me closer than is entirely necessary. "Welcome to the group."

“Lilah,” I say, making an attempt to be polite even though I want to shrink away. Not just because of his odor but because he immediately creeps me out.

Everyone smells more than they used to. Daily showers are impossible. Hal and I used to wash in the creek, but we didn’t have any soap or shampoo. No one wears deodorant. If you’re lucky, you’re able to do a quick washup in the morning and evening.

But not everyone smells this bad.

I’m new, and I don’t want anyone to think badly of me. I fight against a wave of nausea and make an attempt at a smile.

“You’re awful pretty,” the man says, getting smarmier by the second. “How did you make it this far without a man?”

“I had one. He died.”

“Too bad for him.”

Maybe he intends the words to sound sympathetic, but they’re more like a slap in the face. I stiffen. Wish with everything inside me that Hal was here right now.

“I’ll be your man now,” Pete says, leaning toward me again. “I like ’em little and pretty like you.”

Trying not to gag, I edge away from him and say, “I’m okay. Thank you anyway.”

Pete opens his mouth to reply but never gets the chance. Deck has come around the bench with my now nearly empty bowl of stew and sits down between me and Pete.

Literally sits down. In a space way too small for his big body to fit. If Pete didn't slide to the opposite side of the bench, Deck would have landed right on top of him.

Deck doesn't even glance at Pete. Just scrapes the bottom of the bowl with his spoon to get the final bite.

"Way to be the third wheel, man," Pete whines. "I was working something here."

Deck ignores him. So do I.

So eventually Pete gets up to leave.

3

When dinner is over, I volunteer to help clean the dishes because it's one task I'm capable of contributing. Everyone is claiming beds in the showroom for the night. As with the chairs, I wait until everyone else picks what they want before I choose the bottom of a child's bunk bed. It was originally displayed next to another set of bunks that have now collapsed, so the bed I choose is mostly blocked from the rest of the room. There's enough space for me to slip into it, and it feels as closed off as my old den.

Before I lie down, I head outside to go to the bathroom and use some rainwater collected in an empty planter to wash up with. I have to move farther away from the group than I'd prefer to get some privacy. A lot of the men don't care if they pee in sight of each other, but I'm not about to do that.

It's getting dark by the time I return inside and climb into my bunk.

Because I'm not exposed there, I change out of my jeans and into a pair of tissue-thin leggings and one of Hal's big T-shirts. It's more comfortable. I hate sleeping in my

jeans.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:45 am

I'm curling up on my side and trying to relax when the bed shifts. Someone has climbed onto the top bunk.

I stick out my head to see that it's Deck.

He eyes me as he unhooks his belt and holsters.

"I'm sure Logan didn't mean you have to attach yourself to me every single minute," I tell him. "It will be fine for you to sleep over there somewhere." I gesture toward the other side of the showroom where more of the men are settled.

Deck doesn't answer. He also doesn't move.

With a loud sigh, I pull myself back into my bunk.

It doesn't matter. He can sleep up there if he wants. Even if he snores, I'm so tired it probably won't bother me. Logan told him to look out for me, and that's what he's doing.

He doesn't care that I don't really want him to.

I wake up in the middle of the night.

Hal and I figured out how to tell the general time by the night sky, but I have no view of it when I open my eyes. It takes me longer than it should to remember where I am and what I'm doing in a real bed with real covers.

By the time I figure it out, I'm also conscious of one other thing.

I really need to pee.

Getting up at this time of night wouldn't be my first option. I don't want to wake anyone else. I don't want to go outside alone. I don't want anyone to notice me. Maybe I won't have to. After all, it might be close to morning, in which case I'd only have a little while to wait.

So I lie in place for several minutes until I can't think of anything except peeing. Then I finally crawl out of my bed, careful not to make any noise.

Deck is asleep in the top bunk. I know because I squint through the dark to see. His big body is stretched out on top of the covers. He's still wearing all his clothes except his shoes and his belt. And his breathing is slow and even.

I turn away, tiptoeing through the closely positioned furniture and avoiding the area where the others are sleeping.

I go out one of the exits—it used to be a door but is now just an opening—and duck behind an overturned van to crouch and pee.

It only takes a minute.

Toilet paper is a luxury I've long since lost, so I do my normal shake-off before I pull up my leggings.

I step out from around the van and run smack into Pete.

I know it's Pete because of the smell, even before I jerk backward. I did bring my pistol with me—I'm not entirely without sense—but I'm so surprised it takes me too

long to move it into position.

He's on me before I can react at all. He obviously followed me because he's not surprised like I am. He was lying in wait.

He takes the pistol from my hand and tosses it aside, and then he grabs me and turns me around, pushing my face against the back hatch of the van.

I'm too shocked to scream. To do anything. He yanks the waistband of my leggings and pulls so hard he rips them. He holds me in place by one hand on the back of my neck as he mutters, "Time for you to learn what a real man feels like."

It's sickening. Horrifying. Everything inside me is screaming to fight—lash out, get away—but I'm trapped in a weird, terrified trance. And I can't do anything.

Except wonder if this is really happening because it's all so sudden and surreal.

I know—I know, I know—what to expect now. But what happens next isn't that.

I sense a rush of motion. Maybe running feet on pavement. Then Pete is suddenly jerked away from me. When I whirl around, I see why.

It's Deck. He's pulled Pete off me and thrown him several feet away. Thrown him. The greasy man has landed in a messy heap on the cracked pavement of the old parking lot.

I have the sense to make a dash for my gun as Deck goes after Pete again, hauling him up by the front of his shirt only so he can land a powerful punch.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:45 am

Down Pete goes again, moaning and crying as he collapses.

It's hard to watch what follows. It's hardly a fight. Deck has complete control of the situation, and he's showing Pete no mercy.

He's making no sound. He doesn't even appear particularly angry. Just fierce. Primal.

"Deck!" The one word sounds clear and sharp from the direction of the furniture store.

What happens next is also astonishing.

Breathtaking.

Deck stops mid-punch. Then he steps back, shaking out his hands at his sides like someone might do to restore feeling into them.

I've seen men do all kinds of things since Impact that would have been unbelievable to the person I was before. Men who might have appeared and acted basically decent in the old world of social and legal restraints on behavior have turned into near animals now that nothing is holding them back from taking what they want.

In the ugly reality remaining, never would I have believed a man in Deck's fierce state was capable of controlling himself so instantly. So completely.

Deck turns toward Logan with a scowl and gestures toward me.

“I can see what he was trying to do,” Logan says crisply, approaching with his smooth, efficient stride. He’s replying as if Deck spoke aloud. “I know he deserves it. But he’s one of us.” He pauses, holding Deck’s eyes. “You don’t carry that. I do.”

More of the group have come outside to see what’s happening. It must be close to dawn anyway. There’s a faint light at the horizon in the distance.

Without another word, Logan reaches down and lifts Pete to his feet, forcing him to stumble back behind the van where I peed earlier.

In only a few seconds, a loud gunshot sounds through the crumbling shopping center and night air.

Logan returns from behind the van alone. He glances around at the men who’ve gathered. “We don’t do that. Ever. We’re humans. Not animals.” He meets my eyes and speaks in a lower voice. “It won’t happen again.”

I nod to show I understand. I’m completely incapable of speaking. I’ve started to shake. Too much has happened in only a few minutes of time. The queasiness that has been bothering me on and off for hours now returns with full force.

Logan has a light spatter of blood on his face. He wipes it off with the back of his forearm as he turns and walks into the building.

The others follow him. All of them except Deck.

I try to make myself move but can’t. After a minute. I collapse like a dropped marionette and vomit onto the broken pavement.

Deck stands there, watching.

After I finish, I sit for a minute and breathe deeply to compose myself. Then I get up, pulling down my long T-shirt to make sure it covers my butt.

My leggings are hopelessly ripped.

Deck doesn't speak and doesn't gesture. He just waits until I start walking and follows me back inside.

We start off an hour later just as the sun is edging above the horizon.

The morning goes a lot like the previous afternoon. I'm in the back of the truck with Deck, Burgundy, and Micah, and we stop a couple of times when we see an abandoned home or building to search.

Right around noon, we halt for a light lunch of tuna on a weird kind of brown bread.

When the group scatters after eating, I look to Burgundy for an explanation. "We always get an hour or so to rest after lunch unless we're on guard duty. I'm on guard today. Logan doesn't ask the women to take the guard positions at night. He's never said why, but I assume it's so no one is tempted to do what Pete tried to do last night. He has us take the lunchtime shifts. I'm sure he'll assign you similarly once you get used to things. I better get going."

"Oh. Okay." I watch her walk to her position at the perimeter of our camp. Then I look around to see what I should do now.

Everyone is minding their own business except Deck, who is predictably minding mine. He's standing nearby. Obviously waiting to see what I'll do.

I give him a shrug.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:45 am

He makes a summoning gesture with his hand and then turns, assuming I'll follow him. A little part of me wants to rebel, but I'm still worried about getting on the wrong side of these people and Deck helped me out big-time last night. I go with him to a quiet spot blocked by trees.

He holds up a finger—not like he's shushing me but like he's indicating the number one—and then he carefully moves my body so I'm facing a tree.

I'm more confused than scared, so I look back at him.

He makes that gesture with his finger again. Then reaches down to lift one of my feet, angling it so the flat of my foot is near his crotch.

I understand.

He's showing me one thing I can do if a man grabs me like Pete did last night.

I don't ever want to feel like that again. Like I'm completely at the mercy of anyone who grabs me. For no other reason than I'm small and too stunned to react or fight back. So when Deck taps my thigh, I kick back the way he showed me.

He nods his approval. Then lifts two fingers to signal he's showing me a second possible move.

He's got six moves to teach me. We spend the rest of our lunch break practicing them.

I wake up the following morning when something nudges my leg.

I grumble. Who wouldn't? My sleep might not be peaceful—it's been tense and fraught for the past two years—but it's still sleep. And I'm not ready to wake up yet.

More nudging.

Opening my eyelids enough to squint, I glare up at the nudger.

Deck.

Predictable.

He's standing above me, as shaggy and unkempt as ever. Most of his features are covered by his long brown beard and the hair hanging around his face, but his eyes are clearly visible. Peering at me impatiently.

I scowl.

He scowls back.

Irrationally amused by our interaction, I hide it as I sit up, pulling my leg away from his big, well-worn hiking boot.

I had to sleep in my jeans last night with my loose T-shirt. We traveled all afternoon, stopping occasionally to search for supplies, but as the sun was setting, there were no nearby buildings or structures to spend the night in. So we camped outside in a clearing near a creek, and I slept on the ground like everyone else.

It's not new for me. It's how Hal and I were sleeping for at least a year. But without something over my head like in the den, I was anxious and exposed. And it's weird to have so many people around.

I stretch out my back. Glance around to see that everyone else is already awake and getting ready for the day.

Jumping to my feet quickly, I say, "I slept too late."

Deck frowns and shakes his head, using a finger to make the symbol for one.

"One minute?"

He shakes his head again, still holding up the one finger.

"One hour?"

He nods.

"Okay. Good. Then I've got plenty of time to get ready." I wince when a roll of one shoulder provokes a stab of pain. I crane my neck to peer at my back and catch a glimpse of blood on my shirt.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:45 am

Damn it. If there's too much blood, it will ruin another one of my few pieces of clothing.

Deck sucks in an audible breath and takes me by my uninjured shoulder to turn me around so he can see.

I jerk away. "It's fine! I fell on it the other night with Pete. It scratched up the skin and there's a bruise. But it's not serious. The scratches must have broken open again and started bleeding."

He keeps trying to get a better look, and I continue resisting. The skirmish ends when I make a loud, frustrated sound and take several quick steps away from him. "I said no."

Once again, I'm reminded that I really should be playing nice. I'm completely dependent on these people, and if they decide I'm too much trouble, I'll be left alone and unprotected again.

Plus Deck has helped me. More than once. He rescued me the other night.

But there's this twisting tension inside me, pressing out against the edges of my being. I can never unleash it for real, but the pressure nags at me constantly.

It makes me want to snap at anyone who gets too close, and right now that's Deck.

He takes a few deep breaths through his nose and glares, obviously annoyed. Then, to my relief, he walks away.

I find a convenient tree to do what I need to do, and then I sit down on my blanket to comb out my hair and put on my shoes. I've got an old sports bra—stretched thin from years of use—and I manage to maneuver myself into it without fully taking off my big T-shirt. No one is looking at me, but still... I'm not going to go around in my underwear like some of the men do.

“Hey.”

I look up to see Burgundy smiling at me. “Hi.”

She's holding a small plastic box. “Do you have an injury that needs treating?”

With a gasp, I shoot my eyes over to land unerringly on Deck, who is leaning against a nearby tree, trying futilely to appear innocent.

“I'm fine.”

“I'm sure you are. But Deck thrust this first aid kit at me and pointed at you quite insistently, so we either need to take care of the issue or deal with Deck. And let me tell you, that man is as stubborn as a mule.”

“I believe it.” I get up with a sigh. “Fine. But I'm not going to take off my shirt in front of everyone.”

“We can go a little farther up the creek where there's no one around.” Burgundy smiles.

She's as unfazed by my bad temper as Deck is, but in a sweet way rather than an obstinate way. I follow her to the creek bank where several people—including Logan—are washing up. Then we keep going until no one else is in sight.

“Is it safe this far out?” I ask when Burgundy sits down on a rock.

“It is with our watchdog on guard.”

I jerk my head in the direction she motions and see Deck standing a distance away with his rifle, his back toward us.

He obviously can’t see my expression, but I roll my eyes at him anyway.

“Logan told him to watch out for you,” Burgundy murmurs, “so he’s going to do it no matter what.”

“I know. I know I should be grateful. He really saved me the other night. Big time. But...” That twisty tension rises up again, this time pushing into my throat. I lower myself to the ground beside Burgundy.

“But what?” She sounds genuinely curious as she pulls scavenged bandages and antiseptic wipes out of the first aid kit.

I pull my T-shirt off so she can get to the scratches on the back of my shoulder. “But it makes me feel even more helpless. I know I am—I am helpless—but I like to at least pretend I’m not.”

“You’re not helpless. I understood you survived entirely on your own for months ever since your boyfriend died. Hal, right?”

“Yes. Hal. And I did make it on my own, but I only made it by hiding most of the time.”

“Hiding is smart if you can’t fight. Hiding isn’t helpless.”

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:45 am

“Maybe. But—” I gasp when she touches the raw scratches on my skin with a wipe. “But it doesn’t feel like it. And I wish I could...”

“You wish you could what?”

“I wish I could...” I’m not going to answer. There’s no reason to answer. I hardly know this woman, and everyone who has ever loved me—everyone I ever trusted—is dead. Ripped away from me violently and far too soon. But I hear myself saying, “I wish I could really fight back.”

“You can. You were kicking out at Deck when he grabbed you from the Jeep.”

“Yeah. I guess. I thought that’s what I would do in a dangerous situation. But when Pete came after me, I... I couldn’t do anything.”

“That’s not your fault. He was bigger than you.”

“But I still could have done something. I don’t know what happened. I froze.” I lower my voice slightly, suddenly worried that Deck might be able to hear. “I froze. I never thought I would do that. It’s like everything inside me that was screaming to resist was... was trapped. Bottled up inside me. It was... terrible.”

“It sounds terrible. But whatever your reaction, you’re not to blame for it. You know that, right?”

“I know it rationally. And I’m not blaming myself for what he did. I’m glad Logan shot him. He deserved to die. I just thought I would react differently. I’m always so

angry at everything. I thought it would all come out at a time like that, but it didn't. It makes it worse somehow."

I was never a particularly reserved or guarded person until Impact, but since then I've withdrawn into myself. So many other people have done the same. Sharing oneself intimately requires a measure of safety, and that's one of the things we lost when the asteroid hit. I honestly can't believe I admitted something so vulnerable to Burgundy, who is nice but still mostly a stranger.

"I don't know much about it," she says slowly, still carefully cleaning off my scratches and the surrounding skin. "But I do know that sometimes—at least in my experience—some feelings are too strong to let out. Because if you let them out, they'll overwhelm everything. They're too powerful. They'll be dangerous. So maybe it's like that?"

I think about what she said as I stare at an empty spot in the morning air. Then I say, "Yeah. Maybe it's like that."

We sit in silence as she works for a minute. Then I try to lighten the mood by asking randomly, "What did Logan do before Impact?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, what was his job? He said that Deck worked for him?"

"Oh. Oh yeah. He owned a construction company in Saint Louis."

"Really?" I stare at an empty spot in the morning air, trying to imagine the Logan I know with a job like that. He took Pete behind the van the other night and shot him without even a moment's hesitation. The violent act appeared to have no effect on him at all other than the spattering of blood left on his face. It's hard to picture him as

a regular man in the old world—one who worked a regular job and came home to a normal house to eat dinner and scroll on his phone.

“Yeah. He was super successful. He’s one of those people who is good at anything he tries. And everyone who worked for him loved him. Deck ran one of his crews. Micah worked for him too.”

“Micah did too? So y’all have known Logan for a while then?”

“Micah started working for him when he was eighteen. I never really knew him well until after everything fell apart. Micah and I stayed with our family, but there were riots everywhere. We lost our parents and ran away and thankfully hooked up with Logan. I don’t like to think about what might have happened to us if we hadn’t.”

“Have you been traveling all this time?”

“No. We stayed put for the first year, but all the food and supplies around got used up. We tried to grow a garden, but nothing would grow. So we took off to scavenge for what we could, and we’ve been on the road ever since.”

“Oh. That’s interesting.” I think about everything she’s said. “So Deck was running a crew back then? How old is he?”

“I don’t know.” Burgundy is applying a couple of big bandages now. “Since he was ahead of Micah at the company, I always assumed he was a few years older than Micah. That would put him around thirty, I guess.”

“Oh. Okay.” That tracks with my sense of him, but it’s as strange to think about Deck having a regular job as it was Logan. Did he look like Bigfoot back when he was living in the world before Impact? I’m having trouble visualizing it.

“Why? Are you interested?”

I turn my head to blink at her in confusion.

“In Deck.”

“What? Oh, no. Just curious.”

“Okay, good.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:45 am

“Why good?”

“I don’t know. He really withdrew after Impact. Not just with words but with everything. He’s so closed off I’m not sure he could let someone in enough to have a relationship.”

“That makes sense. A lot of people are like that. I think maybe I am too.”

“Now if you’re interested in Micah, I could maybe help you get hooked up.” Burgundy is obviously teasing. Her dark eyes are twinkling.

I snicker, as she clearly wants me to. “No, thank you. I’m fine on my own.”

“All right then. But keep Micah in mind if you’re ever in the market. He’s a really good guy. You won’t find a better one. There.” Burgundy pats the final bandage. “You’re all set now. But those bruises look ugly. They must hurt like hell.”

“They’re not that bad. Thank you for helping.” I move over to the creek to cup water in my hands and wash my face, neck, arms, and armpits, shaking off the droplets before I pull my shirt back on.

“No problem.” Burgundy grins at me. “It’s nice to have another girl around my age. I haven’t had a friend for years.”

“Me either.” We smile at each other just briefly, and I feel better in more than one way when I heft myself to my feet.

I follow Burgundy down the creek bank. We pass Deck, and he puts a light hand on my arm.

When I frown up at him questioningly, he gesturestoward his chest and then uses his fingers on both hands to make the sign for two and then nine.

I stare at him a few seconds before I nod.

We continue back toward camp.

Now there are two things I know for sure.

Deck is twenty-nine.

And he definitely overheard what I said to Burgundy.

5

The morning passesas yesterday did—sitting in the back of a pickup for miles, looking for danger, broken only by brief stops to scavenge. Maybe to someone else it would get tedious after a while, but it doesn't to me.

After days and weeks and months of seeing nothing but the old Walmart and the barren landscape surrounding it, everything feels new and interesting. I'm alert and watchful all morning, and I do the best I can to help search for abandoned provisions whenever we stop.

By the midday break, I'm more tired than I realized. Yesterday several in the group found quiet, shady spots to take naps, and that sounds like a good idea for me today. So when I climb out of the back of the pickup and bend at the waist to stretch my back and thighs, I'm ready to search out a suitable napping spot.

Deck climbs out right after me and immediately disappears—I assume he’s peeing, but I don’t know this for sure—so I take the opportunity to get some distance, moving to the other side of the clearing and searching for an out-of-the-way corner to settle.

Others are lining up to grab the bread and jerky for lunch, but I’m not hungry. I’ve had more to eat these past two days than I’ve had for a year. My stomach simply doesn’t have room for it all.

I’m eyeing some grass under a tree—it’s almost green, not like a lot of the struggling, half-dead grass and foliage that’s most common now—when a presence moves to my side.

With a sigh, I turn toward Deck. “What?”

He hands me my lunch portion.

“You can have it,” I tell him. “I’m not hungry.”

He thrusts it at me again.

“Deck, I said—” I break off my objection because he heard exactly what I said. He simply doesn’t care. I accept the bread and jerky, break both in half, and hand him one section of each, making myself take a bite of the other.

This is apparently acceptable. He eats the part I gave him in a couple of big bites and stands watching until I get my portion down. It tastes fine. That’s not the issue.

The problem is I’m simply not used to eating.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:45 am

When I've finished, I drink the water he hands me.

Finally finished with these duties, I ask, "Can you leave me alone now?"

He shakes his head and gestures to the right. I know exactly what he means. He wants us to practice self-defense like we did yesterday.

"I was going to get some rest," I tell him.

He narrows his eyes and gestures more emphatically.

I could argue. I should argue. This man is obnoxiously bossy, and he has no right to act that way with me.

I'm my own person. I'm the one who decides what I do with my break. Not him.

But I'm tired. And I've been weirdly upset since that vulnerable conversation with Burgundy this morning. I simply don't have the energy to argue with him.

Maybe if we do a short round of self-defense training, he'll let me rest after that.

So I relent, rolling my eyes and mumbling complaints to myself as I follow him away from the others.

We end up in a good spot. I'm not sure how he found it so quickly. It's surrounded by trees and thus isolated, but it's shady, the grass is thick, and the dirt is soft.

I put down my water bottle and face him, waiting for him to tell me what to do.

He has a towel draped around his neck. He pulls it off, winds it around his hands, and holds them up.

When I just stare, he makes some grumpy nods toward his hands.

He wants me to punch him there—as if he were wearing boxing gloves or holding a punching bag.

Obediently I aim a few punches at the wrapped towel.

He makes a sound in his throat, which surprises me. It's soft and guttural but an actual sound. His expression tightens in frustration as he gestures with his head back at his hands.

He's getting annoyed. He wants me to hit him harder.

Sighing, I try. But the impact on my knuckles doesn't feel great. And he's so much bigger than me. I'm around a foot shorter and half as broad as he is. My punches aren't going to have any sort of impact.

He keeps urging me to try harder for about five minutes until he makes another throaty sound and unwraps his hands.

Hopeful that he's giving up for today, I say, "I'm sorry I'm not any stronger. But what the hell do you expect from me? You're like a mountain compared to me."

He frowns fiercely and pats one of his shoulders with his opposite hand.

I stare, my mouth falling open.

He pats again. More insistently.

“I’m not going to punch your shoulder like that! I might be small, but I could still bruise you.”

Through a series of gestures and grimaces, he soundlessly yells at me. Ordering me to punch him in his shoulder.

After a minute, I’m so frustrated and annoyed that I do it. I aim a sharp, upward jab at his shoulder. It’s harder than I expected myself to be capable of. It hurts my knuckles so much I gasp and jerk backward, but it doesn’t move him at all.

He nods approvingly and pats his shoulder again.

I rub my knuckles, checking to see if they’re damaged.

He takes my wrist and straightens my fingers, moving my arm so that I’m connecting his shoulder with the heel of my hand. Then he drops my wrist and waves toward his shoulder again.

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:45 am

I groan out loud. I really can't help it. What the hell is he even trying to accomplish here? I can't defend myself by hitting a big man in the shoulder. My best punch didn't hurt him at all.

He glares and points one more time, so I step closer and pull my arm back. I hit him hard in the shoulder with the heel of my hand.

It doesn't hurt nearly as much as with my knuckles, but it obviously doesn't faze Deck. At all.

"See? I can't hit hard enough to do anything."

He makes a face at me and raises both hands, slamming one of his hands into the other fiercely.

"Fine," I tell him, sounding as impatient as I feel. "I'll try to do it harder. But there's only so much harder I can get."

He drops his hands and waits for me. I change my stance, pull my elbow back, and then throw my hand forward and upward, hitting his shoulder so hard it makes a loud smacking sound.

He nods and gestures for me to do it again. So I do. Then again.

Then he raises his hands and counts out ten on his fingers.

"Fine. Ten times, and then that's it. This is a ridiculous exercise."

He lets out a breath and waits.

I hit him once as hard as I can. My palm hurts, but I do it again and again, letting out a little grunt each time.

On the fifth hit, something weird happens. That twisty tension that's always lurking, always pushing at the edges of my selfhood, suddenly rears up. Swells. Grows. Startslashing out. Until I'm hitting him fiercely with helpless, choppy sobs of effort.

He takes it. Stands motionless. When I've gotten to ten, I'm so out of control I almost keep going, but he moves out of my reach and leans over to pick up the towel. He winds it around his hands again and holds it up, nodding toward it like he did before.

So I hit there and keep doing it. And with each blow all the brewing anger that's been trapped inside me finally has an exit point. An escape hatch.

It feels so weirdly, twistedly good as I unleash blow after blow on Deck's wrapped hands that I can't stop. I let loose, getting louder and louder as I hit him.

He stands motionless, braced on parted legs with his hands up defensively, and he takes it. All of it. Even as it feels like I'm attacking him.

Even as his big body becomes everything that's wrong in this world. The unknowable force that's stripped everything away from me. My family. My friends. My community. My future. My safety. And finally Hal, the one person I had left who knew me. Loved me.

Only a few years ago, I was happy in college. Taking classes. Hanging out with Hal and my friends. Taking spring break trips. Planning to be a lawyer. To have a good life.

If Impact hadn't happened, I could have had it. All of it. A career I loved. Success. A man who loved me enough to marry me. Maybe children. Or even grandchildren.

I could have had what millions of other people had who had the good luck of being born a few decades earlier than me.

But it was all ripped away from me, and I have absolutely no one to blame for it. To hate for it. Call it fate or reality or the brutal will of God, it's done this to me, and it remains completely inaccessible.

And I hate it. I hate all of it. I throw everything I have into lashing out, as if I might somehow beat a merciless world into compliance.

Eventually I'm sobbing for real as I flail out at Deck. Tears are streaming down my cheeks, and my nose is running.

And it's that—that small detail of a runny nose—that triggers a sliver of recognition. Because I'm not somehow battering cruel reality. I'm lashing out at Deck.

A real man. Who might be annoying but who has also been good to me.

I jerk backward, sniffing and shaking my aching, tingling hands.

His expression is completely composed, and his eyes are far too knowing. They see far too much. He gestures back toward himself, urging me to keep going, but I shake my head.

I turn my back to him and work on composing myself, sucking all the emotion that got unleashed back inside where it belongs.

And it's strange.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:45 am

So strange.

There doesn't seem to be as much of it now to fit inside my too-small self.

When I've controlled myself, I turn around to see that Deck is still standing there. He's dropped the towel on the ground, and he's just watching me.

"I'm going to lie down and get some rest," I tell him, so self-conscious I have to fight not to simply run away. "Is that all right with you?"

He nods soberly.

He's still standing motionless, and it's deeply disturbing. But I like this quiet spot. It's out of sight of everyone else. So if I feel like crying, I can do it with a semblance of privacy.

I step over to pick up the towel and then lie down on the grass, using the towel as a pillow. It smells like Deck, but I don't care.

It's not that bad.

I turn on my side with my back to him and pull myself into a loose fetal position.

I work on not crying out loud. I work on it for only a few minutes. Then I can't work on anything because I've fallen asleep.

I wake up when someone nudges my leg.

At first I have no idea where I am or what's happening or what hour or day or year it is. But then I breathe in the scent of Deck and turn over to see he's still there.

He's sitting down, leaning against the trunk of a nearby tree. Close enough that he can reach me with his foot, which is how he woke me up.

I sigh and sit up, sore and exhausted and oddly lighter than I was. "You provoked me into losing it on purpose," I say bluntly.

He meets my eyes.

I blow out another breath and stretch my arms above my head. "Well, I do feel a little better for some reason. I don't even know why." A lot of hair has slipped out of my braided ponytail, so I pull out the elastics and start from scratch, smoothing it down to secure it tightly and then braiding the tail. "I guess you overheard what I was saying to Burgundy this morning, didn't you? About me feeling trapped. Frozen. When it counts."

He nods slowly.

"And that's what the whole thing was about? Proving I'm not actually trapped. That I'm able to lash out if I need to."

He makes a series of gestures. One that looks like he's grabbing someone. Then a repeated punching of his own palm with his right hand. He nods at me a few times.

"Yeah. I get it. I still don't like my chances of overpowering a much bigger man, but I do want to fight back. I really do."

I'm about to get up when he stops me. He hooks a couple of fingers into the neckline of his T-shirt and pulls, stretching it far enough to expose a lot of his shoulder.

There's a red, angry blotch on his skin. From where I repeatedly hit him.

"Oh shit. I did hurt you. You shouldn't have let me do that to you."

He raises a finger to stop me, touches his shoulder, and then gives me a thumbs-up sign.

For no good reason, the sight of huge, shaggy Bigfoot giving me a cheesy thumbs-up makes me snort in amusement. Then I start to laugh. Then I can't stop.

He's shaking his head bemusedly as he stands up and then leans over to extend a hand to me.

I let him help me to my feet, still laughing a little.

I really don't know what comes over me, but I giggle on and off for the rest of the afternoon.

6

Four weeks pass in no time.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:45 am

A month after I join up, Burgundy and I are hiking through thick woods on our own at just after dawn. It's dark under the canopy of half-dead tree branches, so we're using an LED flashlight to see the overgrown trail in front of us, but the sky peeking through is lightening to gray.

The sky is always gray now. It's been a year and a half since it has looked even faintly blue. The asteroid might have crashed into the other side of the planet, but every square foot of the world felt its impact. The layer of ash and debris in the atmosphere has taken away one of the fundamental truths of reality.

The sky is supposed to be blue.

But it's not anymore.

I remember a stray piece of knowledge from one of the television documentaries my dad used to watch. Sometime back in history, a huge volcano erupted, throwing up so much ash that it lowered temperatures around the world, leading to a couple of years of famine.

This is kind of like that. Only worse. Even the air I've been breathing this year feels like it's full of grit. Some people have gotten chronic coughs.

Burgundy glances back at me. Her hair is darker and shinier than mine, and today she has it pulled into two long braids. "I think we're almost there."

"Logan said it would take about forty-five minutes to hike, so that seems right." We're both speaking softly even though there's no one else around.

“Look up there.” She gestures ahead to where the trees thin out, revealing more of the early-morning light.

We reach the clearing and peer out to see grassland sloping into a shallow valley and then rising into a gentle hill on which sits a huge old house. One of those that was old-fashioned even in the world before Impact with gables, turrets, big windows, and a large front porch. It’s in good condition but appears weirdly anachronistic in the barren landscapes and crumbling, soulless structures we’ve been traveling through.

“Guards there and there,” I say, spotting men stationed on either side of the property.

We’ve heard reports that a gang took over this house after killing the families who were scraping out a life inside.

Logan never sets out on missions of mercy, but the gang is supposed to be sitting on a stockpile of supplies in this house. That’s enough of an incentive to risk moving in on this place.

“Okay then. Let’s do this.” Burgundy squares her shoulders and opens the backpack she’s carrying. I do the same. Then we move in opposite directions, skirting the edge of the woods and deliberately placing several small firecrackers on the ground at even distances.

When I set down the last one, I peer across to where the edge of the woods curves. I eventually see a flash of Burgundy’s dark hair. She waves. I wave back. Then I click a lighter to get a small flame and lean over to ignite the firecracker I just placed.

I start running immediately, so I’m a few strides away when the firecracker explodes with a loud crack and a bright flash. I keep running, leaning down to light the next one when I reach it. Then the next and then the next.

Burgundy is doing the same on her side of the woods.

Men and women start pouring out of the house, shouting and firing guns blindly in our direction. With all the bangs and flashes from the firecrackers, it must seem like a whole army is attacking them.

Instead, it's only me and Burgundy, drawing out the gang's defense in this direction so Logan and the rest of the group can advance on the opposite side of the house.

My job is to meet Burgundy at the trailhead and then retreat into the woods as quickly as possible. But my final firecracker doesn't want to ignite. I lose a few seconds trying a time or two to light the fuse, but some of the gang are running toward us now, and I'm exposed in this position. So I give up and start sprinting.

The delay was a few seconds too long. One of the guys is in range of me now, and he obviously sees me. He fires, and I have to throw myself on the ground to not get hit by his bullet.

He keeps firing, so I crawl behind a tree, shrinking as his gunshots hit it, causing slivers of dry bark to fly out in all directions.

When the firing halts, I assume he's reloading, so I pull out my small pistol and lean around the tree to aim.

I have a line on him. He's standing out in the open, completely exposed.

I try. I really do. But I can't pull the trigger.

He's got brown hair. And freckles. His jeans have a rip at one knee.

If I shoot him, I will kill him. And something inside me is holding me back from

taking a life, even the life of a man currently trying to kill me.

I'm about to give up and plow through the tangled foliage of the woods to get away when a presence emerges from behind me. Even before I turn to look, I know who it is. I sense the vibes or maybe catch a faint whiff of his familiar scent.

Deck.

He's supposed to be on the other side of the hill, attacking the house with the others. But no. He's here. Shooting his rifle three times and killing the three men closest to us one by one.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:45 am

He scowls at me and motions with his head.

I jump up and start running toward the trail again, finding an anxious Burgundy lurking there.

Deck motions us both to run and then follows in a backward walk, shooting to provide us cover.

When we're far enough away to feel safe, Burgundy and I slow down and wait for Deck.

He reaches us, waving us on and scowling at me again.

Who can blame me? I scowl back.

What just happened was a life-and-death situation for me. I easily could have died, and the fear and adrenaline are still coursing through me. I don't need to be chastised the way his expression is clearly doing.

I already know I didn't shoot when I should have.

But I'm sorry. The world might have transformed into a hellscape around me, and strangers might want to assault or kill me at regular intervals now.

But I still don't want to kill anyone.

For a while, I believed I'm angry enough with the world to pull the trigger in a

scenario like that, but maybe I'm not angry enough.

We head farther into the woods and wait until all the sounds of gunfire have died. Only then do we follow the trail back toward the big house.

I must have pulled a muscle at the back of my right thigh when I dove from the bullets earlier because every step makes me want to wince.

It's not bad enough to make an issue of. Not even bad enough to mention.

After a couple of minutes, Deck, who has been walking beside me, gives my arm a little tap to get my attention and then gestures down at my right leg.

Of course he would notice. He's really very obnoxious about not letting even small things slide.

"Oh, did you hurt yourself?" Burgundy asks. She's been walking behind us, and her voice sounds worried.

"No. No, it's fine. It's nothing." I aim a glare up at Deck's face. Another annoying thing is that he's so tall I have to crane my neck to meet his eyes. "I'm fine. Just pulled a muscle."

Deck breathes heavily through his nose as he meets my gaze.

"Okay," Burgundy replies. "But if it's worse than that, you need to let Deck take a look. Even a minor injury can?—"

"I know. I know. I'm not going to tough out an injury that could get infected. But no skin is broken. It's just the pulled muscle."

This answer appears to satisfy Burgundy but not Deck. He stewes about it silently as we keep walking.

I try very hard not to limp.

We're close to where the trail ends when a new sound breaks the silence. It's a low buzzing kind of noise. One I don't recognize until a small motorcycle appears on the trail coming right toward us.

Deck has already moved in front of me and pulled out his gun—maybe he realized what the sound was before I did—and he fires when the motorcycle doesn't slow down.

He hits the driver. That much is clear. The bike gives a jerk and then skids, veering sharply to the right.

Unfortunately, it was going fast enough that its forward motion continues even after the driver is shot. It comes right at us. If Deck wasn't blocking me and Burgundy, it would have slammed into us.

He reaches out to brace himself against the collision with the side of the bike. He manages to stop the motorcycle, but it hits him so hard he's thrown backward off his feet.

"Deck!" The exclamation chokes in my throat at the horrifying sight of the big man knocked down so violently.

I run toward him, barely processing that there was someone else on the motorcycle behind the driver. A woman who is now pinned beneath the vehicle and the dead body of the man.

Page 19

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:46 am

Burgundy has her gun out, and she keeps it aimed at the woman as I kneel beside Deck, washed in relief when he sits up on his own, looking stunned and messier than ever but basically intact.

He brushes me off grumpily when I run my hands down his arms and chest to check for injuries. Then heaves himself up to his feet, waving me off again when I try to inspect his backside. His shirt and jeans are stained with mud, and he must have fallen into some sort of brambles because he's got twigs and vines caught in the tangle of his hair. He might be bruised—he must be bruised after that collision and fall—but he moves easily and purposefully as he strides over with his rifle to aim at the woman.

“Oh, thank you!” She's got a sob in her voice, but something about it feels off to me. No particular reason. Just a bone-deep instinct I've always had that gets triggered when people aren't entirely sincere. “Thank you for saving me!”

Burgundy frowns, still leveling her pistol. “Saving you?”

“They... they had me in that house. Using me... I thought they would kill me for sure. You're not going to hurt me, are you? You're women, so I know you understand.”

There are actual tears streaming down her face, and every woman alive today knows exactly what she's implying happened to her. That weird little vibration of warning still bothers me, but neither Deck nor Burgundy look suspicious. Burgundy has already holstered her gun, and Deck is still holding his but not aiming it at the woman.

“We won’t hurt you unless you try to hurt us,” Burgundy says slowly.

“I won’t. I promise. I’m Trisha,” the woman says. She’s attractive with hair around the same shade of brown as mine but blue eyes and a curvier body. She cries some more as Deck hauls the man’s body and the motorcycle off her. “I’m just so glad to be away from those monsters.”

Maybe she’s telling the truth. If I were in her place and had been held by that gang, I’d probably be weeping and pouring out thanks on my rescuers too. I shouldn’t be so mistrustful. I know as well as anyone that women have a distinct disadvantage in what this world has become because we’re so often physically smaller than men. She probably had little choice but to be with them.

And even if she made some sort of conscious choice, it wouldn’t have been a real one. I wouldn’t blame any woman for using any means at her disposal to stay alive. Sometimes that means using sex. I don’t consider myself fortunate, but at least I haven’t been cornered into having to offer sex to survive.

I’m in the wrong here. I’m letting my general bitterness infect my view of this woman. Burgundy is smiling and introducing all three of us, and Deck has reached down to help the woman to her feet.

The woman has an injured leg. She clings to Deck for support. He finally swings her up into his arms to carry her. She can’t walk. That’s the only reason he’s holding her like that.

So judge me. Maybe I am a bitch at heart—or maybe this life has turned me into one. As I watch her beam up at Deck and wrap her arms around his neck, I conclude I definitely don’t like her again.

When we reach the big house, Logan and the rest of the group have either killed or chased off the entire gang. We are now in control of the property, the building, and its stockpile of food and supplies.

Everyone has spread out, busily searching the rooms or setting up guard posts around it. Logan strides out to meet us when he sees our approach, and Burgundy quickly explains what happened.

Logan tells Trisha she's welcome to stay with us as long as she's willing to contribute. She immediately agrees.

For some reason, I was hoping Logan would have the same instincts I have concerning her. He's a good judge of people. I've seen that firsthand over the past month. But he doesn't appear wary or guarded. Just as matter-of-fact as ever.

Resigning myself to the fact of her presence and trying to talk myself out of the irrational antipathy, I do allow myself to say, "Maybe someone else can help Trisha. Deck took a really bad fall, and I'm sure he's bruised if not worse."

Deck gives me a small glare, which I ignore, and I'm relieved when Logan calls Micah over to carry Trisha into the house.

Burgundy goes with them, so Deck and I are left alone, staring at each other.

"You are hurt," I tell him. "Act as macho stoic as you want, but you're hurt."

He gestures down at my right leg.

"That's a pulled muscle. It's not the same as you trying to tough out a fall like you had."

He makes a face at me, but then his expression changes. He nods toward where Trisha and the others disappeared into the house.

“I don’t know,” I say slowly, answering his unspoken question. “Something doesn’t feel quite right about her.” At his look of concern, I add quickly, “No, it’s nothing specific. Nothing that we can act on. I don’t know. Just vibes.” I shrug and shake out my hands as if they had gone numb. “It might be nothing. I don’t want to leave an innocent woman stranded merely because I’ve got my quills out. But maybe keep your eyes open.”

He nods soberly and then puts one big hand on the middle of my back to get me to walk inside.

The house is in such good condition and there’s so much food stored there that Logan announces we’re going to stay here for the time being.

It’s happened before, although not in the month I’ve been with his group. The only reason we travel is to find more sources of provisions and supplies. If there’s a place that provides both that and secure shelter, then Logan has us stay until we’ve used up enough to require traveling again.

I’m excited. I haven’t really minded riding in the back of a pickup for most of my days. I’ve gotten used to the motion now, so it doesn’t make me queasy, and there’s always something new or interesting to see or do. But it’s a luxury to stay in a real house that’s in livable condition. It means I’ll be able to relax. Rest. In a way that’s impossible on the road. Sure, there will be duties required. Cooking or housekeeping or guarding. But Logan always puts us on rotation, so there will still be a lot of time left with nothing required of me.

Page 20

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:46 am

It feels like a vacation, and I'm not the only one. Everyone's spirits are up as we spread out through the house to find our individual sleeping spaces.

I try not to notice and then try not to care, but I can't help seeing that Trisha almost immediately claims the small bedroom on the first floor with only one single bed in it. It's the only spot that will offer real privacy since there are so many of us. Everyone else will need to share rooms.

Her explanation—that her leg is too injured to walk up the stairs—is actually a good one. It's fair. Of course she can't make it upstairs to share one of the larger rooms on the second and third floors.

I wish her presence wouldn't rankle so much. I need to work on my attitude.

Maybe it's because I'm still not used to being around other people. For so long it was just me and Hal, and then it was only me.

As always, I retreat into a corner to wait for everyone else to get their first choice. Deck disappeared somewhere, so I stand in the hall of the second floor and look out the window, waiting to see what's left after everyone else has found their space.

I jump when someone touches my shoulder.

Deck. I wasn't paying attention, or I would have known he was approaching. He frowns, visibly unhappy that I'm standing here instead of claiming a spot. He motions vigorously to follow him.

With a sigh, I do. He probably wants to inspect my leg to make sure I'm not hiding a secret injury.

He walks upstairs to the third floor and then down a hall and up a few more winding steps to a weirdly shaped room in one of the turrets. There's a custom-made bunk bed built into the curved wall and nothing else in the space except a wide stretch of window.

Charmed, I smile as I gaze around at the adorable room. He motions me into the bottom bunk, and I immediately set my bag on the mattress.

The bunk beds were clearly designed for little girls. They're still made up with pretty spreads and sheets featuring princess accessories like glass slippers and tiaras. It would have been a dream room for me when I was a child, and it's still the sweetest space I've ever seen.

Deck is peering at my face, no doubt looking for my reaction. "I love it," I say. "But maybe I should wait to make sure no one else wants to sleep here."

He shakes his head.

"Okay. Fine. I'll take it then. Maybe Burgundy will want the top bunk."

With another shake of his head, he purposefully sets his pack on the upper mattress.

I snicker. "All right. If you want to beat out Burgundy for the pretty princess bed, then I have no objections."

I really don't have any objections. I'm used to him sleeping nearby now. He almost always does.

And I feel safer that way.

The house has a functioning well that still provides good quality water. That's a huge advantage, saving us the trouble of boiling water from creeks and streams.

After I get my stuff settled in my bed, I go downstairs to volunteer to help with dinner preparations.

Micah likes to cook, so he and I have a great time pulling out ingredients from all the canned and dried food available in the huge pantry. We make a big pot of chili with canned beans, seasoned tomatoes and chili peppers, and some sort of roast beef product that tastes surprisingly good. We mix a fruit salad with cans of peaches, pears, and mandarin oranges.

Everything is delicious, and a couple of the men make a big bonfire in the yard. We sit outside and eat our meal around it, telling stories and joking.

I have a better time than I can remember having since Impact.

Afterward, there's still some sunlight and the air is warm, so Burgundy and I wash up in the nearby creek with some body soap we find in the supplies. I wash my hair with shampoo for the first time in months.

I put on a loose cotton dress I found in the back of a closet with some other women's clothes. The dress isn't at all flattering. It never had much shape—just falling straight down from short sleeves, and it's way too big for me. But it's incredibly comfortable, and I don't want to put my dirty clothes back on my clean body.

Burgundy found a dress to put on too. Hers is more flattering than mine, but I don't really care.

I'm not trying to look beautiful for anyone.

Some folks are still gathered around the dying fire, but a lot of others have scattered. I see Trisha, and it looks like she's flirting with Logan, which makes me hide a chuckle.

She can try, but the man is as impenetrable as a stone statue. I really don't think she'll have any luck with that.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:46 am

At least she's not still clinging to Deck.

Speaking of, I have no idea where he got to. He's usually following me around, and it's strange that he's not in sight.

I check our bunks and see that one set of the clothes he keeps in his pack is gone.

He must be washing up like Burgundy and I did.

I wander around outside until I find him farther down the creek. He was indeed cleaning himself. He's wearing nothing but a pair of worn boxers.

I've seen his chest before—just in passing in the mornings or evenings—but he looks naked-er than normal right now.

He's sitting on a towel that's spread over a big rock, and he's working on his hair.

When he fell backward, he got twigs and brambles tangled into it. He's pulled them out now, but the back of his hair still looks like one clump. I see why as I come closer.

He's gotten a bunch of prickly burs stuck in it, and the whole thing has tangled into one enormous knot.

“What a mess,” I say, approaching him from behind.

I wouldn't have thought it was possible for me to take him by surprise—since he's

always so wary—but I must do so right now. His whole body jerks, and he whirls around as he jumps to his feet.

“It’s just me,” I tell him. “Calm down. What have you done to your hair?”

He makes a series of grimaces and points back toward the house. He wants me to leave him alone.

He ignores me all the time when I tell him things, so I can ignore him in this. “I’m not going to leave. You need help with your hair. It’s all matted around those burs.”

For some reason—I really don’t understand why—my eyes keep dipping down to his broad chest. His mostly flat belly. His hips and thick thighs. His big, muscular arms. I’ve never gotten such a good look at him, and I want to see more.

He doesn’t have the perfectly developed, polished body that bodybuilders used to have in the old world. No matter how big and strong he is, a lot of it is natural bulk rather than cultivated musculature. He’s been physically active most of his life and even more so since Impact, and it shows in the strong shape of his arms and legs. But he doesn’t have a six-pack. He’s actually got a little extra flesh around his middle.

And I like it.

I don’t know why, but I really like it. I kind of want to touch him there.

I don’t do anything so silly, of course. I control my straying gaze and keep my eyes on his face instead. “You’re never going to get the burs out like that. I can run get a pair of scissors if you want.”

He makes a growly sound—one I’ve only heard a couple of times.

“Okay, fine. I won’t cut it if I can help it, but you need to let me help if you don’t want those burs to be a permanent feature of your hairstyle.”

His grimace fades into a reluctant nod.

“You’ll have to sit down. I can’t reach you way up there.”

He does as I say, picking up the towel and sitting back down on the rock. Then I take the comb he gives me and move behind him. The whole back half of his hair is matted up with the burs.

“This is crazy,” I murmur. “How did it get like this?”

He raises his shoulders in a shrug. He feels strangely passive sitting like this.

It makes me feel... odd.

I try to focus on carefully pulling out the burs, combing out one small piece of hair after another on the edges of the mass. I am making progress, but it’s slow. It should be getting tedious, but it’s not.

There’s the strangest tension in my belly. Maybe slightly below my belly. A kind of tightness. Pressure. It’s not bad, but it’s deep. It makes me anxious.

Deck has helped me over and over again in the weeks I’ve been with Logan’s group, and he needs my help right now. So I resist the urge to get away so the weird twisting inside me will lessen. Instead, I try to breathe through it, removing the burs and combing out the tangles one by one.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:46 am

It would be easier—less strange—if Deck were his normal grumpy but relaxed self. But he's not. He sits motionless. Uncharacteristically stiff. He makes no sign or gesture to indicate a conversation, so we both breathe through the tension in the air.

I work on his hair, and he does nothing at all.

It takes a long time to get all the burs out and untangle his hair. The sun is almost down when I finally hand him the comb. He's holding his towel loosely on his lap.

"Okay," I say, shifting from foot to foot. That coiled tension below my belly is stronger than ever. It's so strange. Intimate. I have no idea why I'm feeling like this from nothing other than combing his hair. "You're fine now."

He nods soberly. Doesn't move.

"Should we go in?"

He taps his chest, points at the creek, then gestures at me before pointing toward the house.

I sigh. He wants to finish washing up, and obviously I can't hang around to witness it. "Okay. I'm going to get ready for bed."

He nods and waits until I'm a distance away before he starts to move.

It's not even thirty minutes later when Deck comes into the turret room as I'm lying in my cozy little bunk.

He's got his clothes on. He smells clean and feels a lot more relaxed than he was before. He leans over to peer in at me. When I wave and say good night, his mouth twitches up just a little. Then he turns off the flashlight he's been using. It's completely dark now.

He didn't like me working on his hair. He's relieved it's over. Now he's back to his normal self.

I shouldn't be surprised. He's a private person, always willing to help and do his duty but not letting anyone in. He stopped talking after Impact. He doesn't want to open up.

Not even to me.

It makes me a little droopy, but there's no reason for that reaction.

One thing I've learned is true about the world after Impact. You've got to take people as they are, or you won't have any people at all.

8

I wakeup the next morning when the bed jiggles.

It must be Lance. My little brother likes to sneak into my room and climb into bed with me on weekends and holidays. We'll plot to convince our parents to take us to a movie or drive out to the closest city big enough to have a toy store. He'll ask me questions about how the house walls are strong enough to hold up the roof and who would win if a gorilla and rhinoceros got in a fight. Then we'll go downstairs in our pajamas when Dad calls out that breakfast is ready. We'll eat pancakes and crispy bacon, and Mom will remind us to finish our orange juice because we need the Vitamin C.

That's what's going to happen this morning. I know it with a certainty that permeates my body. I can almost smell the bacon and feel the weight of my five-year-old brother shift my mattress.

And I'm safe.

In that moment, I'm completely safe. Young and trusting and deeply loved and safe.

Then the familiar scent of Deck hits my nose, and it's all ripped away from me again.

Because I'm not nine years old in our family home with parents and a brother and a future. Each of them has been murdered by whatever heartless force controls our reality.

The loss hurts so much that I shake. Squeeze my eyes shut to hold back tears. Because for a moment sweet little Lance was close enough to touch, but now he's torn away from me again.

It's dark in the room. Deck must have accidentally woken me up when he climbed down from the top bunk. Even though I haven't made a sound or identifiable motion, he jerks and turns around, leaning over to peer in at my bed.

Maybe he picked up vibes.

I'm embarrassed by my breakdown and don't want anyone to know about it, so I lie completely still, eyes closed. He won't be able to tell I'm awake in the dark room like this. No one could.

He reaches out to put a light hand on my arm.

"I'm fine," I tell him since there's clearly no sense in trying to deceive him even in

the dark. “Just woke up thinking I was back home. With my little brother. And I’m...” My voice breaks. “I’m not.”

Page 23

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:46 am

His position bent over like that, extending an arm under the top bunk to reach me, has got to be uncomfortable, but he holds it for a minute. Speaking with nothing but the light touch of his hand.

For no good reason, it makes me feel better. A little less alone.

I wish I knew what he was thinking. His lack of speech doesn't bother me—it simply feels like him—but it's so hard to know what's going on in his mind if he can't put it into words.

If only there was a way to more clearly communicate with him.

Maybe he senses that I've recovered from my small emotional collapse because he straightens up and withdraws, leaning down to pick up yesterday's clothes from the floor where he dropped them.

My eyes have adjusted to the darkness, so I can see the bulk of his strong body. Outside, he sleeps in his clothes, but because we're more secure here, he took them off last night. He's only wearing his boxers, and the sight of his tight ass and the sculpted contours of his thigh muscles as they stretch gives me that weird clench below my belly again.

It's not lust as I understand it, although everything about his body right now is attractive. It's deeper than that. Some sort of possessive entitlement. It's disturbing.

He's about to pull on his jeans when I stop him.

“Wait, Deck. You can’t put those jeans on. The whole back of them is caked in mud.”

He straightens up with a jerk and turns, his jeans hanging down from one hand.

I sit up. “I’ll wash them for you. I was going to do mine today anyway, so I’ll do your stuff with them.”

He stands still, frowning down at me.

“It won’t be any trouble.” To push him past his reluctance, I add, “It’s really for my benefit. Since you insist on following me around, it will be nicer if your clothes don’t stink quite so much.”

That does it. His shoulders shake a few times in a silent chuckle. He reaches over to turn on the flashlight he was using last night. It illuminates the room with a blueish, eerie glow.

I slept in the loose knit dress, and I have to pull it down as I slide out of the lower bunk since it gets hiked up around my hips.

Deck’s expression changes, and he gestures out the window.

“I know it’s early, but I’m wide-awake. I might as well get up and see if they need help in the kitchen. But first give me as many of your dirty clothes as you can without going around naked, and I’ll wash them with mine later when the sun comes up.”

He’s gotten over his hesitation, so together we collect all his extra clothes except the cargo trousers and T-shirt he puts on. I add my clothes to the pile and leave them on the floor. I remember seeing an old laundry basket in a closet somewhere. I’ll grab it later to haul them down.

Deck is about to stuff his feet into his hiking boots when I sit down on the edge of my bunk and pat the mattress beside me. Frowning in confusion, he sits where I indicate, having to fold his body and lean forward to avoid banging against the top bunk.

“How would you feel about learning sign language?” I ask him before I lose the courage.

His brown eyes widen slightly.

“It would be easier for you to tell me things,” I explain. “It’s fine if you don’t want to. But it could just be with me. I doubt most of the others even know American Sign Language. You could use it only with me. If you want.”

He sits very still for a minute. Then very slowly he nods.

Relieved and strangely gratified, I beam at him. Then I start by showing him the signs for parts of the body. Feet. Legs. Stomach. Chest. Shoulders. Arms. Hands. Head. Face. Hair.

He picks them up quickly, but then he nods toward the door of the room.

Maybe he got rounded up for a guard shift this morning. Or maybe he just needs to go to the bathroom. I let him go.

If he can learn ASL, maybe eventually he’ll be able to tell me.

I help out in the kitchen with breakfast. By the time everything is cleaned up, it’s midmorning, so I find that laundry basket and put Deck’s and my clothes in it to carry outside. There were some barrels and tubs in the side yard to catch rainwater, and using those will be easier than pumping all that water from the well or managing down by the creek where there’s as much chance of getting the clothes dirtier as

cleaner.

As I'm passing an open door on the hallway, I pause when Logan appears. It's the smallest bedroom on the third floor aside from our tiny turret room.

"Everything okay?" he asks, giving me a quick once-over in that efficient manner that characterizes him. Like he's checking for issues rather than personally concerned.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:46 am

“Yeah. I’m just doing some laundry.” Without thinking through the offer, I add, “You want me to wash any of your clothes?”

Logan starts to turn around, as if his first instinct is to accept the offer and grab some dirty clothes, but he pauses mid-rotation. “You sure?” he asks, eyeing me closely. “It’s not required.”

“I know. But I’m doing laundry anyway, and I don’t mind some extra. These are Deck’s and mine, and they don’t even fill the basket halfway.”

Logan nods, unsmiling as he walks farther back into his room and collects several pieces of his clothing, adding them to my basket. “Thank you. I appreciate it.”

“No worries. I don’t have any duties today anyway, so I might as well get something useful done.”

When I’ve got the clothes outside, I pick out the best two tubs to use. Then I walk back inside and search the pantry for some soap and stumble across an old-fashioned washboard.

I’ve never used one before, but people made do with them for centuries. Surely this contraption will get the clothes cleaner than scrubbing them with my hands. I haul that out with an old bottle of dish soap, which is the closest I can find to laundry detergent.

I start on one of my shirts, getting it wet, soaping it up, and then experimenting with the washboard. Whenever I’ve seen one used in historical movies, the person just

rubbed the fabric up and down over the ridges of the board. So that's what I do, trying a few times until it feels like I get it right and surprised by how clean the shirt gets from this method.

I rinse it off in the other tub, wring it out, and then put it back into the empty laundry basket. I'll need to hang up the wet clothes on the clothesline, but it's on the other side of the yard, so I'll wait until I've done all the washing first.

It's harder work than I would have expected, and my back and shoulders are feeling it when I'm on the last couple of pieces—two pairs of Deck's boxers. I'm so focused on the scrubbing that I don't notice that someone comes over until a voice says, "Hi, Lilah. Can you do me a huge favor?"

I jerk in surprise and then force my lips into the shape of a smile as I look up at Trisha.

I swear I could have predicted it. She's giving me her sweetest smile and holding an armful of clothes. I don't respond. Just wait for her to say it.

"Could you wash my clothes while you're in the zone? I'd do my own, but my poor leg is too injured. And it's been so long since they've been washed. Pretty please? Logan said it would be okay."

If Logan said anything of the kind, it would have been that it was okay for her to ask me. There's no way in the world Logan volunteered me to wash someone else's laundry. Personal duties are handled personally. That's one of his rules. He even hesitated before letting me do his own clothes.

He did not tell Trisha I would do her laundry.

I'm tempted to ignore her and start scrubbing again without even giving her an

answer, but there's this tiny twinge of guilt at the back of my mind. That I'm judging her unfairly. That I dislike her for no real reason. That I've let all the bitterness simmering inside me get channeled toward her as a target when she's done nothing to deserve it.

And that a good person wouldn't act that way.

I've always thought of myself as a good person. Despite everything, that's still who I want to be.

So I nod and look back at Deck's soapy boxers. "I'll do them this one time, but after this you'll have to do your own. With Logan, we all handle our own business. Everyone understands that."

"I do understand. Believe me. My leg just hurts so bad. I really appreciate your help. You're the sweetest thing."

If I needed any confirmation that she's not being sincere, it's that final claim. I think I'm decent. And I try to be brave and generous and helpful. I might even be warm under the right circumstances.

But I'm not sweet.

I'm nothing even close to sweet.

Trisha dumps her pile of dirty stuff into the basket of damp clothes I've just cleaned.

I give her a casual "Sure" as I quickly pull her stuff out of the basket and drop it onto the ground. It's completely irrational—even I can admit that much—but I don't want her dirty clothes to contaminate my clean ones. Or Deck's. Or even Logan's.

She thanks me with a saccharine edge that makes me grit my teeth, and I'm hoping that she'll leave me alone now. But she doesn't.

She lowers herself to sit on an overturned terra-cotta planter. It looks like she's getting ready for a long, juicy chat. I know I'm right when she says, "So tell me about Logan."

I wring out Deck's boxers and spread them neatly on top of the pile in the basket. "What about him?"

"Anything. What's his story? Is he with anyone?"

Of course that's what she wants to know. His romantic status.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:46 am

There were always girls like her back in high school and college. Ones who pretended to be friends with other girls but whose whole goal was to claim the best guy. So all conversation was focused on gossip, and even the smallest decisions were motivated by getting her closer to whoever her target was. I was burned by girls like that multiple times—assuming they really wanted to befriends but finding out soon enough that they would throw me into the trash at the first opportunity to win an advantage with a guy.

It's a queasy kind of déjà vu. I might as well be back in high school with a girl who is pretending to have a conversation with me but who really has her eyes on the captain of the football team the entire time.

I have absolutely no romantic or sexual interest in Logan—any more than he has in me—but I feel defensive for him anyway. He deserves better than Trisha.

“I don't know that much about him,” I say blandly. “He's a private person.”

“So he doesn't have a woman?”

“Not that I'm aware of.” I'm not meeting her eyes because I'm not sure I could hide my annoyance.

“He's too old for me, but he's still damn sexy. And I like a man in charge.”

She would. Just the power itself is probably what attracts her most.

“But he's not as big as Deck. What about him?”

I've been scrubbing one of her shirts against the washboard, but I halt abruptly, looking down at my own hands. "What about him?"

"What's his story?"

"Same as the rest of us. Trying to survive after everything went to hell."

"He needs to shave and cut his hair, but if he did that, he'd be superhot. And there's something about a man whose hands can span your waist. Or your ass." She makes a throaty sound of approval.

Clenching my jaw, I scrub and scrub. And scrub and scrub.

She might not possess the deepest intellect, but she's sharp, and she obviously sees something in my reaction. "He's not your man, is he? Someone said you two weren't together."

"We're not together like that."

"So you wouldn't mind if I had a go?"

Scrub. Scrub. Scrub. Scrub.

It's a wonder I'm not shredding the shirt into pieces, working out my suppressed aggression on it.

"It's not my business. You can do whatever you want."

"Okay, good. I was just checking. I want us to be friends."

"Of course."

To my relief, she gets up to leave after that.

As I finish washing her clothes, I blow out my resentment. I didn't understand it back in school, and I don't understand it now.

So many things are central in life. So many things are life and death. So many things matter in all the deepest ways.

Why can some women—even in an apocalypse—see nothing of worth except snagging their next boyfriend?

9

I can't find any clothespins, so I hang the wet clothes on the line by simply folding them over it. It's not that windy today, so hopefully they'll stay put.

By the time I finish, it's almost lunchtime. After we eat, I find a book on one of the shelves in the house and take it out to a shady spot to read.

I make it through a couple of chapters before I fall asleep.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:46 am

When I start to wake up, it feels like I've been out a long time, and I'm aware of a presence nearby. It's not a bad one. It's familiar. Secure. I peek through my lashes and see Deck reclining against the nearest tree with his eyes closed.

I stay completely still, thinking maybe he actually fell asleep. I don't want to wake him up. But as soon as I shift my head slightly, his lids pop up.

He narrows his eyes, looking relaxed but also faintly suspicious.

"I wasn't doing anything. I just woke up." When Deck gestures toward the book that fell onto the ground beside me, I add, "It's not too bad a story. It's one of those romantic suspense books. But I didn't get very far before I fell asleep. I didn't realize I was so tired."

He points toward the line where the clothes I washed are still flapping. Most are still in place, although one shirt has fallen off. It looks like Trisha's. I'm not inclined to walk all the way over there to pick it up.

"Yeah, doing the laundry was more tiring than I expected. Using that washboard is really a workout. My shoulders are already sore."

He points again, this time at the side of the line where Trisha's clothes are hanging. He makes a questioning gesture and then a disapproving shake of his head.

I sigh. "She basically dumped her clothes on me. It would have been rude to say no. But I did say that this would be the only time. She has to do her own laundry from now on."

He nods, his eyebrows drawn together like he's reflecting.

Maybe I should leave things alone, but the words come out before I can stop them.
"She was asking about you."

He jerks his head toward me, visibly surprised.

"She wanted to know if you were with someone. She said you were superhot."

He rolls his eyes and makes a face.

"There's no reason for you to brush that off. You might not be the prime example of grooming habits, but you're a good-looking guy. Surely she's not the only woman to show interest in you."

He wriggles his fingers at his mouth.

"I know you don't speak, but a lot of women wouldn't care about that. I'm just saying it might be smart to be prepared for how you'll react because I think she's going to come on to you."

He still looks surprised and reflective, and something about the expression bothers me.

Why is he thinking so much about it? Surely he's not actually tempted by Trisha's charms? She would be a terrible choice for him. He's got to see that for himself.

He knows I don't like her.

Shouldn't that mean something to him?

To distract myself and also him, I suggest we practice more sign language. I teach him the signs for tree, grass, sky, house, and the various articles of our clothing. Then I show him how to ask simple questions. What are you doing? Where are you going? What are you thinking?

We're laughing when he messes up one of the gestures, and I reach over to move his fingers in the right shape. Well, I'm giggling, and he's kind of smiling.

We both jerk when a voice comes from several feet away. "Deck. You're needed on the front porch."

It's Logan. He doesn't look mad or upset or annoyed or anything really. But something is tense about his posture.

Deck gets up immediately and starts toward the front of the house.

I expect Logan to follow him, but he doesn't. He stays looking down at me.

Awkward and slightly guilty, I stand up and brush off the back of the loose dress I'm still wearing since all my other clothes are on the clothesline.

"Is there anything I should know?" Logan asks.

We're facing each other, my head lifted so I can meet his gaze. "About what?"

"About Deck."

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:46 am

“What? Oh, no, of course not. Everything is fine. I was actually trying to teach him some sign language so he can communicate better.”

Logan’s mouth turns down slightly. “Listen, I don’t care what my people do. At all. You can fuck who you want or pair up or make the rounds or whatever. I don’t care. But sometimes relationships end in conflict, and choices have to be made.”

I’m still confused, but my stomach is also sinking—like it knows what’s coming even before my mind does. “Choices?”

“Yes. Sometimes things end in a way where both can’t stay. And Deck has been one of my people for twelve years. He started working for me at seventeen.” Logan meets my eyes with a clear significance. “Sometimes choices have to be made, and Deck isn’t going anywhere.”

My stomach drops all the way down. I swallow hard over tension in my throat. Because I know exactly what Logan is telling me.

I’ve hooked up with his group, and it’s been working out great. I’m safer than I ever could have been otherwise. I like these people. I want to stay. I’m actually enjoying being part of things. Contributing.

But if something happens between Deck and me that leads to an angsty breakup, I’m out.

I’m out.

I'll be left all alone.

If it ever comes down to a choice between me and Deck, Logan will always choose Deck. Of course he will. He probably likes me fine. He seems to anyway. But I'm new, and Deck is like family to him.

"You understand what I'm saying?"

"Yes," I manage to get out. "I understand."

"You'll be careful?"

"I'll be careful."

Logan nods and turns away from me, heading toward the front of the house like Deck.

And I'm left alone with a lot of heavy, confused revelations.

They're a hopeless muddle in my head, but they basically boil down to just this. I'm starting to maybe want something to happen with Deck, but it can't. It absolutely can't.

Because there are so many things in this world more important than getting a boyfriend. And it's not just my heart that would be put at risk.

It could end up as a threat to my life and safety, and no relationship is worth that.

For the rest of the day, I'm upset but trying not to show it. Partly because it's no one's business why my heart got thrown into such turmoil and partly because it seems smarter to not let these people view me as emotionally messy.

I've worked hard to be an easygoing and useful member of this community, and I'm not going to throw all that effort away because of insignificant relationship issues.

Overall, I do a good job. I avoid the front porch where Deck is helping some of the other guys replace rotting wood. At dinner, I chat with Micah and Burgundy and make an effort to not pay particular attention to Deck.

I'm sick to my stomach but also proud of myself for handling the situation so smoothly when it starts to get dark. After washing up and going to the bathroom outside, I climb into my lower bunk in the turret room.

Because I've been so resolutely ignoring Deck's presence, I'm actually not sure where he's gotten to after dinner. I'm settling under my covers when the bedroom door opens and his big body fills the small space.

He's holding a flashlight, and he shines it in my vicinity but not directly in my eyes.

"I'm here," I say, assuming he's simply checking for my presence. "Good night."

Leaning lower, he peers at me with a questioning frown. He waves a hand vaguely in my direction.

Because I know him and because his face—even hidden by so much beard—usually conveys what he's feeling, I understand what he's asking. "I'm fine. Nothing is wrong."

It's a lie but not a big one. Whatever is happening in my heart is not his concern. I don't have to share it with anyone.

His frown deepens. His thick eyebrows pull together more tightly. He gestures more emphatically.

Page 28

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:46 am

“I said everything is fine,” I say, enunciating the words more crisply than normal. “Stop fussing.”

He makes a soft, guttural sound and straightens with a jerk. Then he strides out of the room, clearly unhappy with me.

Well, that’s just fine then. If he wants to leave in a huff and sleep somewhere else, he’s more than welcome to do that.

I roll over onto my other side so my back is to the door and try to relax enough to fall asleep.

It’s only a few minutes later when the door bursts open again, and his familiar presence fills the air of the room. I roll over to look because I’m not by nature a pouter and because I’m genuinely curious about what he’s doing.

He’s kneeling down beside the bed, holding a torn piece of notebook paper and a pen he must have salvaged from somewhere in the house. He puts the paper on the hardwood floor and scrawls something on it before he raises it again to my level and shines the flashlight on it.

What the hell is wrong with you?

“Nothing,” I say, surprised because I’ve never seen him go to such effort to communicate with anyone. “I told you I’m fine.”

He leans over to write out some more words. Stop lying and tell me.

For some reason, the vehemence of his words and his scowl make my eyes burn and my throat swell. I fight through the emotion. “I’ve already told you what I’m going to tell you. Nothing serious is wrong.”

After scrawling more, he lifts the paper so I can read. Did I do something wrong?

“No!” Surprise has the response bursting out of me. “Deck, of course you didn’t do anything. It has nothing to do with you.”

So there is something wrong!

“No, there’s not. I’m upset right now because you won’t let this go. Would you please stop nagging me and go to sleep?”

He stares at me for a long time, almost shuddering with the intensity of his frustration. Then he makes another soft, exasperated sound in his throat and hefts himself up to his feet. He’s silently stewing as he takes off his shoes, socks, pants, and T-shirt. Before he climbs into the bunk above me, he gives me a sharp look and writes out another line.

Do you want me to swap beds with Burgundy?

A sob is lodged in my throat but doesn’t release. “No! Of course not. I said I’m fine, so shut up and go to sleep.”

With one more scowl, he climbs up to his top bunk and flops down.

Neither one of us says another word or makes another gesture, but it’s a long time before I go to sleep.

The next morning, I wake up when Deck does before dawn, but this morning I don’t

get up. I lie in place and try not to move. Try not to breathe.

After he pulls on his clothes, he looks over at me, the room faintly illuminated by the flashlight.

He knows I'm awake. He's checking my expression. Checking my mood. Seeing if things are like they were last night. He doesn't say a word, but I know it for sure.

I make myself smile at him.

If he were verbal, he would have let out a groan of pure frustration. That's what's reflected on his face as he grabs his belt and secures it before sliding in his handgun, his hunting knife, and the second knife he keeps in an ankle holster.

Then he's gone, and I'm left in my pretty princess room all alone.

10

The whole nextweek isn't great. Not terrible, but definitely not good.

Deck and I had three tense days when he kept pushing to know what's wrong with me and I resolutely refused to tell him. Eventually he gave up and has been acting with matter-of-fact resignation with me since.

I don't like it, but the withdrawal was my decision, and I still believe it was the best one for my long-term security. So I have to live with it.

Today I've barely seen Deck at all. He had an early guard shift and left our bedroom before I woke. I worked in the kitchen and then gathered up a load of laundry between mine, Deck's, and Logan's clothes because my low-level anxiety makes me too restless to lounge around doing nothing.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:46 am

I don't wash Trisha's laundry this week.

When I finish hanging the clothes to dry, it's still earlyafternoon. After wandering aimlessly for a few minutes, I decide to wash my hair, mostly to fill up more time. Burgundy is on duty and I'm not comfortable asking anyone else to keep watch while I'm naked, so I don't go to the creek. Instead, I use water from a rain barrel behind one of the outbuildings.

I take off my shirt, leaving on my jeans and sports bra, and then dunk my head to get my hair wet enough to work up a good lather with the shampoo.

After rinsing it off, I put on some conditioner and let it set for a few minutes.

I went so long without regularly washing my hair that, now that I can, it's gotten drier than it's ever been in my life.

I'd still rather have it clean than dirty though.

It's after I've rinsed off the conditioner and am brushing out my wet hair—it's so long now it almost reaches my waist—that I become aware of someone watching me.

With a gasp, I whirl around and then immediately blow out a relieved breath when I see it's Deck who's come up behind me.

He was clearly on his way to the creek to wash up. He's not wearing a shirt, and he's holding soap and a towel. There's a sheen of sweat on his skin, on his beard and hairline. My eyes are drawn immediately to his naked chest.

It's a good one with defined muscles and a scattering of hair. My appreciation of his body is more thanaesthetic. Something about the sight of him partly undressed awakens a newer, deeper feeling.

Need.

Need.

Like I'll be living a half existence if I don't get my hands on him.

I wrench my eyes back up to his face because leering in this context is inappropriate. My breath hitches when I notice his gaze is crawling up and down over my body with such hunger I can't help but look down at myself.

My bra is thin and damp. There are drips of water streaming down my skin into the low waistline of my jeans. My body is nothing special, but it's exposed more than it's ever been with Deck before.

With a weird jerk of his head, he looks away from me. Makes a quick, awkward sign.Sorry.

"It's fine. You didn't know I was here." I pull back on my shirt even though my wet hair is going to soak the back of it. My entire body buzzes with an almost-forgotten sensation.

Arousal.

It's been a really long time since sex has even crossed my mind.

My cheeks flush hot as I duck my head and gather up my shampoo and conditioner.
"Okay."

He doesn't say anything. Doesn't move.

"Okay," I mumble again. "I've got to..." I wave in a random direction, indicating anywhere other than right here.

Then I get out of there before I humiliate myself even more.

It should have been over after that, but it's not.

Not for me, anyway.

I keep reliving the moment in my mind for the rest of the afternoon, and every time I do my body gets interested again.

Hal and I had plenty of sex in college, but less and less in the months after Impact. We were too scared. Too vulnerable. Had decreasing energy as our food sources became scarcer. Plus, while we took care of ourselves as much as possible, issues caused by our lack of hygiene made sex less appealing than it would have been otherwise.

Not to mention that, even if we took precautions, the possibility of my becoming pregnant in our tenuous situation was the stuff of nightmares.

So we didn't have sex much, and neither of us were particularly troubled by that fact. If Hal got hard, I'd help him jerk off. I never got aroused at all.

I've never considered myself an intensely sexual person anyway. The only times I got turned on before Hal were from reading sexy stories. I wasn't even physically interested in Hal's body until I fell in love with him.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:46 am

So this feels strange to me. The fact that I can't stop picturing Deck in my head. That I can't stop imagining how it would feel to touch him, for him to touch me.

I go to bed hoping that this obsession will have dissipated when I wake up in the morning, but lying in bed in the dark makes it worse.

Deck hasn't come to the room yet, so I'm all alone. In bed. Under the covers. Wearing nothing but panties and a loose T-shirt.

Thinking and thinking and thinking about Deck.

My self-control must not be what I've always believed it to be because I finally slide my hand between my legs and rub my clit through the fabric of my panties. I'm aroused enough from imagining having sex with Deck that my body leaps toward climax at the first pressure of my fingers.

My breath sounds loud in the silent room as I rub myself fast and hard. Even the fear that Deck might burst into the room at any moment doesn't quench the sensations.

In fact, it somehow intensifies them.

A lingering remnant of self-preservation makes me turn over onto my other side so I'm facing the wall instead of the door. I pull my covers up higher.

My momentum toward orgasm breaks from the repositioning, so I have to start again. But it doesn't take long until I'm close again, my body tensing up and my skin blazing with heat.

It's then—of course it's then—that the door to the bedroom swings open and Deck's presence fills the room.

I was so close. Almost there. I almost whimper with the frustration.

The sound of his motion stops abruptly. I know he's peering at me in the dark.

I don't move. Don't breathe. Hold my hand perfectly still despite the way my whole body is throbbing.

After a minute, he stops checking me out. I hear the sounds as he undresses and then climbs up to the bunk above me.

My arousal was halted so abruptly my pussy actually aches. I never make a conscious decision, but I very carefully start rubbing my clit again.

If I make no sound or motion, Deck will never know.

And I've got to relieve some of this tension if I'm ever going to sleep.

The interruption only slowed me down slightly. Soon I'm on the cusp of release again, fighting against the urge to rock my hips and release little moans because it feels so good and I need it so much.

Deck is still moving occasionally above me the way he always does to get comfortable on the small bed. He's paying no attention to me.

And I'm almost there.

I fall over the edge on that thought. I keep pushing hard against my clit as the spasms of orgasm radiate out from my center. I manage not to move, but there's no way I can

suppress a soft gasp of pleasure.

It's fine.

Deck has grown still now. He always falls asleep almost as soon as his head hits the pillow.

He didn't hear. And if he did, he won't know what that gasp was from.

My body feels so much better. It's relaxing, washed with waves of satisfaction.

That's all I needed. I'm fine now.

Everything is fine.

I'll go to sleep and forget about this whole thing by morning.

I'm still convincing myself of that fact a few minutes later when Deck suddenly climbs off his upper bunk, stuffs his feet into his shoes, and strides out the bedroom door.

I turn over and gape at the door in the dark, startled and upset by his abrupt departure.

Page 31

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:46 am

But even that is not necessarily a big deal. He's even done it before—a few days ago when he ate something that disagreed with him and had bathroom issues during the night.

There's absolutely no way he could have known what I was doing earlier. No one could.

I'm relieved when he returns about five minutes later.

“Are you okay?” I ask him as he toes back off his shoes.

He turns on the lantern so I can see his signed response. Yes. Bathroom.

I let out a long breath, deeply relieved. “That's what I figured. You're not sick, are you?”

No. Okay. He flicks off the lantern and climbs back up to his bunk.

“That's good. Good night.”

He drops a hand and taps the bedframe, which I understand as his response and acknowledgement of my words.

So it's all okay. Not great, but okay.

And at least I didn't give myself away.

Four weeks later, I'm riding behind Micah on an ATV and trying to get the flyaways from my braided ponytail to fly in the proper direction and not right across my face.

"What are you doing back there, girl?" Micah asks after a minute of my whipping my head weirdly back and forth to maneuver my hair without letting go of Micah's firm body.

"Hair in my face," I explain. "It needs to stay on the proper sides of my head, but it's not cooperating."

Micah chuckles and speeds up slightly to keep pace with Deck on a second ATV in front of us.

This morning, when we started off, I suggested riding with Micah because he's not as big as Deck so there would be more room for me. It made sense, and no one objected. But the sharp look Deck aimed at me made it clear he knew I chose Micah so I wouldn't have to be so close to him.

The past month hasn't been a bad one. We've been able to stay at the house the whole time since there were so many provisions stocked up there, and I've felt relatively secure—which hasn't been true since Impact.

My relationship with Deck isn't like it used to be, but it's not bad between us. We still get along. We still help each other out. He still sleeps on the bunk above me every night. I've managed to control my sexy thoughts better, so I haven't had to take the edge off again like I did that one night. And I'm still teaching him sign language, although he only ever uses it with me.

But I always feel a little awkward about being too physically close to him, which is

why I chose Micah to ride with today.

Micah is tall and strong, but he's not as bulky as Deck. He's good-looking and good-natured, and I like him better than anyone except Deck and Burgundy.

And it's not troublesome to sit this closely behind him as we ride, wrapping my arms around his lean waist and occasionally pressing my face against his back.

I like him. He treats me like a sister, and I'm sure that's how he views me.

It's nice to feel close to someone in an entirely safe way.

Deck waves an arm, gesturing toward the right when the backwoods road we're driving on forks. Micah follows, and about five minutes later we're parking behind an abandoned drugstore.

One of the other guys found it yesterday on a scouting trip but didn't have time to check it out for more than a minute since it was getting dark at that point. But he said there looked to be a lot to scavenge there, so the three of us have driven out this morning to collect anything useful we can find.

I'm stiff when Micah turns off the engine, so I stretch my back before I dismount. By the time I've done that, Deck has come over, extending a hand to help me as I swing my leg over the seat and straighten up.

I don't pull my hand away even though the warmth of his big, strong grip sends little tremors through my body. If I jerk away from him, he'll get all frustrated and upset and might start demanding answers again.

Things work better if we let that topic lie neglected.

Deck drops my hand before I start enjoying it too much. When Micah stands, I pull my small pistol out while the men get their rifles at the ready.

Page 32

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:46 am

This region appears to be mostly deserted. Most people fled to the center of the country to avoid the flooding and earthquakes that ravaged both coasts. We're kind of in no-man's-land here in what used to be western Kentucky.

We've parked in what was the back of the freestanding building, so we walk the perimeter to the front. When we reach it, all three of us freeze.

We're not alone.

There's an old pickup parked at an angle right near the door, and behind the truck bed is someone clearly at a guard post.

It's not a man though. It's a very small, very pretty young woman—girl?—with dark hair and an oversized man's T-shirt.

"Cal!" she calls out sharply, stiffening and aiming at us as soon as we move into sight.

Deck's already aiming at her, and Micah shifts quickly to the right when a big man comes out of the opening where the glass doors of the store used to be, pointing a shotgun at us.

The man is almost as large as Deck, but he's older with a tough, intimidating face. He looks dangerous. Like the kind of person who shoots first and asks questions later.

So I call out quickly, "We mean no harm! We're just passing through."

The man peers from me to Micah to Deck and leaves his shotgun trained on Deck. “If that’s true, then get the fuck out of here. We were here first.”

The young woman—who is definitely younger than me and probably still a teenager—adds, “We won’t shoot unless you make us.”

I believe she means what she’s saying, but I’m not sure the man necessarily agrees. I’m so scared I’m almost shaking from it. I trust Deck and Micah. They’re not going to kill innocent people who are simply trying to stay alive.

But that man... he looks like he’s cut from a different cloth.

“Right, Cal?” the girl adds. She’s got a straightforward manner—like not much fazes her—and her tone is slightly impatient. She must have had long experience trying to rein her companion in.

Cal makes a growling sound. “I’ll stop aimin’ at them when they stop aimin’ at you.”

Deck is tightly on guard. I can feel the tension vibrating through him even through the distance between us. He shifts his stance to point his rifle at Cal instead.

“I don’t think any of us wants to shoot,” I say, searching for something to say to defuse this situation. “Why don’t we back away and leave y’all alone?” I glance over at Deck, who gives me a quick nod without looking away from Cal. Encouraged by his agreement, I add, “You get anything you want out of here, and we’ll come back later after you’re done.”

“That sounds good,” the girl says, looking over at Cal as if waiting for him to agree too.

“So get the fuck out of here,” Cal bites out.

Deck, Micah, and I all move backward, still pointing our guns as we retreat.

“You show your face again, I’ll blow your head off,” Cal calls out when we’re almost out of sight.

I groan in relief when we’ve moved behind the building and I can holster my pistol and relax my stance.

“Shit, that was close,” Micah mutters, strapping his rifle back on his back so he can straddle the seat of his ATV. “I thought we were dead for sure. Good going, Lilah.”

I flush at the compliment, but I’m shaking helplessly from the aftermath of the crisis. Before I can move over to get on the seat behind Micah, Deck puts an arm around me and moves me over to his.

I’m too weak to object. I don’t even want to. What I really want to do is wrap my arms around Deck and never let go. No one has ever made me feel as safe as he does.

When I’ve climbed on the ATV behind him, I hold on tight, and the three of us drive away.

We wait in the woods for most of the day until we see the pickup truck leave the old drugstore.

By then it’s late afternoon. The sun is halfway down its route in the western sky. But we came all this way, and if we don’t bring back any scavengeable items, then all the time and gas will have been wasted.

So we spend a few hours searching what remains of the store. The exterior and roof are intact, but inside is a ruined mess with toppled shelves, crumbling interior walls, piles of crushed and useless supplies, and unpleasant evidence that wildlife has been

setting up shop in the building for the past two years.

If there was any canned food or medication remaining, Cal and the girl cleaned it out earlier today. All three of us root around, Deck and Micah lifting heavy shelves and me squeezing into tight corners, but our search isn't as productive as we were hoping.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:46 am

We find some only slightly damaged plastic products that we can use—old summer-themed tumblers, resealable baggies, and disposable utensils—plus a sleeping bag and a few battery-operated lanterns from what must have been a small camping section. But it's not until Deck and Micah together lift an enormous shelf that we find anything valuable enough to make the trip worth it.

First aid supplies and bottles of pain reliever were preserved in near-perfect condition by the shelter of the rubble. Cal probably couldn't lift that shelf on his own, which is the only reason the treasures still remain for us to uncover.

We fill our bags with Advil, aspirin, Tylenol, Band-Aids, antibiotic cream, self-adhering athletic wrap, and hydrogen peroxide. When we have no more room in our bags and there's still more to be had, I find a water-logged box of black garbage bags and detach a few from the middle of the roll where they were protected.

After the garbage bags are filled, we take all our loot back to the ATVs and have trouble figuring out a way to carry it all with us.

"Shoulda taken a truck," Micah mutters as we work on strapping bags onto the back of his vehicle.

"I think we can get it all," I say, hoping these garbage bags are indeed as hefty as advertised. When I see Deck frowning at the lowering sun at the horizon, I add, "It's going to be dark in an hour, so we need to get going."

Since we strapped more of the bags onto Micah's ATV, I climb on behind Deck. But as soon as he turns the ignition, the engine makes a puttering sound and a loud clack.

“Shit,” I mutter as Deck’s body tenses up. I can feel it acutely because my chest is pressing against his back.

Micah puts his ATV back into park and gets off so that he and Deck can peer in at the engine of the second one. Both men have basic, utilitarian knowledge of mechanics, but whatever is wrong with this engine doesn’t easily reveal itself.

I have no experience with fixing vehicles at all, so I stand back with my arms crossed over my chest, stewing as I watch the sun get lower and lower.

Even in a large group, it’s not safe to travel at night. There are far too many criminal types around who do their worst in the dark. Not to mention desperate animals who are too hungry to follow their natural instincts of reserve and retreat.

This is not good.

Not good at all.

“Shit,” Micah says, stepping back and wiping sweat off his forehead with the back of his forearm. “We’re fucked.”

Deck glances back at the sunset—mostly gray with just a slight tinge of pink—and points toward Micah before he signs “go home” with his hands.

“Yeah,” I say, nodding at him. “He’s saying you need to drive home now. Take those supplies with you and head back as quick as you can. Then tomorrow morning, someone can come get me and Deck.”

“Y’all can’t stay here on your own.” Micah looks around dubiously at the darkening forest. “It’s too dangerous.”

Deck signs again, gesturing toward me.

“No.” I narrow my eyes at him. “I’m not going with Micah. I won’t fit with all the supplies, and you can’t stay here on your own. It’s dangerous enough with two people. On your own is an absolute no. We can hole up in the building and take turns staying on guard.” I turn again toward Micah. “Just get back here as early as you can tomorrow morning.”

I’m not thrilled about spending the night in an unknown and insecure location, but Hal and I managed for a long time doing exactly that. It’s better than any other option we have available.

And there’s no way in hell I’m leaving Deck to his own devices when there’s a good chance we would come back tomorrow morning to find him dead.

Or not find him at all, which would be even worse.

Deck scowls at me but doesn’t argue further, so Micah helps us find a defensible corner of the building, assures himself we’ll be okay, and then takes off into the evening with promises that they’ll leave at dawn tomorrow to rescue us.

Micah’s trip alone will be almost as dangerous as our night holed up here, but at least on the ATV he’ll have a good chance of outrunning any predators.

Deck and I go to the bathroom before we settle on the floor in the corner. There’s a minefield of litter between us and the entrance, so we’ll hear if anyone or anything approaches. We both have our guns at the ready.

We should be okay.

We eat the last of the jerky and bread we brought with us, and then I walk several feet

and lean down to grab a small item where I'd seen a flash of red earlier.

It's a bag of Skittles. Untorn, uncrushed, and unopened. The bag is dirty, but the candy is still clean and in good condition, so Deck and I split it, sitting side by side against the wall with our legs extended.

It's sweet and slightly tart and tastes strongly artificial. But good. Familiar.

For some reason the taste of it makes me want to cry.

Page 34

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:46 am

I don't make a sound or twist my features or sniffle or anything, but Deck still senses my mood. He wraps an arm around me and pulls me to lean against his big body. I huddle against his side, comforted.

I should know better than to fall asleep, but I do anyway. When I wake up, it's pitch-dark and I'm aware of nothing but the scent and heat of Deck's body. My head is on his lap. His fingers are idly stroking my head and down my ponytail.

"Sorry," I say when I'm conscious enough to realize what happened. "I'm supposed to be keeping guard with you."

I start to sit up, but he puts a hand on my head to stop me. I don't resist because I'm exhausted, and it feels weirdly good to lie like this.

Like he's protecting me.

It's been such a long time since I've felt that way.

It's far too dark to see his face, so I find one of his hands and bring it down so I can feel any signs he makes with his fingers.

"Has it been quiet the whole time?" I ask softly.

He gestures yes.

"If you need to sleep, I can stay awake for a while and keep guard."

No.

“It’s really okay. I don’t deserve special treatment.”

Yes. You do.

I smile, my chest aching intensely. I squeeze his hand.

After a minute, he gently retrieves it and strokes my hair again.

It’s not long until I fall back to sleep.

12

I wake up when Deck starts moving.

Even half-asleep, I can tell he’s trying to gently extricate himself from beneath my head without disturbing me, so I mumble, “I’m awake,” as I attempt to pry open my eyelids.

He starts positioning me so I’m lying back down with my head on the sleeping bag we found instead of his lap, but I resist his hands. Eventually he gives up and lets me sit.

It’s still dark in the building, but Deck has turned on a flashlight so I can see the darker shadows of the fallen shelves and his face dimly lit when I turn toward him.

He scowls and sighs, Sleep as he points back toward the floor.

“I’m awake now,” I tell him. “I can’t just go back to sleep because you order me to.”

I sound crabbiest than I intend, so I give him a quick look from under my lashes.
“Sorry. Didn’t mean to snap.”

He shrugs off my apology, clearly unfazed.

“Is it morning yet?” I ask, squinting toward the dark entrance as if that might give me a clue about the time of day.

I glance back to see his response. Almost.

By the time we’ve gotten up, organized ourselves, and walked outside, there’s some faint light from the rising sun. We wander until we find a small stream with enough water to do a half-assed morning washup.

We have no food left, but we spend thirty minutes searching the wreckage of the drugstore until we find some baked beans in a half-crushed can that’s still sealed. Deck pries it open, and we eat the beans at room temperature.

It’s better than nothing.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:46 am

I'm tired and stiff and grumpy. It's been more than a month now of sleeping in a real bed in a genuinely safe environment. I'm not as used to tense, interrupted, insecure sleep as I used to be. Deck acts normal. Silent. Efficient. Matter-of-fact. And observant. But he's not as relaxed as I've seen him lately either.

I don't like this anymore. It's safer and more familiar with Logan and the rest of the group. That feels as much like home as is possible anymore, and I want to get back there.

Micah and whoever he brings to get us won't have left until first light, so we've got at least a couple of hours to wait. We return to our corner and sit side by side again, and I try to prepare to pass the tedious minutes until their arrival.

Deck reaches over to touch my arm to get my attention. Then signs, What's wrong?

"Nothing," I respond with a sigh, dropping my head back against the wall. "I just don't like it here. I feel vulnerable. I want to get back with the others." I keep my head turned to the side so I can see his response.

We've done well with communicating with sign language given my limited knowledge and the short time we've been practicing, but there's still a lot Deck isn't able to communicate with learned gestures. He taps his chest and then wraps one hand around his rifle with a frown.

"I know you'll protect me. I know you're not going to let anyone hurt me. But even you aren't invulnerable, you know."

His frown deepens like he wants to argue with that claim.

Unexpectedly, his expression makes me want to smile. “I’m not casting aspersions on your strength or your manhood. I just... I just don’t like being away from the others. It... It makes me feel how I used to feel before I joined up with you. At the time, I didn’t realize how traumatic it was when Hal and I were all alone and always hiding and scrounging to survive.”

He moves his hand from his rifle to my thigh and leaves it there. Big and warm and comforting.

“I guess we just do what we have to do. No matter how hard. And don’t really think it all through until afterward. And then Hal died, and I was all alone. And even then I just survived without realizing how hard it actually was. But thinking back now... it was... terrible. Terrible. What I had to go through.”

He makes a couple of awkward gestures, signing no and now.

“Not anymore,” I say, verbalizing the sentiment he’s trying to express. “I know. I’m not alone anymore.” I cover his much bigger hand on my thigh. “I think that’s why I want to get back. I don’t want to feel even a little like that anymore.” I give him a faint smile. “You and Logan and the others really saved me.”

He sits up straighter and turns to face me directly. He signs out no and now again and then spells out alone with his fingers. Then he taps his chest. And keeps tapping with increasing emphasis.

I must be emotionally stretched by the fear and tension of the night because my face contorts as I fight against a wave of emotion.

He may not want or be capable of speech anymore, but nothing could be clearer than

what he's telling me right now.

I'll never be alone again.

Because he's with me, and he always will be.

The emotion shudders through me until I'm able to contain it back into my heart where it belongs. I nod and manage to force out, "Same. Same here. With me. You'll never be alone again either."

He makes a rough sound in his throat—an actual sound—and pulls me into a hug. It's strong and urgent and so tight it momentarily takes my breath, and it's also a little awkward with both of us sitting on the floor.

But I love it. Need it. I hug him back with all I'm worth.

After a minute, Deck solves the awkwardness of our positions by pulling me into his lap and leaning against the wall as we hug. It's better. More comfortable. More intimate.

Warmth and affection and pleasure and excitement all swell up inside me, overwhelming the small shiver of fear that also awakes from the knowledge of needing someone so completely in a world that never allows the good things to remain.

It's a long time before Deck finally loosens his arms. He draws his head back and stares at me. I gaze back, hot and flushed and trembling in the expectation of what I can see in his eyes.

He cups my face with one of his huge hands. Waits a moment to see if I'll pull away. When I don't, he leans forward. Brushes my lips with his.

It feels so good—so much better than anything I can ever remember—that my body and my heart both lurch with need and ownership. He's withdrawn his head so he can see my response, and I sway forward in his direction, closing the distance between our mouths to kiss him again.

This time it's deeper. Longer. More intense. The first slide of his tongue into my mouth makes my pussy clench, and the arousal tightens and builds as he kisses me hungrily, rearranging my body so I'm straddling his lap.

Now our groins rub against each other. He's already hard in his pants. I hold on to a handful of his beard as I open wider to his tongue, sliding mine out to get in on the action.

He's a lot bigger than Hal. He feels and smells and is different. Everything about the kiss is new, and it's heady and intoxicating. I eagerly try to suck down every sensation.

Deck slides his hands down to cup my bottom over my jeans. He holds me there, moving my hips in a rocking motion against the hard shape of his cock.

Page 36

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:46 am

I'm so into it that I'm pretty sure I could come from simply this—this shameless, carnal humping motion—but a stray thought pierces the heated blur of my pleasure.

Logan's voice. Asking me if I'll be careful.

This is exactly what he was warning me about. What Deck and I are doing right now.

The sharp pang of fright is enough to interrupt the momentum of my arousal. I pull back abruptly.

Deck, still lost in the kiss, reaches out to draw me back again, but I choke out, "No. Deck, no."

He freezes, flushed beneath his facial hair and his body visibly tense.

"We can't." I'm fighting against every instinct in my body to get the words spoken. "Deck, we can't."

He takes a shaky breath and blows it out. Then taps his forehead and lowers the same hand, making the shape of the letter Y with his fingers.

"Because—" It still feels like I'm going to gag on the words. I cough to clear my throat. "Because Logan said?—"

I break off the explanation, changing my mind mid-sentence.

Deck rears up, using the letter L to indicate Logan as he asks, Logan said what?

“It doesn’t matter.” I’m about to burst into tears, so I start scrambling to my feet.

Deck stops me, pulling me back down. Logan said what? He forms each gesture emphatically as he scowls.

Tears are sliding down my face now, but I control myself enough to say, “He said it’s dangerous. To have that kind of relationship with you. Because sometimes they end bad. And then... and then... one person has to leave.” I swipe tears away as they fall, pausing briefly to shake through a couple of silent sobs. “And it won’t be you who’s leaving. It will be... it will be... me.”

Deck is signing urgently, but he’s too upset for it to be clear. I can’t interpret the specific words he’s trying to communicate, but I know what he means.

Logan is wrong.

He’s wrong, and what he told me is never going to happen.

“But we don’t know how things will go,” I say with that same sob in my voice. “I know we think we can make it work and that we’re mature enough to manage if and when it ends, but we don’t know that. It could be terrible. And I’m so sorry, Deck, but I don’t think I can make it on my own again. Not after I’ve had it so much better with all of you. It’s... it’s too much of a risk. I have to think about my own safety. No matter what I... I want.”

He’s breathing hard and fast through his nose, staring at me. I honestly don’t know what he would have said.

He doesn’t have the chance because we hear a familiar voice calling just then from outside the building.

It's Micah. He has arrived to rescue us.

Micah brought one of the pickups, and it doesn't take us long to load all our supplies and wheel the ATV into the bed of the truck. Because I'm still really upset, I sit up in the cab with Micah, letting Deck stand guard in the back by himself.

It's clear to me that Micah knows something is wrong, but he doesn't ask about it. He keeps up steady, pleasant conversation as we drive back to the big house, and I feel better by the time we reach it.

Not good. I don't feel good at all. But I'm resigned and in control.

I made the right decision, and I can see it through.

Logan and some of the others are tinkering with one of the Jeeps as we arrive and park near the house on the grass. A bunch of the others come over to greet us and see what we've brought.

Deck climbs out of the back of the truck, strides over to Logan with a scowl, and slugs him.

That evening, I climb into the lower bunk in the princess room and wait for Deck to come up from outside.

It's been a weird, bewildering day, but I slept for a couple of hours in the afternoon, so I'm not as tired as I would have expected.

I'm jittery. Like something is about to happen that I desperately want and that I desperately fear at the exact same time.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:46 am

Logan punched Deck back—likely an automatic instinct rather than a conscious decision—but then the whole thing was over. I was astounded that first, Deck didn't continue the fight this afternoon and that second, he didn't get in trouble with Logan for lashing out. Logan didn't appear to even resent the blow. They had a conversation later, but I wasn't allowed to be part of it, so I have no idea what was communicated between them.

Afterward, everyone acted normal. Like nothing in the world had happened.

For some reason, this fact has made me even more jittery.

I don't even know why.

When Deck finally walks into the room, he smells like soap more strongly than normal, and he's carrying a pad of paper and pen. He kneels down beside my bed and starts to write something out.

I watch him in the light of the lantern I kept on, once again experiencing that odd swell of ownership at the sight of his big face, rumpled beard, and intelligent brown eyes.

I wait until he's finished writing. Then read what he wrote.

I told Logan he's not allowed to kick you out unless you break the rules.

I lick my lips. "I know you say that now, but we don't know how we'll feel later on. I mean, what if things go bad between us?—"

No!He makes the sign dramatically, shaking his head at the same time.No!He grabs the pad to write out,What kind of man do you think I am? I wouldn't let you be put in danger like that no matter what happens.

I take a couple of deep breaths as I read his messy handwriting. Inside, I know what he's saying is true.

Of course Deck isn't like that. Of course Deck would never let that happen. Nothing that might occur between us could ever change the man he is.

"Okay," I manage to say. "I believe you."

He peers at me intently for a minute. Then writes,You never have to worry about that happening.

"Okay," I choke out. "Thank you."

We stare at each other for a moment. Deck is still kneeling next to my bunk, and I'm propped up under the covers.

Then he nods and withdraws, starting to stand with a reluctant expression.

It's then—only then—that I know what all the jittery excitement inside me has been telling me all day.

"Wait!" I say, grabbing for him and catching a handful of his shirt.

He lowers himself back down to my level with a question on his face.

"If you mean it," I say. "If you really mean it, then I'm not afraid anymore."

Deck freezes, only his eyes searching my face with growing heat.

“If you think we can keep it casual, if you think we can keep it from turning into an emotional mess that will cause problems in the larger group, then... Can we...”
When my voice catches, I start again. “Can we go back to where we stopped this morning?”

His answer is evident—hotly thrilling—on Deck’s face as he climbs into the little princess bunk on top of me.

13

Deck is big.

I’ve always been aware of this obvious truth, but I’ve never experienced it as palpably as when he crawls into the small lower bunk with me.

How has he even been sleeping up top? He can’t even straighten his legs.

Right now he’s filling up all the extra room in the space between my mattress and the bottom of the upper bunk. He’s in an awkward all-fours position straddling my body as he bends his elbows to get low enough to kiss me.

I’m swallowed up by him in every way as I open to his mouth, winding my arms around his neck as my heart and every nerve ending thrills in excitement at getting to hold him this way.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:46 am

He must have made some extra efforts to wash up this evening because he smells a lot like soap and just a little like his natural scent. He's as hot as a radiator as he devours my mouth, his tongue eager and presumptuous and his entire face somehow involved in the kiss. His nose, his jaw, his beard.

His beard.

I dig my fingernails into the back of his neck and arch up, trying to rub myself against the bulk of him. He's still braced on his knees, so he's too high up. I grind against nothing, whimpering in frustration.

He pulls back abruptly, his warm eyes searching my face and checking to make sure the sound I made wasn't from anxiety or discomfort.

"How are we going to manage this?" I ask. "You're so big I can't even get a good dry hump going!"

He shakes with silent laughter and pulls me up in a quick, awkward maneuver that ends with him lying on his back beneath me and me sprawled on top of him.

Giggling helplessly, I rearrange so my legs are on either side of his hips and I'm leaning forward on his chest. This position allows me much better access to his body, and he's not as at risk of bonking his head on the bunk every time he moves.

He slides me up his body to kiss me again. Since my back is shorter than his, I have to grind against his belly instead of his groin. That's just fine with me. Every part of his body is warm and firm and natural. Real.

We kiss for a few minutes—deep and urgent but not rushed—until my pussy pulses and Deck’s hands have become more and more assertive. He’s got them under my T-shirt now, spanning my back and sliding down to cup my bottom over my cotton panties.

For no good reason, I hear Trisha’s sassy voice in the back of my head. There’s something about a man whose hands can span your waist. Or your ass.

The memory distracts me so much I break out of the kiss, straightening up so abruptly I bang the top of my head against the upper bunk.

“Ow!” I rub my scalp with a frown.

Damn Trisha. Somehow even interfering with this.

Deck is frowning and puzzled, peering up at me in the low light of the lantern that’s still illuminated. When I stay in position, absently massaging the sore spot on my head and purposefully clearing my mind, he lets go of my butt and turns his palms upward. What? he signs.

I shake my head. “Nothing. A random, stray thought that has nothing to do with us.”

What?

“I told you it was a stray thought. Don’t be pushy.”

He starts making the same sign again, so I grab his hands to stop him.

He resists, and we have a silly fight over his hands that ends up making him shake with silent laughter and me collapse in giggles.

He wraps his arms around me in a quick, tight hug but then lifts my shoulders so I'm sitting on top of him again. He points toward me and shapes his fingers into an O and a K.

"I'm okay." He's so serious I can't bring myself not to give him a real answer. "I got kind of insecure for a minute. Are you... You really think we can do this and not have it turn into a mess, right?"

I... Yes. Neither one of us knows the sign for sure, but his response is clear and without hesitation nonetheless.

"Because it's not like it would be back in the old world. Just starting out. There are real stakes to everything now. Life and death. Not only what Logan would do if we have a bad breakup. In other ways, anything complicated could get in the way of our safety and security. You might be strong enough to make it on your own if everything falls apart between us, but I'm... I'm not."

He nods, obviously understanding what I'm attempting to express. He thinks for a moment before he reaches down to the floor where he dropped the pen and pad. He scrawls out, We can wait for this.

I stare at the words. Stare at his broad, familiar face. Stare at the words on the piece of paper again.

Then I whisper, "I don't want to wait."

His expression cracks in visible relief.

Call me wishy-washy if you must, but it makes me giggle again.

He smiles, amused and affectionate, and pulls me down into another kiss. This one is

lighter. Gentler. Pleasurable but not so intense. I kiss him back, rubbing my body against his until all the arousal from before builds back up. Even stronger now.

This time when I rear up again, it's to pull off my T-shirt so he can get his hands on my body more easily. I'm too enthusiastic with the motion and bang first my elbow and then my head against the top bunk.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:46 am

I don't hit very hard. It's more annoying than anything else. I grumble as I pull the shirt off and fling it across the floor. The room is so small it hits the wall and slides down with cartoon slowness.

Laughing, I turn back to smile at Deck only to discover his eyes are lower than my face. I'm only wearing my panties now, and his attention is fixed on my bare breasts.

Back in college, I used to be confident in my body. I've always been very small, but I had defined curves back then. My breasts were firm and rounded, and my belly has never been anything but naturally flat. But going without proper nutrition for so long has had a significant effect on my figure. I'm not sure my boobs are much to look at anymore even after eating better for the past several weeks.

None of those worries are evident in the way Deck is gazing at me right now. Not only with the heat of arousal but also with something deep and hungry. He's flushed under his beard. He's hard as a rock beneath his trousers.

"Hey," I say softly, something a lot heavier than arousal in my chest and my belly. When I get his attention, I make a motion toward my face. "Eyes up here, mister."

The hot tension cracks again. His whole body shakes with suppressed laughter. He pulls me down into another kiss—a short, hard one—and then just hugs me for a minute until every hint of insecurity has vanished from my mind.

Maybe he senses it. Or maybe his physical condition becomes too urgent. He eases me up again and uses his large hands to rub my breasts.

It feels so good I let out a silly moan. Then I arch my back and bump my head again.

“Damn it!” I’m laughing and rubbing my scalp at the same time. “Bunk beds aren’t really conducive to these kinds of activities.”

He’s chuckling too, but he motions down to the floor.

“No way. The floor would be way more uncomfortable than this. But if I keep it up, between the laughing and the bruises, I’ll never be able to focus enough to have an orgasm.”

That comment makes an impact. His expression sobers, and he motions to get me to look at his face, meet his gaze.

I do. There’s no reason not to. And what I see in his eyes arrests me.

He sees me. Really sees me. All the way. Deep down inside.

And he still wants everything he sees there.

My giggles fade as I grow still. I can’t look away from him even as he lifts his hands to caress me again. He cups my face. Then gently runs his hands down my neck, curving around my throat for a moment before he separates them, sliding them down my shoulders and arms.

My throat and pussy both tighten as he palms my breasts before teasing my nipples between his fingers and thumbs.

An invisible cord inside me tugs between my nipples and pussy. I release an embarrassing whimper.

He continues stroking me until I'm so turned on I'm squirming and moisture is leaking from between my legs, through the worn cotton of my underwear, and onto the fabric of his shirt.

It's only then he lowers one of his hands to tuck his fingers beneath the elastic of my panties, exploring until he finds my clit. He rubs it in firm circles as he tweaks one of my nipples with his other hand.

The intense sensations split me in two. I let out a quiet cry and jerk my head to the side as an orgasm tightens and builds.

He lets go of my breast to move my head back so I'm looking at him again as he rubs me off.

"Deck," I choke out, something so nakedly intimate about meeting his eyes as I'm this close to coming that I can barely contain it. "Deck, I need it." I make a loud, hoarse gasp as he adjusts his hand, sliding one big finger into my pussy and rubbing my clit with his thumb. "So bad." The words are embarrassing me and making me hot at the same time, so I'm kind of swallowing them down as I speak them.

He slides his hand down to hold my head in place by the jaw as he works his other hand between my thighs. The orgasm comes on fast and hard, and I ride it out, grinding against his hand and making helpless, eager sounds.

He's smiling, obviously proud of himself, when he finishes stroking me through the last of the spasms of my pussy. He retrieves his hand and sucks his finger clean.

I shake my head, trying and failing at disapproval. "Don't get cocky."

He laughs breathily through his nose and readjusts my body so I'm farther back on him—straddling just past his groin.

We both reach for his trousers and work on undoing them.

“I’m not sure how we ended up with me mostly naked and you wearing all your clothes,” I say in a feigned grumble. “That doesn’t seem quite right.”

He taps his chest and signs outokayagain.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:46 am

“Yes, it doesn’t surprise me that you’re just fine with it.” I start to straighten up so I can wriggle out of my panties but stop when Deck lifts a quick hand to protect the back of my head before I bump it again. “Yeah, okay. Here’s what we’ll do. I’m going to stand up to get out of my underwear, and you get rid of your clothes at the same time. Deal?”

He nods, already lifting his hips to pull down his pants and boxers as I climb out of the bunk.

When we’re both naked, he pulls me back on top of him again with a feral smile.

His cock is big. Big and hard and poised upright. I stare down at it greedily as I shift my position.

He taps my chin and makes a motion toward his face with two fingers.

I spill over with giggles. He couldn’t have said Eyes up here more clearly if he’d spoken with words.

Together, we arrange my body to align me over his cock, lifting my pelvis and lowering my head at the same time so I don’t hit the upper bunk again. It’s not entirely comfortable, but I couldn’t care less as Deck holds his penis in position and uses his free hand to guide my hips down.

It takes a little maneuvering to get the angle right, but then I’m sheathing him with my wet pussy.

Because Hal and I didn't have sex very often in the last year of his life, I feel tight. Very tight.

I gasp loudly and halt midway down.

His hands are cupping my ass, and he helps hold me in place until I breathe it out and manage to relax.

When I can open my eyes, Deck's eyes are moving from my face to the place where we're joined. Torn between concern and the bone-deep need to thrust.

"I'm okay," I tell him, intentionally softening my pussy so I can take more of him inside me.

No okay. Good. You good?

"I'll be good in just a minute." I can't help but smile in response to his gestures. The contradiction of him. Big and gruff and sweet and silent. "It's your own fault for being so inconveniently enormous."

He chokes on a laugh. How big?

"I shouldn't feed your ego."

Yes.

"Okay, fine. Just this once. Very big. Very, very big." I rock my hips as I say the teasing words.

He sucks in a sharp breath, his back arching slightly. His fingers clench in the soft flesh of my bottom. Sweat has broken out on his forehead, illuminated by the glow of

the lantern we never turned off.

He's holding on by a thread.

The tight discomfort has eased up now, so I reangle my hips. Keep rocking, gradually riding him faster and harder.

Soon he's bucking up into me, matching my rhythm and shaking the frame of the bed with his enthusiasm. His breathing gets louder and more ragged as I squeeze my pussy around the penetration of his cock.

I'm not going to come again, but everything feels amazing. The pride and pleasure of it—the deep affection—fills my chest and throbs in my head.

It doesn't take long for Deck to fall out of rhythm. His back arches up from the mattress as his fingers clench down hard on my ass. He jerks and huffs and lets go of me to slam one of his hands against the wall as he works his way up toward release.

Just before he reaches climax, he lifts my hips so his cock slides out of my pussy. I grab it so I can squeeze him through the spasms. The spurts of his ejaculation are so forceful they hit me on my neck and chin.

We're both gasping when he's worked through the last of them. I keep gently massaging his cock as it gradually softens. My entire body is flooded with excitement and ownership.

He gestures to get me to look at him, and I smile. He smiles back.

He pulls me down into an embrace. His body is so hot I'm momentarily convinced it will burn me. But he's relaxing now. Softening. I love the feel of it. Him.

After a minute, he slides a hand between my legs and starts rubbing before I know to expect it.

Page 41

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:46 am

I come in less than a minute, tensing and shuddering through the release with a loud whimper since all my inhibitions have somehow vanished.

He strokes my hair and my back. I play with his beard and kiss his shoulder.

I honestly can't remember the last time I felt so completely good.

14

The next morning things are relaxed and almost normal between us. Nothing significant has changed despite the fact that we had sex last night.

When we've gotten dressed, Deck signs, You okay?

"Yeah. I'm a little sore, but I feel pretty good about everything. What about you?"

Very good. He gives me a wolfish smile, making me giggle.

"So you think we can do this, right? Act like we always have and just have sex at night when we want to?"

Yes.

"Okay. Good." I squeeze one of his arms. "Then that's what we'll do."

I'm in a good mood all day. I do try to keep everything in perspective. It's not like it would have been before Impact after I had a really good date. There's not the same

promise and hope for a future, not the leisure of slowly working out a relationship at our own individual pace.

But still. I'm definitely in a better mood than normal. Merely from the expectation of maybe having sex with Deck again this evening.

My good spirits are dampened only slightly when I find out that Deck has guard duty for the late-afternoon-and-early-evening shift. At least he'll be done before too late, so we'll still have the chance of sex afterward.

It's a very warm evening, and the grit in the air doesn't feel as thick as it sometimes does because there's a steady breeze. After dinner, I sit outside on the porch swing, pleased when Micah comes to sit beside me.

He's not Deck, but he's good company.

I smile at him, waiting to see what he'll say.

He arches his dark eyebrows. "So you and Deck are a thing now or what?"

I stiffen. "What are you talking about?"

"You're together now?"

"We're not together any more than we were yesterday," I say rather primly and without complete accuracy. "Why is it any of your business?"

"It's not. But you know how Logan is. He doesn't like anything to interfere with the efficient functioning of his people."

"I know. But that's not going to happen. Everything is fine."

“Okay. Good. Because fucking is fine. Feelings not so much.”

I narrow my eyes at him, defensive and so switching the direction of the conversation. “It’s ridiculous of Logan to think he can control the feelings of everyone who rides with him.”

“I don’t think he gives a shit about what anyone feels about anything. He just doesn’t want the feelings causing problems.”

“They won’t.” Micah doesn’t look entirely convinced, so I ask, “So you don’t have any troublesome feelings about anything?”

He flashes me a half smile. “Not really. I love my sister but no one else. It really isn’t worth it in the shithole this world has become.”

“Burgundy said you all lost the rest of your family.”

“Yeah.” He’s not meeting my eyes. He’s always been good-natured and no-nonsense. I’ve never seen him open up even this much before. “But almost everyone has. You did too. That’s what I mean. You can like people. I like all kinds of people. But loving them?” He shakes his head. “Not worth it. Not when everyone ends up dying or leaving anyway.”

“That’s a pretty sad worldview.”

He gives me a surprised look. “It’s a pretty sad world.”

“Yeah. I know it. I used to be so angry about everything I’ve lost. But even back then, I never...” I have to think a minute before I finish the thought. “I never stopped wanting it.”

“I think that’s because you’re a better person than I am.” He sighs. Says in a hoarse murmur, “If something ever happens to Burgundy, that will be it for me. I won’t even try anymore.”

I reach over to touch his knee through his jeans, squeezing it companionably.

I understand exactly what he’s saying. What he feels. And why he feels that way.

Not everyone is like Deck. Not everyone can hold on to their heart in the face of one assault by the universe after another.

“So you’re not angry anymore?” Micah asks after a minute, sounding curious. And lighter than before.

“I don’t know. I think I still am. But it’s not always on the verge of exploding out of me like it used to be.” I suddenly see myself punching Deck’s shoulders, his wrapped hands. I feel the intense relief at finally letting some of that anger out.

Deck gave that to me. And so much more.

“I’d kind of like to see that.”

“See what?”

“See it all explode out of you.” He’s teasing. His eyes are glinting.

I shake my head, trying for disapproval but barely suppressing giggles. “You’re an asshole, you know.”

“I know. That’s what everyone says when they really get to know me.”

We’re both smiling when I become aware that someone has approached. Deck. I sense his presence before I see him coming around the corner of the house.

My heart leaps in excitement as he takes the porch steps all in one stride and stands in front of us, glowering.

“What’s the matter?” I ask, surprised because he seemed to be in a good mood like me earlier. “Has something happened?”

He looks from me to Micah and back again. He bristles. Then without any hesitation, he turns around and starts to sit down on the swing right between us.

There’s room for two, no problem. But not three. Especially when one of us is as big as Deck. But he doesn’t care. He makes a space for himself and sits down.

“Fuck, man,” Micah says, standing up before he’s completely squeezed off the swing. “You could’ve just asked for my spot.”

Deck scowls at him.

“Stop being ridiculous,” I tell Deck. “Micah and I were just talking.”

His lips curl on one side in a sneer.

Micah doesn’t appear particularly annoyed. He’s half laughing as he sits down on the porch floor, leaning against the house with his legs outstretched.

“We were only talking,” I murmur, checking Deck’s face.

His scowl is softening, but he’s still frowning as he looks between me and Micah.

I find one of his hands and squeeze it. He takes my hand between both of his and lifts it to his mouth, kissing the knuckles and then the palm.

“Oh yeah, right,” Micah says. “No inconvenient feelings happening here at all.”

Deck and I ignore him.

Page 43

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:46 am

The three of us have been hanging out for about thirty minutes when Logan strides onto the porch from the front door, followed by Trisha, who has been his constant shadow since our arrival.

She's still trying for him. As far as I can see, he's given her no encouragement, but she's a woman who will want the most powerful man available to her.

And that's Logan. No question.

I have no idea where Logan is heading or if he simply wanted out of the house. But he stops walking so abruptly Trisha almost runs into his back.

He makes an impatient sound and says in his normal blunt tone, "Look, Trisha, this is starting to get old. Do you always have to flutter around me like this?"

Micah makes a choked sound, obviously hiding laughter, and I raise a hand to cover my mouth.

I try so hard not to be mean and petty. I really do. But I don't like Trisha. I like her even less now than I did when I first met her. And for a while I was worried Logan would give in, if only to have a convenient body in his bed.

But she's now had that particular door slammed in her face, and I can't help but be pleased I was here to see it.

Logan doesn't wait for an answer. He walks off across the dark yard, the silver strands in his hair gleaming eerily in the light from the lantern on the porch.

Trisha watches him walk away, and I can see from her body language exactly what she's feeling. Anger. Frustration. A momentary hesitation as she decides whether to follow him or give up.

She gives up. I see it happen in the slump of her shoulders and the inclination of her head.

But then she straightens again. Shakes herself off. And turns around.

Toward us.

I see her eyes move between Micah and Deck. Once. And then again.

Until they land on Deck and stay there as she approaches.

My stomach twists. My hackles rise.

She smiles sweetly, completely ignoring me as she focuses on Deck. "Logan is always so busy, but maybe you can help me, Deck. Something is broken on my bed. Can you help me fix it? Pretty please?"

My hands clench into fists as Deck glances toward me quickly before he nods and stands up.

"Thank you, sweetie! I knew I could count on you." She moves toward the front door, reaching for one of Deck's forearms so she can pull him after her. "It won't take long."

Deck glances back at me over his shoulder, but I fight every instinct to be territorial and just smile and wave him on.

Relaxing, Deck follows the other woman into the house.

He would jump to help if anyone asked him. It has nothing to do with Trisha. I know it for sure.

But that doesn't stop the simmering resentment I feel for her rising to a boiling point.

"Bad idea," Micah says blandly. "She's going to make a play for him, you know. Now that Logan isn't happening."

"I know."

"But you're not going to stop it?"

"Stop what? Deck went to help her with her bed."

"We both know what kind of help in bed she's looking for."

"Stop it. Deck isn't going to do anything. He's a grown-up, and he can tell her no."

"If you say so. She should have wised up and made the move on me instead. I wouldn't have told her no."

Page 44

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:46 am

“What?” My voice squeaks slightly with a sharp jolt of surprise and outrage.

Micah shrugs. “She’s hot enough. And I wouldn’t say no to a half-decent fuck if a woman offered.”

I frown at him. “I guess I thought better of you.”

“Yeah? Well, I’ll tell you something, Lilah.” He looks suddenly tired as he leans his head back against the wood siding of the house. Utterly exhausted. “Thinking better of me was your first mistake.”

15

Three weeks later, I wake up in the top bunk of our princess room.

I’m cozy but not hot and cramped, so I know, even before I come to full consciousness, that Deck has already gotten up.

We’ve started using the top bunk when we have sex every evening instead of constantly bumping our heads in the lower bunk. It’s still not ideal. We have to be careful and not get too athletic in our positions or our vigor. Last week Deck was trying to rearrange and roll onto his back, and he ended up rolling all the way off the bed. But overall there’s more space up here than below.

I usually move to my own bunk to sleep afterward, but last night I fell asleep and never woke up enough to move. It’s not the first time. If Deck is bothered by my taking up extra room in a bunk that’s already tight for his bulk, he’s never indicated

so in any way.

So I'm comfortable and unworried as I pry open my eyes. Morning light is coming in through the window, so I must have slept later than normal.

I roll onto my side and smile when I see Deck pulling on a clean pair of boxers. He's still shirtless, and his hair is a tangled mess. Even his beard is smushed on one side and spiking out weirdly on the other.

"You just woke up," I say, irrationally pleased at catching him sleeping in. In the months I've known him, he's always been up with the sun.

He turns to me with a warm twitch of his mouth. He signs, And?

"And you slept in. I didn't think you ever did that."

Tired from last night.

Last night he was particularly ambitious, spending a lot of time on foreplay and making me come with his mouth three times before he took me from behind and came himself.

I smother a giggle as I run my eyes up and down his body. I like that he's big. That he's got body hair and a little softness around his middle. I like that he looks and feels real.

And mine.

He asks, What?

"Nothing. Just like the looks of you right now."

I'm not sure what I expect. If anything, maybe a sweet kiss because the mood between us feels fond and playful. But what happens is Deck steps over and drags me out of the top bunk.

I half squeal, half laugh as I wrap my arms and legs around him. He steps over so my back is against the small piece of wall next to the window as he leans into a kiss.

The only way for our mouths to meet is with my legs wrapped higher around his belly. Because of our size difference, it's almost impossible for us to kiss and have our groins meet at the same time.

But that doesn't matter to me at all. We've made do just fine. And there's something intimate—special—about the way he's holding up my weight so we can kiss like this.

I'm completely naked since I never put anything on after sex last night. It's not long before my entire body buzzes with arousal.

He lets me slide farther down his abdomen until I can feel that he's hard in his boxers.

"I'm ready, Deck," I mumble, kissing his neck and shoulder as I rub my pussy against the fabric of his underwear.

He makes a breathless sound and hefts me up higher, holding me secure as he turns around and slides down the wall into a seated position on the floor. He helps me adjust my legs so I'm straddling his lap more comfortably, and then he pulls his hard cock out of his boxers.

Together, we align my pussy on his erection. He eases me down to take him inside me. I'm used to the size of him now. He feels tight but familiar. Exactly right.

He's watching my face as I adjust my legs so I can use them for leverage. When I meet his gaze, something about his expression arrests me. "What?"

Page 45

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:46 am

He lets go of my bottom so he can sign, What?

“You were looking at me weird.”

I was?

“Yes. Like... like...”

Like what?

“I don’t know. Like you see something in me that’s not really there.” I flush as I mumble out the words, wondering why I even brought the topic up. We’re in the middle of sex. His cock is penetrating me fully. This isn’t the time for deep, awkward conversations.

I see you. He makes the gesture again to emphasize it. You.

I gulp. I don’t know why his simple claim makes me nervous, but it does. To distract myself, I start to ride him, using my thighs to lift my hips up and down until I’ve established a fast rhythm.

Deck is with me. He can’t thrust all that well from his seated position, but he does what he can, rocking up his pelvis every time I push down on him.

I can’t come from penetration alone, so I slide a hand between us to rub my clit as we fuck. I whimper as the pressure generates shock waves of pleasure, combining with the deeper stimulation of his cock inside me.

Since he's stopped signing, he's holding my butt with both hands again, guiding my motion, keeping me from going at it so hard that his cock slips out of my wet pussy.

The restraint of his holding me in place is irrationally pleasing. Freeing. I can let myself go completely because I know he's not going to let go. My gasps and whimpers turn into steady, choppy bursts of sound as I build up toward orgasm.

His eyes never leave my face. He's watching me the whole time. Seeing me. Exactly as he said.

This fact changes things. Shifts the significance of the way we're moving together. Deepens it.

So the feelings in my chest are swelling as powerfully as my orgasm when I reach climax and cry out, barely remembering to muffle the volume by leaning forward and pressing my mouth against his shoulder.

He holds me as I writhe and jerk through the spasms of release. When I've come back to my senses, I straighten up, smiling at him and wiping the saliva off his shoulder with my fingers.

Deck is flushed and sweating and tense, so I lean backward so he can let go of his restraint too, thrusting into me as he works up to his own climax. Just before he reaches it, I pull off him, fold his cock between our bodies, and let him draw me close so he's trapped tightly between us. He jerks through the last of his thrusts, breathing raggedly until he comes with a long shudder and a hoarse, wordless moan.

He never speaks with his voice. I doubt he ever will again. But he does make real sounds when we have sex, and I love it—like the vocalizations are wrenched out of him because he's feeling so much.

When his hips have grown still, I collapse forward onto his chest. He holds me, and I don't even care that his ejaculate is smeared between us on our bare skin.

We stay in place for a few minutes, until he finally shifts slightly.

He's sitting on the floor. He's probably uncomfortable. And I can't stay on top of him like this forever just because it's the safest I've ever felt in my life.

I smile as I climb off him.

He smiles too, looking sated and deeply relaxed. He grabs my face and pulls me into a short kiss before he hauls his big body to his feet.

We both get dressed after that. The sun is up, and it's time to start the day.

16

The afternoon is warm and humid, and Burgundy and I get hot and sweaty working in the stockroom, sorting out the remaining food and supplies.

Once it's all organized, it's quite clear we have less than a week left of provisions.

We're going to have to leave soon.

After two months here—feeling secure, feeling comfortable, even enjoying myself—I hate the idea of getting back on the road and facing who knows what danger along the way.

Burgundy suggests washing up in the creek after we finish working, and I immediately agree. I'd like to cool down and get clean, and I could also use the distraction since the idea of leaving this house soon is bringing me down.

Page 46

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:46 am

In all the time we've been here, we've encountered very few passersby. The occasional traveler will stop, thinking it might be an abandoned house to scavenge, and there're always a few folks who live nearby hunting or searching for food who wander onto the property. But we've gotten so that we don't expect threats from every direction when we're close to the house.

Burgundy and I are relaxed as we find a secluded spot near the creek and put our stuff down.

No matter how relaxed we are, we're not stupid enough to both be vulnerable at the same time. I take off my clothes and get in the water first, using some scavenged bath soap and shampoo to wash my hair and clean up while Burgundy stands guard with her gun.

When I'm done, I dry off and pull on one of Deck's T-shirts—it hangs like a short dress on me—and draw my pistol so Burgundy can wash up in the creek too.

I hear someone moving in the trees behind me, so I turn around and raise my weapon. But I'm not worried. It's almost certainly one of us. I'll just tell them to go somewhere else so they don't invade Burgundy's privacy.

But it's not one of us. It's a stranger. A dirty man with long, greasy hair and cutoff denim shorts with hiking boots.

I freeze, my gun pointed at him.

He looks as surprised as I am. He jerks to a stop, blinking at me.

Then his face changes into an ugly kind of smirk.

I recognize that smirk. Any woman who's stayed alive for two years after Impact would recognize that smirk.

My gut twists, and my hand trembles on the trigger. "Go away!" I manage to say in my fiercest voice.

It's not very fierce.

He cuts his eyes over to Burgundy, naked in the creek, before he looks back at me. He takes a step forward. "Put the gun down, little girl. You two are way too little and pretty to make it without a man, but I can take care of that for you."

I shoot, aiming just over his right shoulder.

He must know I missed on purpose because, after an instinctive flinch, he laughs. A sickening sort of laugh. He keeps coming toward me.

"Go away!" I say again as everything inside me screams at me to pull the trigger.

"Shoot him, Lilah!" Burgundy calls from behind me. I hear motion from the water. The man's head shifts toward her again, and his face transforms into a coarse leer.

I shoot again, still incapable of aiming at him directly because I know the shot will kill him.

Killhim.

He's almost reached me when there's a shot from behind me and the man drops. He collapses to the ground in a bloody mess.

He's dead. Burgundy scrambled out of the creek wet and naked, grabbed her gun, and shot the man because I couldn't bring myself to do it.

What the hell is wrong with me?

"I'm sorry," I manage to choke out.

Burgundy has snatched up a towel and is wrapping it around herself, one hand still holding her pistol. "It's fine, Lilah. We took care of it. Don't beat yourself up."

I'm shaking inside but completely frozen outside. I look from Burgundy to the man's body on the ground. She shot him in the chest. Right in the heart. He died immediately.

There's so much blood.

"Lilah, it's okay. It's really hard the first time. I couldn't manage to kill anyone either until the guy was right on top of me. Survival instincts kick in, and you just do it."

"I don't know if I have any survival instincts." My nose is running. I wipe at it with the back of my hand.

"Of course you do." There's not the slightest hint of disappointment, resentment, or judgment on Burgundy's face, and for some reason that makes me feel worse.

I don't deserve her empathy. I didn't do what I was supposed to do.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:46 am

Our gunshots were obviously heard because Logan appears from the woods at a run. He's got his hair pulled back at the nape of his neck as usual, and there's a sweat spot on the front of his gray T-shirt.

He takes a quick scan of the scene and then holsters his gun. His mind works more quickly than anyone I've ever met. He's obviously put the pieces together and knows exactly what happened here.

Trisha bursts out of the surrounding trees too. I don't know if she heard the gunshots as well or simply followed Logan.

"We're fine," Burgundy says. "This guy showed up and made trouble, but we took care of it." She puts down her gun and tucks the towel around herself more securely.

Trisha might be my least favorite person in the world, but she's not slow or dense. She too must deduce what happened here. She gives a little laugh. "Did you freeze again, Lilah, and make poor Burgundy come out of the water naked to kill the man for you?"

The words feel like a slap in the face. Mostly because they're entirely true.

"You can't keep letting other people fight your battles. You've got to be stronger than that."

"Shut up," Burgundy snaps. "You don't know?—"

"Enough," Logan says curtly. "Trisha, go find Micah and Billy to take care of this

body. It's not your place to lecture Lilah, so keep your comments to yourself."

Trisha doesn't like that. She hides a scowl as she turns to leave.

When she's out of sight, Logan turns to Burgundy. "And it's not your place to cover for Lilah. Otherwise you did good here. Go ahead and get dressed."

Burgundy gives me a sympathetic look before she walks over to where she left her clothes.

And me, I'm still standing like a statue.

Like a useless, pitiful waste of space.

Logan meets my eyes. "Why didn't you shoot?"

"I..." The words get stuck in my throat. "I should have. I'm sorry."

Logan glances down at the man's body. "Were you unsure of his intentions?"

It would have been an easy excuse—some way to defend my inaction—but I've never been any good at lying, and it doesn't even occur to me to do so now. "N-no. I knew what he was after."

"Then why didn't you shoot?" Logan doesn't sound angry. I've never seen the man angry. He's either blunt and matter-of-fact or quietly reflective or as cold and cutting as ice. Right now he's asking a real question and waiting for me to get the answer out.

It takes a minute before I can finally verbalize the real reason. "Because... because he was a human being. And killing him is so... final. What if I misread him? What if

there's more to him than it looked like from the few seconds I saw? What if I get it wrong? He'll be dead, and I'll be the one who did it."

Logan listens. Genuinely thinks about what I've said. Then he finally takes a step closer to me. "That hesitation," he says at last, soft and cool. "That hesitation is you still believing you can be a good person and live in this world. Maybe a few years ago there was room for those kinds of choices. But not anymore. Good people don't survive. Not here. Not now. Your job is not to solve moral quandaries. You protect yourself. And you protect your people. That's your job now. You failed at both today, so Burgundy had to do it for you."

I've noticed Burgundy getting dressed in my peripheral vision, and now she makes a noise of objection.

Logan silences her with a brief wave of his hand. "So you take that sense of morality that keeps holding you back, and you force it into a dark corner of your mind so you can do what must be done to survive. This world doesn't give you the luxury of moral introspection. All the truly good people didn't make it even this long because they couldn't do what we're forced to do to make it through each day. Do you think the monsters of this world hesitate even a moment before they pull the trigger? Of course not. That means you can't hesitate either. If someone is a threat to you or yours, you shoot. And you keep shooting until they're dead. You can try to be decent, but you can't be good. Do you understand?"

I nod. Manage to get out "I'm sorry. I'll do better."

Logan inclines his head. "Okay. It's done now." He glances over my shoulder. "Burgundy, can you get her back to the house?"

He must think I'm in a pitiful state if I need support walking the short distance to the house.

The worst thing is he's entirely right.

Burgundy walks with me up to my room, but then I tell her I'd like to be alone for a little while. She gives me a quick hug and leaves.

I climb into my bunk and curl up on my side, hugging my knees and shaking helplessly.

I don't know how long I stay like that, but I'm still in the same position when the bedroom door opens and Deck's familiar scent fills the room.

Page 48

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:46 am

He stands still and looks at me. I don't turn around, but I can feel it. Then he takes off his shoes and climbs into bed with me, curling his big body around mine to spoon me.

I shake even more. Grab his hands and hug them to my chest.

I'm not crying. Just shaking. And it goes on for a long time as Deck holds me.

When I finally grow still enough to speak, I whisper, "I failed everyone."

Deck sucks in a sharp breath and pulls one of his hands free so he can tap two fingers with his thumb in the sign forno.

"I did."

No.

I turn over to face him. There's barely room for both of us to lie on our sides in the bed. My back and bottom are pressed tightly against the wall. "I did fail. I failed Burgundy. I failed Logan. I failed you after all the ways you've tried to teach me to defend myself." My voice breaks on the final admission.

He's shaking his head emphatically, signing, No, over and over again.

"I know you're trying to make me feel better, but I promise I can face the truth. Trisha was right. I have to be stronger. If I want to survive and protect my people, I have to be stronger than this."

He's still shaking his head. And now he signs out, You are strong. You're strong here. He covers my heart with his hand. Strong is more than killing.

"Maybe it used to be," I whisper. "But everything is different now."

No. People are always the same. You are good. You are strong. You see people. His face contorts with emotions as he keeps signing. You see me.

Emotion spills out of me as I choke on a little sob and reach out for him. He hugs me again, and this time when I finally settle, I actually do feel better.

That evening during dinner, Logan announces that we're going to pack up tomorrow and leave the day after.

It's not a surprise, but it still casts a pall over the meal.

A couple of guys made a fire in the front yard, and most of us are sitting nearby either on the front porch or on the grass. The sun is almost down, and no one has gotten up yet. Maybe everyone is feeling like I am—that our respite here is at an end, and as soon as this evening is done, it will truly be over.

After a while, Micah disappears and comes back carrying an old guitar. There's a murmur through the group as he sits on a porch step, propping the guitar on his knee and starting to strum.

Burgundy comes over to sit beside him. She leans over to say something to him, and his idle strumming becomes the opening bars to a song that's vaguely familiar.

It's a pop song I used to hear all the time before Impact. A love ballad. Burgundy starts singing it, and I'm surprised by how good her singing voice is.

Everyone listens, a few people joining in on the chorus. Billy, an older man I don't know very well, pulls out a harmonica and adds accompaniment.

When the song is over, someone else suggests an old country song, and Micah takes the lead on that one. He sings just as well as his sister. I know more of the words to this one, so I start singing with the others. Deck gets up to grab an old wood planter, turning it over and tapping out the beat with his hands like a drum.

When the song is over, someone suggests another. And then another.

I'm sitting next to Deck on the grass, leaning against the side of the porch. And I'm filled with a sense of community I haven't experienced in a really long time.

Like these really are my people. Like we're connected. Like no matter how broken this world has become, Deck was right. Humans will always be human. We might not be very good—the best of us died a long time ago—but there are real ways we can share life with each other.

Maybe this recognition has been growing on me for the past two months, but it's only crystalizing in my mind now.

Despite my failure earlier today.

Or maybe because of it.

After several songs, Burgundy leans over to give another suggestion to Micah. This time when he starts playing, the notes are slower, softer. Haunting and familiar both.

When Burgundy starts singing, the song comes back to me. I remember it from when my family occasionally went to church when Lance and I were kids. "Be Thou My Vision."

Page 49

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:46 am

Burgundy's voice is pure and high and resonant in the night air, broken only by the crackling of the fire.

I don't know the words to this one, but a lot of the others do. When Micah and some of the men join in, the music throbs in my chest even more deeply. It's weird and moving and powerful.

In the break between two of the verses, Deck riffs on his makeshift drum, intensifying the beat as the next verse begins.

Be Thou my battle shield, sword for my fight,

Be Thou my dignity, Thou my delight,

Thou my soul's shelter, Thou my high tower,

Raise Thou me heav'nward, O power of my power.

My throat is so tight I can barely breathe through it. I don't know why the song is affecting me this way. I've never really been a music person before any more than I've been religious.

I meet Deck's eyes, and he smiles at me, softening the tension in my chest.

Then I glance over to where Logan is seated on the porch. He hasn't been singing, but he's listening. He's not distant. Maybe there's something about this experience that he enjoys too.

He must feel my eyes on him. He glances over and holds my gaze. After a moment, he nods at me. A silent acknowledgment.

Of something.

Of me.

He was telling me the truth. What happened this afternoon is over in his mind. He's not holding a grudge or still disappointed in me.

I'm one of his people now, and that's what matters to him most.

So I let myself feel whatever this music—a hymn of faith at the end of the world—has brought into existence.

Maybe it will only last as long as the notes of this song, but I need it. Because Deck was more right than Logan was today. I know it for sure.

The world has to be about more than surviving if it's worth fighting to survive at all.

17

Two mornings later, we pile into the already-packed vehicles and take off down the road.

It's not as bad as I've been dreading.

I like watching the landscape change as we drive west. I like stopping at any abandoned buildings we encounter to search for supplies like buried treasures. I like feeling one of the group, a contributing member. Part of something bigger than just me.

But I miss the little bunk room I shared with Deck. I miss the hours of rest and the chance for privacy.

And I miss having sex.

On the third morning after we leave the big house, I wake up beside a large tree with Deck on my other side, so close that his shoulder is pressing against my back.

He had guard duty last night, so I went to sleep on my own in the sleeping bag we scavenged from the old drugstore. He must have come to lie beside me in the middle of the night because he's here now, blinking at me groggily when I roll over.

It's around dawn—light enough to see without a flashlight or lantern but just barely.

I smile at the sight of his big, shaggy head.

He smiles back, pulling me toward him so he can give me a soft kiss.

Smiling against his lips, I murmur, "Good morning. Did you get enough sleep?"

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:46 am

He shrugs, drawing me even closer to him. He smells like dirt and effort, but the whole world smells that way now. It's not as unpleasant as I would have assumed three years ago. People adapt. Change. In all kinds of ways.

I'm quite sure Deck is planning to kiss me again, even deeper this time, but one of the guys camped out nearby laughs with a mildly raunchy comment about morning wood.

That's enough to dampen all romantic inclinations. I roll my eyes and pull away while Deck gives the guy a rude gesture.

Deck was simply being sweet. He wasn't initiating sex. But it's still a reminder that we might not be able to have sex again for a while. Even if outdoor sex was easy and comfortable, it's certainly not very doable with a large group of other people present all the time.

One of the more inconvenient features of traveling like this.

Maybe soon we'll come across an intact building with enough rooms to give us privacy again.

Logan's voice across our campsite, telling someone that we're going to try fishing in the nearby river before we leave this morning, is our sign that it's time to get up and start the morning.

Kissing will have to wait for a more opportune time.

I don't know how to fish and I don't have the required equipment, so I can't help with the fishing.

I take inventory of our stock of food in the second Jeep instead.

One or another of us does it every morning so we can keep track of what's available as we eat our daily rations and scavenge extra provisions. It's not a popular job because it takes intentional focus, but I've never minded it. I like keeping things organized and checking items off a list.

This morning I count and recount each can and package three times because some of the numbers seem lower than they should be.

Afterwards, I'm looking around for Logan to mention the count is slightly low when I see Trisha appearing out of the woods to the east. She must have gone farther than usual to go to the bathroom since there's no other reason for her to be on her own in that direction.

Shrugging off the trivial aberration, I continue my search for Logan, finding him with a fishing rod on the riverbank. He nods in silent reflection as I mention the food count and, after a minute, asks me to keep an eye on it.

My duties accomplished, I walk back toward the camp to find something useful to do until the others are done fishing. I haven't cleared the trees when I hear voices that bring me to an abrupt halt.

Well, one voice. Trisha's.

"I'm not talking smack about her. You know I love Lilah to death. It's just that she seems to have a grudge against me. I've really tried to be her friend, but she's not having it."

Sharp resentment clenches in my chest and rises into my throat. I peek around a tree so I can see who she's talking to.

Deck, leaning over beneath the hood of one of the pickups and tinkering with something.

Trisha is standing way too close to him, stretched out to make the most of her impressive figure.

Deck doesn't say anything. Of course not. He's not even looking at her, his attention on whatever in the truck's engine needs work.

But he's also not shooing her away.

I can't help but think that's what he should be doing, since she might be faking sweetness but she's also bad-mouthing me.

"It's frustrating. Maybe you can put in a good word for me." The flirtatious smile on Trisha's face makes me want to gag.

Deck again doesn't make any gestures in response.

He keeps working without acknowledging Trisha so long it's got to be deeply uncomfortable for her because the prolonged silence makes me want to squirm.

"Now you're mad at me," Trisha says at last with a put-on pout. "I thought maybe you'd understand."

Deck straightens abruptly, so quickly it startles Trisha, who jumps back but quickly regroups.

She puts her hands on his chest with another artificial smile. “I knew you’d understand.”

Deck stares at her for a few seconds. Then with calm, deliberate motions, removes her hands from his chest one by one. He takes a step away from her and raises both palms in her direction in a universal gesture. Stop!

Page 51

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:46 am

He gestures toward her and then toward him before he makes the Stop sign again.

“But Deck?—”

Stop! This time he punctuates the sign with a glare and a shake of his head.

He shapes the fingers of one hand into an O and places them on the back of his head, bringing them down like they’re spanning the length of a long ponytail.

Lilah. He’s saying Lilah. I know it for sure, and Trisha does too.

He places the same hand on his heart in a possessive gesture.

Then points at Trisha and makes the stopping sign again.

Without waiting for a response, he turns back to lean under the hood of the pickup.

Trisha understands perfectly. With a little huff, she flounces off, mumbling something about how he completely misunderstood her intentions.

I stand behind the tree, shaking and hugging myself and fighting the ridiculous urge to giggle and cry at the same time.

We don’t start off until midmorning because the fishing haul is good. We have to clean, debone, and cook up our catch and then eat.

The late breakfast is delicious, and our spirits are good as we load the vehicles and

start driving.

Usually I'm in the back of a pickup with Deck, Micah, and Burgundy, but Logan wants me to get proficient in driving an ATV, so I'm doing that today.

It's okay. It's not as companionable as being with my friends, but I like feeling active. Like I'm not a useless hanger-on and entirely dependent. And I'm still on a high after witnessing that interaction between Deck and Trisha this morning.

We stop for the midday break later than normal because we got a late start, and it's already the middle of the afternoon when we spot a small community in the distance. It's not directly on the back road we're following, but it's visible down the slope from our position.

The entire caravan of vehicles halts when the Jeep in the front comes to a stop. Logan and a couple of the others use binoculars to observe, and as soon as it's clear the community is still populated and defended, Logan waves for us to move on.

An hour later, we come across a bunch of run-down self-storage units and stop again.

The buildings are in rough shape and overgrown with weeds and brambles from the nearby woods, but most of them still have unbroken padlocks on the doors. There could be stuff inside.

Logan decides it's worth stopping to open all the units and see what's in there to salvage. It might take a while and it's already past midafternoon, so we will stay here for the rest of the day and camp in the storage units since they will offer convenient shelter.

I'm excited. With so many individual units, there could be the possibility of privacy tonight.

Maybe Deck and I can actually have sex.

Deck got recruited into the group that's working on the most damaged units—the ones that require physical strength to unearth their contents—so I'm on my way to join Burgundy to clear the more accessible units when Logan calls me over.

"I've got a job for you, Lilah," he says without preamble. He's sweating in the afternoon heat, and there's a smear of dirt down one side of his forehead like he wiped perspiration away with a dirty hand.

I perk up at the unexpected words. "Sure. What is it?"

"Since we're here for the rest of the day, I want to get a better sense of that community we passed earlier, so take an ATV and drive back out there. Get close enough to see what's going on there."

"What's going on there?" My eyes are wide, and my heartbeat has accelerated.

In excitement, not fear.

Logan has never picked me first for a real task before.

"Yeah. Numbers. What kind of people. How they're feeding themselves. Defenses. I want to know who is living there and how they're surviving. And if they're a possible threat. We were too far away to get a clear view before."

"Okay. You want me to go on my own?"

“Yes. Why wouldn’t you?”

“Because... Because... Well, you know I have issues with... shooting people.”

He lifts one shoulder, dismissing my worries. “You’ll pull the trigger when you have no other choice, but it doesn’t matter for this job. I need someone who can move silently and stay out of sight. You’re better at staying off the radar than anyone else I’ve got.”

He’s speaking as if he’s laying out facts rather than giving me a compliment, but pride and pleasure bloom inside me anyway. To hide it, I quip, “So basically you’re saying I’m Bilbo. Pretty much useless at anything that matters but somewhat decent at sneaking around.”

I surprise him. He blinks and looks at me blankly for a couple of seconds. Then he huffs out a breath. Then another one. Then turns his head to the side and chuckles in short, choppy rasps.

I’ve never seen Logan laugh before.

Not even once.

I can’t believe a stray comment from me is what’s done it.

His laughter only lasts a minute, but he’s still half smiling when he turns back to me. “Yes, that sounds about right. So do you want to do this or not?”

“I do. I’m happy to. So I should go alone, right?”

“Yeah. I can’t spare anyone else, and you’ll do better staying out of sight on your own. It will take you an hour there and an hour back, so don’t spend more than an hour checking things out. You need to be back here well before dark. Take the ATV you were riding earlier.”

“Got it. I’ll be back in three hours.”

Logan is clearly done with the conversation. He starts walking toward one of the storage buildings. I head toward where I parked the ATV, glancing around for Deck.

Because I want to tell him where I’m going and share my good news with him.

He’s busy helping two other guys lift a huge section of wall up from a far unit, so it’s not a good time for a chat. When he can’t find me, he’ll ask Logan where I am, and Logan will let him know.

I’d rather tell him myself, but there’s no reason to stall. I can’t risk getting delayed and having the sun set before I return.

I’ve grabbed my pack, borrowed binoculars from Billy, and straddled the ATV when Deck comes running over. For a big man, he can really move fast.

He’s scowling as he approaches, making some rushed gestures. Where you go?

“Logan gave me a job to do. It won’t take long, and it mostly consists of hiding and staying out of sight.” I add that last bit in right away so he doesn’t get worried about my putting myself at risk.

He’s worried anyway. His frown deepens. What job?

“I’m just driving back out to that community we saw and getting a closer look and taking some notes for Logan. I think it’s mostly for information purposes but also to make sure they’re no threat. I’m not going to get close enough to be in any danger.”

Yes. Danger alone.

“Maybe a little, but it’s daylight, I’m on the ATV, and I have a gun. I’ll be fine.”

No. No!

I gasp and stiffen at his stubborn expression and emphatic sign. “Yes. Logan asked me to do it, so I’m doing it.”

I’ll come.

“No! Logan wants me to go on my own. You’re needed here.”

No.

“Yes.” I’m keeping my voice low because some of the others are looking over at us with interest. Including a smirking Trisha. My cheeks flush. This is probably what I deserve after secretly gloating this morning. “It’s not your choice to make. I’m a grown-up and a member of this group just like you. And you’re embarrassing me right now by acting like I’m helpless. Logan trusts me to do this. Why can’t you?”

He’s breathing heavily, his brows lowered and his jawtight. He doesn’t sign anything else, but it’s more than evident he’s not happy with me right now.

And that's fine.

I'm not happy with him either.

I turn on the ignition and settle myself on the seat again. When Deck still doesn't move or communicate, I back up slightly so I can veer around him as I drive away.

18

My big job is completely uneventful.

Boring even.

I find a hiking trail that runs parallel to the road, so I take it to avoid encountering other travelers or locals. The route takes me through the woods near the town, and when I'm close enough, I park the vehicle and walk until the trees thin.

Because I'm higher up the hill than the settlement, I have a good view with my binoculars. It looks like it was a small township in the old world—a handful of houses with a laundromat, gas station, and Family Dollar—and now maybe a hundred people are living there. They've got a community garden. Guards posted on the perimeter. They don't seem to have a lot of supplies or provisions, but they're making it. There are worse ways to exist in the world post-Impact.

They're definitely no threat to us or anyone in the area.

It took a little longer than an hour to get here because I took the trail instead of the

road, so as soon as I get the information Logan wants, I return to the ATV and head back.

I'm pleased with myself and annoyed that Deck's stubbornness has cast a shadow on what should have been a success for me as I turn off the trail and get back on the road we've been following.

Waiting there is Deck, standing to one side with his rifle at the ready and the same scowl on this face.

"For fuck's sake!" I blurt out, coming to an abrupt stop in front of him. "What are you doing here?"

Logan said wait here.

I roll my eyes and shake my head. Logan probably said he was allowed to wait there but couldn't follow me all the way like he wanted. "You're being ridiculous. As you can see, I was perfectly fine. And I don't appreciate you treating me like a child."

I'm not. He's as upset as I am. I can see it in the rush of his hand gesture. He usually tries to sign carefully so he can express himself clearly, but he's not now. You no go alone. Danger. Danger!

"I'm not about to do anything dangerous on my own. I'm smart enough to know the difference. And you can't go around bossing me and trying to stop me from doing anything you decide might put me in danger. Like I said before, Logan trusts me to take care of myself like I did formonths before I ran into you all. Why can't you trust me too?"

He doesn't answer me. Just stares at me darkly, breathing heavily.

“I know it’s not exactly the same,” I add in a softer tone, my chest aching despite my anger because Deck looks so incredibly unhappy. I’m not used to seeing him like this anymore. I hate it. “Logan doesn’t care about me the way you do. I get that. I know you don’t want me to get hurt. But you don’t seem to understand that I care about you too but I’m still capable of trusting you even when you’re in danger. You need to do the same with me.”

He hears me. I know he does. Something flickers on his face. I wait, holding my breath, hoping desperately that he’ll understand, that he’ll relent, that we can work this out.

Then he scowls again. No.

I groan and sit back down on the ATV. “I don’t know what to tell you, Deck, except we agreed we weren’t going to let this thing between us get messy. And this feels messy to me. It’s not going to work like this. It can’t.”

He stands like a statue, his shoulders rising and falling as he breathes raggedly through his nose.

He’s clearly got nothing else to say, so I drive around him again.

I reach the storage units well before dinner, and Logan is pleased with the information I give him and the speed and efficiency with which I completed the job. But I can’t be happy about my contribution because I’m so upset about Deck.

He followed me back on foot, still as displeased with me as I am with him. We give each other a wide berth throughout the evening, and it’s clear every single person around us—including Logan, including Trisha—knows we’re in a fight.

I hate having our personal issues exposed like that, but there’s no avoiding it in a

group this tight.

I hang out with Burgundy and Micah as we eat, but it's hard to focus on anything when every time I glance over at Deck, he's gazing at me despondently.

But if he wants to make up, he can come over here and let me know. I'm not going to ignore behavior that isn't fair to me just because I want us to get along.

After the meal, Deck disappears. I don't know where he's gone, and I resist the urge to look. Instead, I try to relax as I play a card game with Micah, Burgundy, and Leslie, an older woman I don't know very well but whom I've always liked.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:46 am

I make it until bedtime without breaking down and searching for Deck. I'm right in this. He's not. And if we can't figure out a way to deal with the problem, then we're not going to be able to stay in this relationship.

It's a terrible thought, but I keep coming to the same conclusion.

I was so happy this morning.

I'm heavy and exhausted and aching internally as I go to the bathroom and get ready for bed. When I return to where I put my pack and sleeping bag in one of the central storage units, there's something else on top of my stuff that wasn't there before.

It's a flower. A pretty, dark pink one. I'm not any sort of expert on flowers, but it looks like a kind that grows on vines or bushes. Not a rose or a field flower. It's deeply colored and lush and beautiful even though a few of the outside petals are limp.

I pick it up carefully, noticing a scrap of paper beneath it.

On the page is scrawled, I'm sorry. I'll do better.

My heart is pounding in my chest and my throat and my ears. My fingers shake slightly around the stem of the flower.

"Oh, how pretty," Burgundy says, coming up behind me. "How did Deck manage to find that flower? Nothing much has been blooming this year at all." She pauses, and when I do nothing but stare down at the flower in my hand, she adds, "He feels really

bad and he thinks he blew it, so he's trying to give you some space. But he's in the very last storage unit if you want to find him."

I'm still kind of shaky as I lean over to pick up the note and slide it into an inner pocket of my bag. Then I pick up my pack and sleeping bag and look around blindly.

Burgundy giggles and points to the right. "That way."

I give her a quick smile as I turn around. I walk a few steps before I can't wait any longer.

I start to run.

I pass several open storage units with various folks scattered throughout them. When I reach the very last one, I find Deck by himself, sitting on the floor with his back against the wall.

He looks defeated. And all alone.

With a small sob, I drop my stuff and launch myself at him, and he sees me in time to brace himself against the impact. He lets out a hoarse huff as he catches me and pulls me onto his lap, wrapping his big arms around me.

We hug for a long time, me shaking and whimpering against his shoulder and Deck clutching me and breathing in loud rasps.

When I'm finally able to straighten up, he won't let me pull off his lap. So I stay there. It's a pretty good place to be.

He returns my smile and signs, I'm sorry.

“I know. I’m sorry if I was mean or not as understanding as I should have been. I just...”

I know. You were right. He taps his chest. I was wrong.

I’m so relieved and filled with feeling that I have to swallow down another sob. “Thank you. I do understand it’s scary. When you care about someone. To see them at risk. But that’s what we have to do—living in this world. So if you do your best to trust me, then I’ll stay out of danger as much as is reasonable. I promise I’ll be careful.” I pause and wipe one of my eyes quickly. “Deal?”

He nods, still looking worried and stretched. Yes. I’ll try. Don’t break me. Please.

I’m sure he means don’t break up with him, but there’s something so poignant about the actual words he signed that I hug him again.

He hugs me back, and it really feels like we understand each other.

Because this much I know. If things get too messy and complicated between us and we’re forced to end our relationship, it will probably break me too.

19

We hug on the floor of the storage unit for a long time, but eventually something changes about Deck’s body.

The nature of the transformation isn’t entirely clear—maybe he tenses, tightens, hardens, heats up—but I know what it means.

He’s getting turned on.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:46 am

And the fact of his arousal on the heels of our emotional upheaval gets me going too.

I straighten, pull back, and smile at his damp, rumpled, slightly dirty face.

He gazes up at me with an intensity that takes me aback. It's hot but also more than that. Deep and awed and adoring.

Before right now, no one ever—not once in my life—has looked at me like that. I'm not even sure my mind is capable of processing the significance. But it washes over me like a wave and evokes an internal shuddering that doesn't go away even when I lean forward to kiss him.

I'm still on his lap, straddling his hips. It's become my favorite position because the size difference isn't as much of an inconvenience. Our bodies are as close as they can get, but our faces are almost aligned. I can kiss him and feel his body at the same time.

He's already getting hard in his jeans. The bulge pushes up against my groin insistently. I grab handfuls of his thick, messy hair and open to the intrusion of his tongue.

It's a good kiss. The best kind. Eager and passionate and just a little sloppy. But a small flash of spirit provokes me to tease when I finally draw back. "You really need a haircut."

He huffs and frowns at me disapprovingly.

With a giggle, I sway in for a quick peck. “Not that you’re not already as hot as a man can be, but you could still use a haircut.”

He shakes his head and moves his hands from my ass so he can sign his response. Hair later. Sex now.

I dissolve into more giggles, trying to kiss him simultaneously. This time the kiss is even deeper and more urgent, and when we break apart, we start undressing in a rush. I yank off my top and worn sports bra as he fumbles at the button and zipper of his jeans, lifting his hips so he can push them down with his underwear enough to free his cock.

If he’d rather his bare ass not come into contact with the old cement floor of the storage unit, he makes no show of it. He helps me get my pants off—a rather awkward, rushed endeavor—and then pulls me back down to straddle his lap again.

We’re both smiling as he holds his cock in place so I can wriggle into position on top of it and slowly take it inside my pussy.

It’s only been a few days without sex, but it feels longer than that. I moan in pleasure as he penetrates me snugly. Since our only foreplay has been kissing, I’m not as wet as I usually am. It’s not painful or even genuinely uncomfortable, but the extra friction makes the stimulation more intense.

He gasps raggedly and arches his neck, his big hands clenched in the flesh of my bottom.

“Oh fuck.” I roll my pelvis in a small circle, reveling in the sensations. “It feels so good. I’ve missed this.”

He grunts and rocks upward several times, the little thrusts more instinctive than

purposeful. He's missed this as much as I have. That much is obvious.

When I start to ride him, he keeps one hand on my hip and moves the other to fondle my bare breasts.

They're still not big—they never will be—but I've filled out a bit from better nutrition, so there's a little more there to play with.

He stares hungrily at his large hand tweaking and twirling one nipple and then the other. The sensations combine with the tightness of my pussy to build toward an orgasm.

It feels so good and I want it so much that I let go of his shoulder and lean backward so I can rub myself off, but he beats me to it. He slides his hand from my breasts and down my belly until he finds my clit and starts to massage it.

He's distracted. His cock is buried inside me, and he's making eager, upward thrusts. His fingers on my clit aren't at their most skillful, but it really doesn't matter.

The pressure jolts my body into pleasure. Again and then again as I ride him faster and harder, chasing the orgasm that's almost in reach.

We work our bodies together like that for a while, him gasping wetly and me making high-pitched, choppy sounds in time with our rhythm. Until he suddenly arches up, his mouth opening in a soundless cry as he presses harder into my clit.

It's enough. I come with a silly sobbing noise. Deck yanks out his cock just in time before he follows with hoarse, breathy gasps of release.

We shake and jerk together until he's spurted out a lot of ejaculate between our bodies. Then he draws me into a tight hug, and we continue to shake through little

afterquakes of pleasure until it fades into delicious satiation.

It's several minutes before I finally pull away and straighten up. I'm sore and messy, and my stomach and breasts and even part of my chin are wet from his semen.

He's smiling as he casually reaches over to grab a spare shirt from his open bag and uses that to clean me up.

I giggle again at the pleased pride on his face.

“You're looking smug.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:46 am

He shakes his head. Signs,Happy.

That makes me giggle again because the truth is just this. I'm happy too.

Not long later, we've gotten ready for bed, and Deck has pulled me back onto his lap, this time cradling me with my legs extended to one side.

He's never held me like this before, and I love it.Loveit. Never have I felt so protected, so cared for, so loved.

I'm glad he hasn't yet turned off the lantern because we can't talk in the dark. I have to see his face and hands.

We hold each other in silence until I slide a hand up to stroke his tangled beard. "I'm going to give you a haircut tomorrow. Is that all right?"

He blinks. Stays still for a moment. Then nods and shrugs.

It makes me smile. That he trusts me. That never once has he prioritized his ego over me. I nuzzle the curve between his neck and shoulder, breathing him in. "You know I like you exactly as you are, right?"

He cups my face and pulls it back enough for him to study it. Nods and searches my expression with his brown eyes.

"I don't want or expect you to change—except in the ways everyone needs to change to be with another person."

His thick eyebrows pull together as he nods slowly again.

“So I’m going to ask you a question, but it’s not because I’m unhappy with anything about you. You get that, right?”

He relaxes. He didn’t understand where my questions were going, but now he does. He closes his hand to sign, Yes.

“Did something happen to make you stop talking?”

He grows still again but for a different reason this time. It’s not defensive as much as surprised.

“I’m not ever expecting you to talk again. I’m really not. And it doesn’t matter to me in any real way—except if it’s because something is wounded inside you that needs to heal.” I gulp, my cheeks getting hot as I suddenly fear I’m saying too much, asking too much, pushing too far past his internal walls. “I like you exactly as you are. But I also don’t want you to... to stay wounded.” I mumble out the final words. “If that’s what it is.”

He takes several deep, slow breaths. Meets my eyes and then looks away again.

I’m twisting and trembling inside, but I don’t want to put additional pressure on him, so I don’t keep babbling the way I’m tempted to. Instead, I wait in silence, focusing on the pretty flower he gave me that’s lying nearby on the dirty, gray cement floor.

It’s a jarring contrast. The dark pink petals—lush and tender and so incredibly delicate—against the worn, gritty background. It would take almost nothing for all that beauty to be crushed into the hard gray floor. It should be treasured. Carefully preserved. Sheltered from an ugly world that might destroy it.

But even if that flower is protected, it still won't stay beautiful for long. Because if the world doesn't crush it, time eventually will.

For some reason, the image feels significant. Symbolic. Like a hard truth I still don't want to admit.

I shake it out of my mind because it makes my stomach drop, but it's still in there somewhere. Like a toll of doom in the distance.

Deck makes a brief gesture to get my attention, so I focus again on him.

Impact happen. He smacks his two palms together in the sign we've agreed on for Impact. Same as everyone.

"So it was from the general trauma of the world falling apart? Not... not something worse?"

Worse than Impact?

"Well, I mean, I know there's not much worse. I guess I meant something more specific. Something more... more personal. Did... did something..." A sob lodges in my throat, so I have to clear it before I continue. "Deck, it feels like something happened that you've never told me. When did you stop talking?"

He sucks in more of those loud, slow breaths, but he's not pulling away. It's more like he's steeling himself.

It takes a while, but he finally signs out in halting, awkward gestures, spelling out the words he doesn't know. Riots in the city. Chaos. Violence. Logan makes shelter. Defend it. I find my mother. Take her to shelter. But I too late.

My throat is so tight I can barely breathe for a moment. My hands are shaking as I clutch at one of his arms. “Deck,” I mumble.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:46 am

He swallows visibly. Too late. Gang there. In house. I fight. Too many. They hold me down. He's shaking violently, trying to breathe through the surge of emotion. He rubs at his face until he can continue. Make me watch. Laugh.

Tears stream down my face and won't stop. "Oh Deck."

After that, no more to say.

There's nothing I can say either, so I wrap my arms around him and hug him instead. Both of us are shaking, but only I am crying. That's okay. I can cry for both of us.

I can do that for him.

When I've finally stopped crying and he's grown still, he eases me up so we can see each other again. You want me to talk?

"No!" I shake my head and wipe at my nose. "No! If you ever feel ready to start talking again, that would be fine. I'll help you if I can. But don't you ever do it just for me. I told you before. I like you exactly as you are. The man who doesn't speak is the only one I've known. He's the person I care about." I sniff and peer at him through a couple of stray tears. "You believe me, right?"

He nods. His expression breaks briefly, but then he pulls me into his arms again.

We eventually lie down and turn off the light, but we don't stop holding each other. There's nothing more we need to say.

The next morning, as we're packing up to leave just after dawn, I'm in a good mood. I'm actually humming as I give the food stored in the rear Jeep a quick inventory.

I haven't forgotten that Logan asked me to keep my eye on it, so I'm planning to do it every morning.

I'm still humming an old girl-power pop song, slightly off-key, when a voice comes from behind me. "You need any help?"

I stiffen from surprise and then from immediate reluctance, but I manage to hide it as I turn back to smile mildly at Trisha. "No. I think I've finished it. Thanks."

"You sure?" She's giving me her most saccharine look. I wish it wouldn't grate on me so much. She's doing nothing particularly aggressive right now. She's been actively avoiding Deck since that conversation I overheard, so she appears to have gotten the point that he's not susceptible to her charms.

"Yeah. I just need to redo the fruit. It's a lot lower than it should be, and Logan asked me to keep track of it."

"Okay." Trisha doesn't walk away as I expect. She leans against the back of the Jeep and watches as I start adding up the cans of fruit.

It's still too low as I get toward the end. We used some twice for meals in the past week, but that's not enough to make the dent in the numbers that's evident since my last inventory.

Private snacking is against the rules. No one should try to sneak food on their own because the consequence would be banishment from the group.

I'm about to count the cans again when Trisha says, "My mom used to always feed me canned fruit cocktail as a kid. I hated everything except the cherries."

I give a startled laugh, not expecting Trisha to share something that feels so real. "Yeah. We never had it at home, but my grandma would serve canned fruit salad. It wasn't my favorite either."

"It's funny how things feel different now. Canned fruit is one of the best things we've got."

"I know." I sigh and turn toward her, folding my legs to get more comfortable in the back of the Jeep. "I keep trying to remember what fresh fruit tastes like, and it's just... gone."

"For me too. Where did you grow up?"

I'm still surprised but also pleased that she's actually showing any sort of interest in me as a person. Maybe she's the kind of person who takes a while to warm up, and now that she's giving up her campaign to snag a guy, she's able to interact more naturally. "A small town in western Tennessee. What about you?"

"I'm from a small town in Tennessee too. After high school I moved to Nashville, determined to make it in country music."

"Oh really? You sing?"

"Yeah. I sing and play the guitar."

"You should do a song the next time Micah gets out his guitar. I'm sure everyone would be glad to hear you."

“Maybe. That feels like a lifetime ago to me.” She pauses, staring at the cluster of storage units behind us. “It’s easier not to put yourself back there.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:46 am

“That makes sense. Did you have any luck in Nashville?”

“Not really. I got some gigs in bars, but I had to wait tables to pay my bills. But I was only at it for a few years before Impact. Then none of it mattered at all.”

“Yeah.” I sigh, still questioning Trisha’s unexpected attempt at bonding but unable to unearth any sort of agenda behind the conversation. “I was in college. I was studying and preparing for law school and having some fun and making plans for what my life might look like and trying to figure out the person I was. Then all of it became meaningless in an instant.”

“Did you have a boyfriend?”

“I did. Hal.” I sigh, an ache in my chest that’s poignant but distant—like the grief has aged. “He was from the same town as me, but we didn’t start dating until college. We survived on our own for a couple of years after Impact. After he died, I was all alone.”

“I know what that feels like.”

“Do you?” I hesitate. Then risk the question. “How did you end up with the gang at that house?”

She makes a wry face and takes a minute before she answers. “When everything went to shit, I tried to get home to my family. But I didn’t make it. I was alone, and that gang found me. I didn’t have any choice.”

“No. I know you didn’t. That’s terrible.”

She shrugs and scrunches her features again before her expression clears. “We do what we have to. You know?”

“I know.” I smile at her. Then climb out of the back of the Jeep when Logan calls out a five-minute warning. “Well, now you’re with us. It’s better, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. A lot.”

I’m thinking about the conversation and trying to adjust to new impressions of Trisha as I join Deck at our normal pickup truck.

What?he signs, peering at my face closely.

“I don’t know. I was just talking to Trisha.”

About what?

I let Deck help me into the truck bed and take my normal position across from Burgundy, who has been listening to the conversation with a frown on her face. I say, “About our past. Did you know she wanted to be a country music star?”

Deck shakes his head, and Burgundy looks surprised by this piece of information.

“I did,” Micah says, looking at me over his shoulder. “I told her she could borrow my guitar, but she never took me up on it.”

“I guess it reminds her too much of the past. I get that. Maybe she’s not as bad as I thought. Maybe I haven’t been fair to her.” The last sentence is more to myself than to the others.

You think so? Deck signs, his mouth turned down in a frown beneath his beard. We didn't have time to trim his hair and beard this morning, but I'm hoping to do it during the midday break.

"I don't know. Her man-chasing is definitely annoying, but it doesn't make her a villain. I didn't like her from the beginning, but maybe that's on me."

"I had nothing against her at first," Burgundy says in a cool tone that's not normally like her. "I tried to connect, and I gave her time to adjust. But she's proven to be trouble at every step."

"I know." I think for a minute. "But I don't like to think I immediately classified her as a mean girl when she's... when life hasn't been kind to her."

"Life hasn't been kind to any of us," Burgundy says, still frowning in a way I rarely see from her. "But we can't let that harden what's good inside us. Give her a chance if you want, but just be careful. Bad things happen to bad people as much as good ones. Some people cared only about themselves before Impact and still care only about themselves now."

Her quiet words feel true to me. I glance over at Deck, and he nods soberly, pointing toward Burgundy, clearly communicating his agreement.

I sigh, wishing the world didn't have to be as confusing as it is cruel. "Yeah. You're right. I've always been careful with people. I'm not going to stop now."

We make pretty good time throughout the morning and continue driving past noon. I'm expecting us to stop for lunch at any minute when Micah says, "Deck, look."

All of us turn in the direction he indicates. It's a big church on top of a hill, the steeple and half the roof collapsed.

Because I'm looking, I catch the recognition on Deck's face.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:46 am

“Oh wow,” Burgundy murmurs. “I remember that church building. I didn’t realize we were back in this region.”

“What region? Do we know this place?” Ridiculously, I’m feeling left out, like all my friends share a secret I don’t know.

“We’ve been here before,” Micah explains. “We stayed for a couple of months last year in a town nearby after a bunch of us got injured in a fight.”

“Oh. Okay.” I meet Deck’s eyes. “Did you get hurt?”

He shakes his head and points toward Micah.

“I got winged,” Micah says. “Logan was grazed in the side, and a few others had more serious injuries. We took out a gang that was causing trouble in the area, so the folks in town were grateful and helped us out.”

“I thought Logan wasn’t into missions of mercy.” I glance from one to another, still feeling slightly isolated. They have a long history together that I don’t share. It ties them to each other and to Logan more closely than to me.

Even Deck.

“He isn’t normally,” Burgundy explains. “But there were extenuating circumstances.”

“What extenuating circumstances?”

“His ex-wife lives in the town.”

My eyes widen. “I didn’t know he was married.”

“He was before Impact. All the fear and chaos pulled them apart. She hooked up with another guy, and they ended up here after Logan started traveling. Her new man died pretty quick, but she and her parents stayed. Anyway, Logan wanted to help by taking out the gang.” Burgundy’s been explaining all this in a matter-of-fact tone. “But he let us know it was purely voluntary for the rest of us.”

“Oh. I see. How many people helped him?”

“Everyone.”

It doesn’t surprise me. I’ve rarely seen such loyalty as these people show to Logan. I feel loyal too but not to the same degree.

Another reason I stand slightly apart and probably always will.

21

We stop shortly afterward at a long-abandoned campground and have a quick lunch, but I don’t get to pull Deck away and work on his hair and beard because Logan has other plans.

“I’m going to check things out in town,” he explains as the rest of us are sitting around, finishing our lunches. “Make sure it’s still safe.” He uses two fingers to point at me and Deck. “Y’all come with me.”

I’m pleased to be included since I don’t offer much by way of skill or strength. He must be counting on Deck for any defense he needs if we run into danger.

Obviously thinking similar thoughts, Trisha asks, “Are you sure you don’t want some more help? What if you run into trouble?”

She must be trying to be nicer because she doesn’t mention the obvious fact that I’m not much help in a fight.

“I don’t want to show up with an intimidatingentourage until we see what’s what there,” Logan says. He hesitates. Then nods. “But you’re right. Another gun won’t hurt.”

Trisha is starting to smile when Logan gestures toward Burgundy. “Why don’t you come along too.”

The petty part of me has to muffle a snicker as we collect ourselves and get on two ATVs—me behind Deck and Burgundy behind Logan.

We’re less than ten miles away, so it doesn’t take long to get to the town, which has a defensive perimeter with posted guards like nearly every populated community now. When we approach the front gate, one of the guards must recognize Logan because he calls down a greeting and descends from his post to meet us.

He’s grizzled and tough-looking, but his attitude is friendly enough as he says hello to Logan, Deck, and Burgundy, all three of whom he remembers.

“We were traveling in the area,” Logan explains, his longish hair windblown and slipping out of the low ponytail he usually wears. “So I thought we’d stop by and see how things were going in town. Everything all right here?”

The man makes a face. Then says with obvious reluctance, “Generally the same but got some bad news for you.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:46 am

Logan stands perfectly still next to the ATV he dismounted and waits for the man to continue.

“Bobbi didn’t make it.”

I never heard of Logan’s wife until this morning, so I have no idea of her name. But it’s got to be Bobbi from thereaction of the others. Burgundy gasps out, “Oh no!” Deck tenses up in front of me.

Logan hasn’t moved a muscle—not even a flicker on his face. “What happened?” he asks quietly.

“She got pregnant. She was over forty, and with no doctors or hospital, she had a real hard time of it. Didn’t make it through the birth.”

“She was pregnant?” For the first time, emotion is evident in Logan’s expression. Shock more than anything else. “When did she die?”

The man makes another one of those reluctant faces. “Happened five months ago. She was full term. Never said who the dad was, but we all figured...”

He doesn’t finish the sentence, but he doesn’t need to. The town must have assumed what I’m assuming as well.

Logan was the father.

“Did the...” Logan’s voice sounds rough, so he clears it before he continues. “Did the

baby make it?”

“Yeah. Sure did. Healthy little girl. Bobbi’s folks—you remember Gary and Mary—they took the baby when they left.”

“They left?”

“Yeah. With the little one, they wanted to head back to their kinfolk. Never really felt at home here. They’re from farther west. Ozark territory.”

“Do you know specifically where they went?”

“Nope. Real sorry. But they didn’t think you’d ever show up here again. None of us did.”

Logan is still standing motionless, but he’s breathing loud enough for me to hear from several feet away.

I can’t even imagine how he’s processing it. To hear that his ex-wife died and he has a baby in the span of five minutes.

Talk about a couple of hard blows.

After a minute, he gives himself a little shake and says coolly, “Okay. Thank you for letting me know.”

“Y’all want to come in and stay for a while? After the help you gave us last year, we’d be happy to have you.”

“No. Thank you. We’ve got to keep going.”

“All right. Glad you stopped back. Where’bouts are you headed?”

Logan turns back toward the ATV. “We’re headed west.”

If Logan has anything to say about the change in his circumstances—that’s he’s a father after all this time—he certainly doesn’t share it with us. He and Burgundy take the lead on their ATV, and Deck and I follow.

I feel weird and off-balance and confused—like my understanding of the people around me doesn’t quite hold together the way I believed it did even yesterday.

After a while, I finally ask Deck as we drive, “So he and his wife got back together last time when you were here?”

Deck shrugs and uses the fingers of one hand to spell out Guess so.

“You didn’t know they were together again?”

He shakes his head.

“It must not have been serious if she didn’t come with him and he didn’t stay there. Maybe they just hooked up a time or two?”

Page 61

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:46 am

Probably. He doesn't share.

"Damn. Poor guy. Even if they weren't still together, it's got to hurt to lose an ex that way. And to find out he has a baby but has no idea where she is? He must be torn apart inside."

There's absolutely no sign of Logan feeling anything—at least not that I can tell from the set of his head and shoulders on the ATV in front of us—but that doesn't mean he's not upset.

Anyone would be.

"So you think he's going to look for her?" I ask after another minute.

Yes.

"That makes sense. We've got to travel somewhere. Might as well travel that direction and see if we can find her."

Yes.

I sigh. Because I'm emotionally off-kilter, I don't think through the words before I say them. "Do you ever think of making a home somewhere and having a baby?"

Deck tenses up palpably. What?

"Sorry. Just a random question." I wish I hadn't spoken. Now's he's going to think

that's what I want even though we've just been together a short time.

I feel even worse when Deck signs in a clumsy rush, You want to leave Logan?

"No! No, of course not. It really was just random. I know you're never going to leave Logan, and I'd never ask you to."

He lets out a hoarse breath, but his body doesn't really relax.

Now he's upset too, and it's my fault.

His ties to Logan are longer and deeper and stronger than his ties to me. He's known and loved Logan for years. They might as well be family. Sure, he cares about me and he's happy to fuck me, but he's only known me a few months.

It's not the same.

It can never compete.

And I shouldn't want it to.

"I'm sorry," I add. "I'm happy with Logan. I'm happy with you. Exactly as we are."

Deck nods, but it feels like he's still thinking about it as we take a tight curve in the road.

And suddenly get a view farther off the next stretch of old pavement.

Someone has it blocked.

I have no idea who it is. I doubt the others know either. They're strangers. Several of

them. Holding guns with a big truck angled to block the narrow road.

They're using the switchback in the route as a choke point to catch travelers unaware. It's not an unusual occurrence nowadays. One of the dangers of traveling in small groups. Completely random.

But at the moment, we're those travelers caught in the trap.

Deck slams on his brakes just after Logan does, and they both veer off the road and into the woods. But Logan's ATV doesn't get there. Rifles start firing from behind the truck, and at least one bullet hits the vehicle.

It spins out of control and crashes. Burgundy gets thrown and Logan leaps off just in time to not get crushed.

The attackers are advancing, still shooting in our direction. Deck drives our ATV directly into the shelter of the trees on the right side of the road, and Logan drags Burgundy after us, using a big tree as a shield.

Deck climbs off the ATV, already aiming his rifle and shooting at the strangers. It takes me a minute to untangle my legs from either side of the seat, but I manage to get off too and pull out my gun. I duck behind another tree and lean over far enough to see where I'm shooting.

Page 62

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:46 am

I'm in a blur of panic and shock, so I can't focus on anything but pulling the trigger again and again.

I don't really think I hit anyone, but maybe my firing still helps.

Burgundy is hurt. She's still lying where Logan dropped her in the underbrush of the woods. But she's alive. And in pain. She's twisting uncomfortably and whimpering occasionally.

I really can't believe this is happening. It's hardly fair that we get hit with this ambush immediately following the news we heard in the town.

I'm honestly not sure how we manage it, but the attackers drop one by one. Both Logan and Deck are better than most with their rifles, and the trees provide a stronger defense than we deserve given the fact that we were taken so unawares.

When the shooting finally stops, Logan and Deck come out from behind the trees to check things out and kill the men on the ground who are only injured.

Still holding my gun at the ready, I follow them onto the road in case they need any backup.

But it seems safe enough.

Maybe we're okay as long as Burgundy isn't seriously injured.

I'm about to turn around to check on her when I see a motion from the pickup down

the road. There's someone still alive back there, and they're aiming right at Deck.

I shoot without thinking it through, hitting the smallish man in the shoulder. He falls, dropping his rifle in the process.

Deck and Logan hurry over. Deck shoots the man in the head. Logan glances back at me.

"I know," I say, my voice raw as if I haven't used it in days. "I should have shot him in the head or the chest. I know."

Logan doesn't look angry or give me a lecture. He simply shakes his head. "Okay, Bilbo. We got lucky today, but luck isn't always on our side. If you don't shoot to kill, you won't live long enough to regret it."

"I know."

I do know, but I'm more relieved than anything else as Deck and I go back to see about Burgundy.

Deck gives me a questioning look as we walk. He spells out, Bilbo?

"Yeah. That was a joke I made. Because I'm prettymuch useless but can sneak around and not get seen. Logan thought it was funny."

I can see this process on Deck's face. You're not useless.

"Well, thank you for that. But I do need to get a little tougher. Logan is right. In a different situation, not killing someone when I can would be a big mistake. I need to do better. I need to... change." We're almost to Burgundy, and I'm deeply relieved to see her sitting up. It looks like she's mostly okay.

Deck scowls at me. You read Bilbo books.

I blink. “What? Yes, I read the books. Why?”

He has to spell out a few words because we’ve never learned them. Bilbo’s mercy saved everyone. He gives me a stern look. You don’t need to change.

22

We spend the evening in the campground.

I fit myself into my sleeping bag like normal, settling not far from Micah and Burgundy. Deck is standing guard, but I leave a space for him to sleep beside me when he’s finished with his shift.

I’m always so tired in the evenings I fall asleep without any trouble, but tonight I wake up in the middle of the night. Wide-awake for no reason with a heaviness in my gut I can’t quite identify.

The large campfire has died down quite a bit, but it’s still crackling softly in the middle of the clearing, casting flickering light over the sleeping bodies stretched out on the ground surrounding it.

I have no idea what time it is, but a light touch on my shoulder makes me jerk in surprise. I turn over to see that Deck is lying beside me, so obviously it’s late enough for his guard shift to be over.

I smile at him in the faint light, and he smiles back.

Page 63

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:46 am

Reaching out with both hands, he grips my sleeping bag and pulls it—and me with it—closer to him. Then he positions my body so he’s spooning me. I hug one of his forearms to my chest with a pleased sigh.

That vague heaviness still sits in my gut, but I definitely feel better wrapped in Deck’s body like this.

It’s intimate, despite the fact that we’re lying in the open air around dozens of others and that my sleeping bag is between us.

Deck frees his hand enough to spell letters out on his hand. You okay?

“Yes,” I murmur very softly. I don’t want to wake anyone else up. “I don’t know why I’m even awake.”

Worried?

“N-no. I don’t think so.”

Upset.

This time the spelled-out word isn’t a question. It’s a statement. He somehow knows about the heaviness I’m experiencing.

“I’m not really upset. I’m... I don’t know.”

What?

I blow out a breath. I should have known he wouldn't let it go even if it's simply a stray, passing feeling.

"Restless or something," I finally say. "Like something isn't quite settled." It's the best I can come up with to describe my current state of mind.

What needs settled?

"I don't even know." I can tell he's going to pursue the question, so I turn over to face him. "I mean it. Don't you ever have weird temporary feelings that trouble you for a little while and then go away?"

He shakes his head. Something triggers them.

"I guess."

I don't know what else to say, what will satisfy Deck enough to let go of this topic.

Because the truth is, as we've been talking, the emotions have crystalized into an identifiable recognition.

And Deck is right. It is something specific that's triggered the weight in my gut that woke me from sleep. There is something unsettled inside me that I need to be addressed.

Him.

Us.

We started fucking with the understanding that it was casual between us—no drama, no messiness that might become a problem to the group dynamic—but the way we've

been together from the beginning doesn't feel casual.

At all.

I know he cares about me as much as I care about him, but something new has entered the relationship since the other night in the storage unit when we reconciled after our fight and he opened up about his past trauma.

This relationship has never been perfectly safe for me because of the possible consequences of it ending, but now it's more dangerous than it ever was before.

My heart might never recover from losing him.

But it's too much. Too much to ask. Too much to expect. Too much to demand so early in any relationship and particularly one that was defined from the beginning as casual.

I should say something. Admit my feelings and ask about his. Define the nebulous tension that's started to swirl around me.

That's what a sensible, mature person would do.

Page 64

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:46 am

I even open my lips to get something said.

But no sound comes out.

His features tighten. His eyes deepen with urgency. What?

I try one more time to get the thing said, but I can't. So I shake my head and smile at him. Stretch up to press a kiss on his lips. "Everything is good, Deck."

He's frowning as I turn back over so he can spoon me again, but it doesn't take long for him to let his questions go and relax. He nuzzles my hair. I hug his forearm.

Things are good between us. Really good.

It's all anyone can expect from this universe.

It's more than enough.

Feeling better, I can finally go back to sleep.

Deck has been giving me hot looks all morning.

It started early. I was leaning over to roll up my sleeping bag, and because I was bent at the waist, my jeans slid down to expose the top part of my butt. I only know this because he came behind me and teasingly grabbed the back waistband of my jeans to yank them higher.

I squealed, giggling at his playful, sexy expression and the intimate gesture. Then I pushed my jeans farther down my hips where they'd been before with a defiant look.

Still smiling, his eyes got hot as he made another move for my ass.

We got interrupted by Trisha, walking by, rolling her eyes and muttering about certain people needing to get a room.

We would get a room if there were any rooms to be had. But we're basically wandering the wilderness here. There's nothing but scraggly trees trying to survive with less sunlight than they need, wide stretches of tangled weeds and dead foliage, and the occasional abandoned gas station or quick shop—all of them already thoroughly looted.

As it is, Deck and I have no privacy. The little princess room we shared in the house feels like ages ago now, and there's not much hope for its like in the future. So his sexy mood might have gotten me going too, but we had no easy way to act on it.

There's no sense in being annoyed by this fact. It's one of the consequences of constantly traveling as we do. Deck has been living this life a lot longer than I have, and he clearly has no desire to stop. I like most of the people in our group, and I feel safe here—a blessing I never believed I'd find again. Plus there's no way I'm leaving Deck.

Even if leaving him was an option I'd consider, I have nowhere else to go.

So this is my life now too. It's not a bad one. The conclusion I came to last night is the right one. I need to be grateful for what's good and not ask for even more. Things for me are a lot better than most people's lives after Impact. We don't need a fairy-tale romance. And it's okay that I can't fuck Deck whenever I want.

And that he can't fuck me.

He's been thinking about it all morning. Anytime I glance up in the back of the pickup during the bumpy ride over cracked pavement, he slants me another smoldering look.

Even the mess of his hair and beard can't dim that particular expression.

After the attack on the road yesterday, neither one of us was in the mood for grooming, so he's still all rumpled and tangled today.

It's fine. It looks like him.

Today we're making better time than usual. Logan's Jeep maintains a faster pace despite the unfamiliar terrain and the poor condition of the road. He's thinking about his little girl somewhere out west. He hasn't said a word about it since we left that town, but I know she's on his mind.

Who can blame him?

The chances of our finding her and her grandparents are slim, but he's going to try anyway.

In the middle of the day, we reach a grassy clearing cut through by a decent-sized creek. Logan calls out that we'll break here for a couple of hours.

We usually eat lunch and rest for a while with the others, but Deck takes my hand and pulls me away from the group before we've even gotten anything to eat.

I'm laughing helplessly as I'm dragged after him. "Deck! Everyone will know what we're doing!"

Page 65

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:46 am

He grunts and shrugs and keeps pulling me until we're out of sight of the group and far enough away to not hear their voices.

I'm still giggling as he grabs the back of his T-shirt and pulls it off over his head. His hair is even messier when he drops it on the ground. Scowling at me, he signs, Clothes off!

I'm not ashamed to admit that the blunt order and stern expression get me even more excited.

But I say, "I didn't think you were a bossy, caveman type of guy."

No bossy. Horny. We joked about a good sign for horny a couple of weeks ago and came up with one hand curved into a circle starting on his forehead and extending up like a horn. That's the sign he makes now.

Dissolving into more amusement, I toe off my shoes, peel off my jeans, and then pull my shirt over my head. I'm standing in the open air next to a creek, wearing nothing but socks, panties, and bra. All of them are dingy from long use, but Deck's eyes rake up and down over my body like I could be on the cover of a magazine. He waves toward my underwear, signaling I should take them off too.

He's already stripped down to just his boxers, visibly erect beneath the fabric and smiling ferally. As soon as my panties come off, he hefts me up so I can wrap my legs around his waist as he kisses me.

He's big and strong enough to carry my whole weight without straining. He's solid.

Unyielding. And so incredibly warm. We kiss deep and urgent for a few minutes until I'm as aroused as he is.

It would be nice to be so carried away that we ease into a sex position naturally, but we have several inconveniences to manage—namely our size difference, the lack of bed or handy piece of furniture, and the realities of fucking outdoors. So it takes us a minute to decide on a position that's both comfortable and hot.

Deck finally bends me over a largish rock to raise my hips enough to get the alignment right, and then he kneels behind me, lining his cock up so he can push into my pussy from behind.

I cling to the rock, slightly off-balance, as he fucks me hard and fast. I huff in pleasure on every instroke and get some good stimulation on my clit from this position. Deck is pretty far gone though. He makes a straining, breathless sound before he yanks out his cock and comes on my lower back.

Glancing over my shoulder, I smile at his deeply satisfied expression as he stares at his semen on my skin. Before I can speak, he moves his hand between my legs and fucks me with three fingers instead of his cock.

It takes a minute for me to get my momentum back, but eventually I'm making choppy, helpless sounds until I finally burst out loudly with a hard orgasm that shudders through my body.

Deck is still smiling as he turns me over, helping me arrange myself on the grass before he starts kissing his way down my body. He takes his time and makes me come again with his fingers and mouth.

I'm relaxed, happy, and thoroughly spent when he finally decides he's done. He lies beside me, pulling me into his arms. I play with his slightly erect cock as we cuddle.

“We didn’t even get lunch,” I say at last.

Eat later.

“Everyone must know what we’re doing.”

So what?

“I don’t know. Isn’t it kind of embarrassing?”

Why?

I sigh and press a kiss into his chest. “I don’t actually know. I don’t feel as embarrassed as I would have expected. Although I do kind of miss our little bunk room in that house.”

Me too.

“Maybe we’ll have a room and a bed again one day.”

As soon as the words come out, I wish I hadn’t said them. The mood changes. Deck’s muscles tighten palpably. He cups one of my cheeks to raise my head so he can see my face. He doesn’t say anything. Just peers at me.

“I wasn’t complaining,” I tell him. “This just now was amazing, and I’m happy to have sex with you however and whenever we’re able to.”

You want to leave?

“No! Stop asking that.” I sit up because the mood has intensified fast, and this is too important a conversation to have sprawled out naked on the ground. “I told you I’m

happy with Logan. I'm happy with you. Everything is good."

He sits up too. There's dirt and grass on his back and his head, but that's true of me too. I reach for my shirt to pull it back on.

You want change?

Page 66

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:46 am

“No!” I moderate my tone as I continue. “I don’t want a change.”

You want me to leave Logan?

“No! Deck, stop all this right now. I’ve told you straight out what I think and how I feel. You can’t keep questioning me like this. It isn’t fair.” For no good reason, it feels like I’m on the edge of tears.

He’s as upset as I am now. It’s happened in the span of a minute. He turns his head to the side and twists his features a couple of times before he gets himself back under control. Something wrong. Last night and still today.

“Nothing is wrong. I don’t know why you keep saying that.”

Something wrong. This time he makes the gestures emphatically. In fast jerks. With you. Something wrong. Talk.

I’m suddenly trapped. Terrified. I can’t even explain why, but my first instinct—my only instinct—is to flee. I jump to my feet, scrabbling to pull back on my panties and jeans. “Nothing is wrong. You’re imagining things. And you’re really getting on my nerves with this.”

Talk.

“I’m getting kind of tired of you not believing what I tell you.”

Then talk.

“I don’t have anything to say!”

Talk! He looks as angry and urgent as I feel.

“No!” I burst into tears but manage to swallow down the sobs until I walk away from him.

23

I avoid Deck for the rest of the day. It’s not as hard as it could have been because Logan is agreeable when I ask to practice driving one of the ATVs for the afternoon.

Every time I even glance in Deck’s direction, he’s frowning at me bleakly. He appears frustrated but not angry now. More sad than anything else. And there’s also a confusion underlying his expression that completely breaks my heart.

He has no idea what happened between us earlier.

Neither do I, if you want to know the truth.

I only know that he cornered me emotionally. With the way he was pushing, the only thing I had left to say was the truth I finally admitted to myself last night. That I love him, and I want him to love me too.

More than he loves Logan. More than he loves being part of this group.

It’s unfair. Irrational. Someone who truly cares for someone else shouldn’t force them into choosing between the things that they love. It’s wrong in every way, and I don’t like the part of myself that wants it.

I don’t even know why I do.

I've made it this far in a terrible world by making do, by not hoping for too much, by taking whatever is offered without expecting to get even more.

It makes no sense that now—for no good reason—I'm suddenly dreaming of more. Dreaming of everything.

I know better than that. It only leads to unhappiness. Disappointment. Loss.

Maybe it already has.

I don't sit next to Deck at dinner or as we're all hanging out in the evening. And I spread my sleeping bag next to Burgundy, expecting Deck to respect my need for space and sleep somewhere else.

He doesn't. Subdued and brooding, he lies down near me. Not as close as normal but not very far away.

So I have to feel his presence as I try to sleep, hating myself for messing up the very best thing in my life.

I wake up early the next morning. Before dawn. I blink in the dark, my vision gradually adjusting. Burgundy is on one side, still asleep.

Page 67

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:46 am

When I roll over, I'm looking right at Deck, who is lying a few feet away. He's awake too. We stare at each other.

"I'm sorry," I whisper.

He nods. You okay?

"Yes. I'm fine. I'm sorry."

Talk to me now?

Once again, I'm bombarded by waves of fear, but I control it enough to keep my soft murmur gentle. "I told you. I don't have anything else to say to you. I've told you everything. Why won't you believe me?"

His tender expression tightens into frustration. Not talking truth.

"Yes, I am. And you really need to stop all this. It's getting old." I get up, my hope that we can put all this behind us and get back to normal totally dashed.

So we're still in whatever weird fight we've fallen into as we get dressed and ready for the day.

I can't ask to ride the ATV again this morning, so I reluctantly climb into the back of my normal pickup with Micah, Burgundy, and Deck.

Deck gives me a sad, sober look.

“Shit, would y’all just kiss and make up?” Micah mutters. “All this tension is getting under my skin.”

“There’s nothing to make up,” I say, trying to sound normal but ending up way too cool.

Micah snorts, and Burgundy shakes her head at me. “You guys are normally so close. What even happened?”

“Nothing! Can we please stop talking about it?”

Burgundy turns toward Deck for the answer I won’t give her, but he just shakes his head and gestures toward me.

Either saying it’s my fault or it’s mine to say.

Probably the latter.

He’s never been the kind to blame someone else.

So the mood in our truck is a downer all morning. After stopping for our midday break by a river, I’m so upset and rattled that I can’t stand the thought of climbing back in with the others, so I spontaneously generate a passable excuse about having pulled a muscle so I can ask Logan if I can ride somewhere else in the afternoon.

If he doesn’t believe me, he makes no sign of it. He says I can get in the supply Jeep with Trisha.

That would never be my first choice, but right now any sort of escape from the way Deck is making me feel is a gift. As everyone is climbing into their assigned vehicles, I walk back to the Jeep at the end of the line and open the back hatch.

No Trisha.

Everyone else is nearly ready to head out—in their vehicles or right beside them. Laid-back, greasy Carl is sitting behind the steering wheel of the supply Jeep, and he looks over his shoulder to where I'm standing in the back. "Said she had a bathroom emergency. Headed that way." He nods sideways toward where the river cuts into some tangled woods. "Maybe you can go round her up. We're 'bout to leave, and I hate havin' to rush to catch up to the others."

"I'll go get her," I tell him.

Logan's Jeep has started to drive, followed closely by the ATVs. The pickup truck where I usually ride starts off, spinning some gravel beneath its wheels, and I accelerate to a jog.

Hopefully Trisha isn't sick. Dealing with diarrhea on the road with no working toilet is a nightmare.

I slow down when I reach the trees. I couldn't tell you why. An instinct tingles at the back of my neck, making me stop jogging and move more quietly toward the edge of the river.

It's not until I come into sight of Trisha that I understand what triggered the feeling.

Trisha is there, and she's not alone.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:46 am

She's with a man. A rough-looking man I don't recognize. He looks dangerous, but a lot of men do now. It might not mean anything.

But it does.

I know it does.

Trisha is saying, "That's all I could take this time. If anything else goes missing, it will be noticed, and I'll be in big trouble."

I blink. Step behind a tree so I'm out of sight but peek around so I can see what's happening.

Trisha has given the man several cans of food.

Our food.

"I can't keep doing this," Trisha continues, sounding rather whiny. "When are y'all going to make your move?"

"Soon," the man replies. "There's a lot of them, so we gotta be careful. You just do your fuckin' job until we're ready."

"I am doing my job. I'm giving you all the information I can. But it's getting old, and they haven't found a lot of food lately. If you wait much longer to attack, there won't be anything to take except the vehicles."

My heart has frozen in my chest. It's barely beating. And something hard and painful has lodged in my throat.

Ridiculously, my first response is vindication.

Because I knew it.

I knew it.

From the first moment I laid eyes on Trisha, I knew she couldn't be trusted. And that instinct has finally been proven sickeningly right. All this time, she's been working for another group. A gang of some kind. Probably her old group we drove out of that house. And plotting with them to kill or capture us and take everything we have.

I can't let it happen. Even if I could get away right now, Deck is still in danger. Micah and Burgundy. Logan. All of them. Most of them are good fighters in their own right, but taken by surprise, betrayed from within, they'll have a serious disadvantage.

Right now Trisha doesn't know I'm here and that I overheard, so I don't waste any more time. I need to get to the Jeep and tell Carl to hurry so we can catch up with the others and warn them. I move away from the tree, treading carefully to not make any noise or bring attention to my presence.

I walk right into a wall of a man. As big as Deck, but not him.

Not him.

I huff in outrage when the man, who must have been keeping guard, grabs me and drags me forward toward Trisha and the other man.

“Caught a little spy,” he drawls.

Trisha gasps and whirls. Her eyes widen with shock and then fear and then something like malicious glee.

“I won’t tell!” I burst out with what’s obviously a desperate, last-ditch effort to survive this. My entire body has chilled now. I can’t even feel my hands and feet.

Trisha snorts. “You think I’m that stupid? You’ve always been on their side. Not mine.”

“You think I’d be on the side of someone who sneaks around, lying and working against us?”

“No. You’re way too righteous for that.” She turns toward the big guy who’s still got me in his grip. “Kill her.”

“Nah.” That’s the man she was talking to, who appears to be in charge. “That’d be a waste. She looks good for a few fucks.”

My stomach roils. If I weren’t so entirely frozen, I might actually vomit.

“I wouldn’t,” Trisha says. “She’s good at squirming her way out of things. Soon as you turn your head, she’ll be gone.”

“Fine. Whatever. Just do it quick ’cause you gotta get back before someone else comes looking.”

Page 69

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:46 am

Right then, as the first man speaks, my survival instincts finally kick in. I jerk out of the big man's grip, catching him by surprise but still wrenching a shoulder and tearing the fabric of my top in the process.

The big guy comes after me, blocking my route back to the Jeep. In only a few seconds, I'm trapped by the bank of the river.

It's not a huge river. There's actually not a lot of water. But it has a steep, rocky bank and big rocks all through the riverbed. If I jump, there's a good chance I'll bust my head open on one of them.

"Little bitch," Trisha says, shaking her head in exasperation. "Always getting in the way. You shouldn't be surprised. I told you before." She raises her pistol toward me. "We do what we have to do."

Three things happen at the same time.

The first man reaches toward Trisha as if he's trying to stop her. I duck from the bullet I know is coming. And Trisha shoots.

I fall. Down the bank and toward the river. I'm only conscious of the fear and pain for a few seconds before the entire world goes dark.

24

I'm not dead.

That's my first conscious thought.

I'm not sure how or why I'm still alive after that fall. My entire body hurts, my head and right shoulder the most.

It doesn't feel like I can move, so I don't. I lie there in the shallow water at the bank of the river. I'm soaked. And injured. And I've lost Deck and everyone else I know and care about. They'll be long gone now, and without a vehicle I'll never catch up.

Trisha will for sure have returned to the Jeep, made up a story to excuse my absence to Carl, and left me completely abandoned. Deck would never have knowingly left me behind, but the truck with him and the others had already started driving. He won't know I'm gone until they stop again, which will probably not be until midday.

He's gone.

All of them are gone.

He'll ask where I am. He'll be worried and upset. But Trisha will have concocted some sort of plausible excuse by then, and because Deck and I have been fighting, he might believe her. Even if he doesn't, Logan will never let him leave to come look for me on a doomed quest. Logan is practical—more so than any of his other traits—and he'll know there's no chance of finding me in such a situation.

So no one will come.

No one will save me.

I'm all alone and always will be.

This brutal world has finally won.

So I might as well just lie here until something comes along that kills me. An animal or a bad guy or something.

It doesn't seem worth fighting anymore.

I've done enough.

In this state of mind, I lie there in a few inches of water on a rocky riverbed for a long time. What finally gets me to move is an aggravating itch between my shoulder blades. It nags at me for a while until I can't stand it anymore. With an exasperated groan, I manage to sit up and reach around with my left arm so I can scratch it.

My clothes are soaked. My head is still throbbing. My skin is cut in several places, and my jeans have ripped from one knee and up toward the thigh. My shoulder only hurts when I move it the wrong way, but when I do it's torment.

If Deck were here, he'd help me to my feet. Check my shoulder and probably improvise some kind of sling. Then make me start walking until I got where I need to go.

I want him so much I start crying. Honestly, I'd take anyone. Logan would tell me to toughen up and get moving. Burgundy would sympathize. Even Micah would make a few smart comments to provoke me into proving him wrong.

But none of them are here. Just me.

I pull out my gun to make sure it's still working. It is. It didn't even get very wet. Then I stand up to make sure my legs are still functional.

They are.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:46 am

At the very least, I can get out of this water. I shuffle onto the bank, searching for the shallowest rise so I can climb up that way.

I wrench my shoulder a few times trying to pull myself up, but I manage.

When I reach the spot where I encountered Trisha and those guys, I jerk to a stop when I see the big man still there, leaning against a tree with his eyes closed.

I don't think I make a sound, but he senses me anyway. When his eyes open, he looks surprised and then gives me a creepy smile. "Well, whadya know? You did make it. Becker was sure you were dead, but Trisha said you were a tough little cookie and I should stay here to make sure you don't follow them. Why don't we have a little fun before?—"

I shoot him.

Right in the middle of his chest.

He's dead before he can finish his sentence.

I always assumed killing my first person would be traumatizing, but it's not. I'm numb. Blank. I leave him where he slumps and keep limping toward the road we were following before.

There's more sun on the road, so my clothes will dry faster. I start walking west. I might as well.

I've got nothing else to do.

A long time passes. I'm not sure how many hours, but it feels like an eternity. My clothes and hair dry. My head stops aching, but every other part of my body still does. The sun sinks lower, but it's not even close to evening when I'm aware of a sound behind me.

I'm so out of it I don't know what it is until an old pickup truck approaches. If I were thinking better, I would have run off the road to get out of sight, but I'm not capable of that kind of decision-making at the moment. I step over so they can get around me and lift my gun toward the passenger-side window.

I don't shoot. Even in my current state of mind, I can recognize the difference between a threat and not a threat.

This woman is not a threat. She's older—maybe around fifty—with a strong, pleasant face and a concerned expression. “Do you need help?” There's a younger man behind the wheel of the pickup with thick brown hair and beard.

I blink. Try to think through the question. “I... I don't know.”

“It looks like you were hurt. And you shouldn't be all by yourself on the road like this. Will you let us help?”

“I don't know you.”

“No. Of course you don't. But we're decent people. I'm Greta. This is my son, Jimmy. We have a farm about twenty miles west. If you don't have any place to go, you'll be safe there.”

“I... I do have a place to go. My... people are that way.” I point forward on the road.

“I got left behind.”

“I see.” She frowns thoughtfully for a moment. “Well, at least we can give you a ride until we turn off. It will save you a lot of steps.”

I peer at her. My first instinct is to say no, but she’s right. If I can get a ride for at least several miles, it might save me a day’s worth of walking. No one is fully trustworthy nowadays, but there’s nothing about this woman or her son that set off alarm bells in my mind.

At this point, what exactly do I have to lose?

“Okay,” I say at last. “Thank you. I would appreciate it.”

Greta opens the door and then scoots over toward her son to make room for me to sit beside her. “That’s better. We have around twenty miles on this road before we turn off, so we can at least take you that far.”

“I really appreciate it,” I say, climbing in and situating myself beside her.

“Now, while we’re driving, I hope you’ll think about whether you want to stick with these people or find something better for yourself. What kind of decent people would leave you behind?”

Greta appears to be a no-nonsense, efficient kind of woman, but there’s a maternal note underlying her briskness that makes my throat tighten. “They... they didn’t mean to. Well, one of them did it on purpose, but the others didn’t know.”

She tsks her tongue and glances over at Jimmy, who appears to be listening even though he hasn’t said a word. “Even so, someone should be looking out for you better.”

I think about Deck and start to shake internally. Then the shudders spiral out toward my fingers and knees. “It’s not...” My voice breaks. “There’s someone who wants to, but I... but I pushed him away.”

“Why did you do that?” She asks the question as if she has every right to an answer, even from a stranger.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:46 am

There's no reason not to tell her since I'll never see her again after today. "I guess I... I was scared."

"Of what? If he scares you, then you need to pick out a better man."

"No, no. He doesn't scare me. He never has. There is no better man than him. It's just... I don't know. It's so different than it used to be. It's not as easy as getting a boyfriend before Impact. It's... bigger than that. The stakes feel a lot higher. It's life and death. Who you choose and how it works out and where you end up if it ends. I mean, if it ends badly, then I could... I could lose everything that's keeping me safe. So I guess it just felt safer to try to take care of myself."

"No one can take care of themselves. Not anymore. We've got to have people, and we've got to hold on to them."

A tear slips down my cheek. I swipe it away quickly and stare down at my lap. "I should have done that. Now I might have lost them all for good."

"I don't know about that. How far ahead of you are they?"

"A few hours, I think. I'm not exactly sure."

"Well, that's not too far. You can make up some time with me and Jimmy. They'll stop traveling in the evening, won't they?"

"Yes."

“See, then you’re fine. You can catch up with them then. I don’t like dropping you off on your own though. Maybe we can take you farther.” She glances at her son again.

Jimmy clears his throat. “We can keep goin’ awhile, but we gotta get home before dark too.”

“I know.” Greta sighs. “We’ve been trading with a community half a day east, but the others will send out a search party if we’re not home by dark.”

“Of course you need to get back home. If you can just take me until you’re turning off this road, it will be more than I could have hoped for.”

Greta tsks her tongue some more. It’s obvious she doesn’t like the idea of letting me off on my own, but what else can we do? I’m not too excited about being on my own again, but my only other choice is to give up on finding Deck and the others.

I’m not going to do that. They could be in danger from Trisha and her cohorts even now.

The thought drops into my gut. I want to urge Jimmy to pick up his speed, but of course I don’t. I sit tensely and try to respond politely to Greta’s pleasant conversation for almost an hour, until Jimmy slows to a stop at the side of the road just before a smaller road turns off to the right.

“Here’s our turnoff,” Greta says. “Are you sure you don’t want to come with us?”

“I really appreciate the thought, but my people are that way. I need to get to them.”

“And you’re sure they’re worth it?”

I gulp. Nod for a moment until I can get the words out. “Yeah. They’re worth it.”

I’ve opened the passenger door and have started to slide out onto the road when Jimmy says sharply, “Wait! Wait. Someone’s comin’.”

“Hold on, Lilah,” Greta adds, pulling a rifle up from the floor of the cab and handing it to Jimmy, who has rolled down his window and aims the rifle toward the road in front of us.

It takes a minute for the approaching vehicle to come into full view. And then a few more seconds before the sight processes in my head. Then I gasp. Stiffen. Swing the door open as I say sharply, “Don’t shoot! Don’t shoot him. That’s... that’s my man.”

Because it is my man.

It’s Deck. Big and rumpled and intimidating and beloved. Riding on one of the ATVs. He slows when he sees the truck, swerves off the road and onto the grass to give us a wide berth. He’s aiming his pistol at us when I scramble out of the pickup and wave both arms at him, calling, “Deck! Deck!”

He either sees or hears me. He jerks to a stop and jumps off the vehicle, heading toward me.

I’m running full speed now, and I don’t slow down as I get closer. I hurl myself at him, completely unaware of the soreness of my body and the still-intense pain in my shoulder.

He catches me. Swings me around and up into a tight hug. He’s shaking as much as I am as we gasp and whimper and cling to each other.

When he finally slides me back down to my feet, he frowns as he inspects my

condition. He checks some of the scratches on my skin that have mostly stopped bleeding and then shifts to my injured shoulder.

“I’m okay,” I tell him, wiping away a few stray tears. “How are you even here?”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:46 am

His features twist. His eyes are deep and urgent. He signs, Trisha said you left. Left! You didn't want me anymore. But it was wrong. She lied. You wouldn't leave me. You never trusted her, and you were right. So I look for you.

I wipe my damp face with both hands. They're probably dirty and smearing yuck on my skin, but I don't care at the moment. "Logan really allowed you to leave and take one of the ATVs?"

He shakes his head. Didn't ask.

I don't know why it happens—probably some kind of collapse after so much fear and stress—but I start to giggle. Then I can't stop. Then I almost bend over with helpless laughter until Deck pulls me into a soft hug.

When I've finally recovered, I remember Greta and Jimmy, so I take Deck by the hand and bring him over to introduce him. After I thank them again and assure them that we'll be fine now, they drive off, looking relieved.

I can't blame them.

I'm much safer with Deck than I would be by myself.

I'm much better with Deck than I'd be with anyone else.

When we return to the ATV, he turns me to face him, tilting my head up so I'm focused on him.

Talk to me now?

“Yes,” I rasp. “I’ll talk to you. I’m sorry I didn’t before. I was... I was scared.”

His gestures are rushed and almost clumsy, but he shapes all the words with his hands. I know you were. But you shouldn’t be. Tell me anything, and I’ll listen. You have a problem, I’ll fix it. You run, I’ll follow. You want to leave Logan, I’ll leave him. You want to go somewhere else, I’ll go with you. You want a house, I’ll build it. You want a baby, I’ll make you pregnant. You want a new life, I’ll find one for you. His face is open. Emotional. Nakedly sincere. I’m with you. Always. Forever.

I burst into tears.

Then I fling myself back into his arms. He lifts me up as he hugs me. I’m shaking and crying and holding on to him with all I’m worth as I choke out, “I’m with you too. Always. Forever.”

He makes a helpless sound as his arms tighten around me, and I realize he wasn’t as confident as he seemed.

He didn’t know how I felt about him—not for sure—any more than I was sure of his feelings before right now.

So we’re both overwhelmed by joy and relief and affection for a few minutes until I suddenly remember all our problems don’t go away just because we’re back together. I pull away with a worried gasp.

Deck frowns. What?

“Trisha! Trisha. She’s working with some sort of gang. Maybe some of her old one or someone else. I don’t know. But they’re going to attack Logan and the others. Soon.

They won't be expecting it. We need to warn them."

Deck starts moving even before I stop talking. He straddles the seat of the ATV and helps me on behind him. Then he starts the engine, makes a U-turn, and accelerates. Fast.

We might already be too late, but we've got to try anyway.

Because Deck might be my person, but he's not the only person I have. And the others are all in danger right now.

25

We stay on the same road until after dark. Deck explains that Logan told him if he wants to catch up with them again, they'll be keeping on the same road until it ends.

I was hoping we'd find them before the sun goes down, but it's low—almost at the horizon—and we've still not seen any sign of them.

Surely they'll have stopped for the night by now. Logan always finds a safe place to camp before dark. They won't have gone too far from the road. If we don't see them soon, then we'll have to stop on our own. Then it might be too late.

I've got my arms wrapped around Deck's waist, and my body is pressed into his back. He feels and smells safe and familiar. I can't believe I almost lost him. I can't believe he left Logan to come find me.

The thought swells up in my heart until I squeeze him tight and murmur, "I love you, Deck. You know that, right?"

He jerks his head over his shoulder. Tenses and then relaxes in my grip. He lifts one

hand and spells out with his fingers, Love you too.

Smiling, I kiss the back of his shoulder. “They must have stopped for the night more than an hour ago. Surely we’ll catch up to them soon.”

Maybe.

“What will we do if we don’t find them?”

Keep looking.

He’s right. Today isn’t the only day it’s possible to reach them. If we don’t find them today, we might be able to tomorrow. It might not be too late.

That thought has only just processed in my mind when the sound of gunfire in the distance makes me jerk. Deck hears it too. He stiffens and accelerates our speed.

The gunfire could be anything. It’s not unusual in the world two and a half years after Impact. But I know as well as Deck does that those are our friends, our people.

Trisha and that gang didn’t wait any longer to attack. They’re doing it this evening. Right now.

“Hurry,” I say, although Deck is already doing just that. “Maybe we can help.”

Deck is driving so fast now that I’m being jostled dangerously on the back of the seat because the pavement is in such bad shape. I hold on tight, scared and dizzy and still incredibly sore from my tumble down the riverbank earlier.

I don’t care about any of that. All that matters is reaching the others in time.

In time to... do something.

Deck follows the sounds of the shooting until the shots are very loud, just over the next hill. Then he slows down so we can see the situation before we come barreling into danger.

Because we're cresting the hill, we have a good vantage point to see even in the low light. Logan and the others clearly set up camp in an abandoned church not too far off the road. They built a large fire in the field beside it, and all the vehicles are parked around the back.

And now they're using the church as a defensive position against the gang attacking them.

My first thought is that the gang didn't have a very strategic plan. From here, it looks like they just came off the road and started shooting. Maybe they were forced into premature action by my catching Trisha. Whatever the reason, they don't appear to be overpowering our people.

It looks more like a stalemate, but that's bad enough. If a stalemate goes on long enough, then everyone loses.

Deck drives us down the hill toward the church. No one hears us over the sound of so much gunfire.

There's a big tree along the old driveway into the parking lot, and Deck stops there, gesturing that I should get off and take that position.

I do as he says, pulling out my pistol and using the tree for protection as I lean around it to start shooting the bad guys from behind.

Deck keeps driving the ATV, shooting with his rifle as he goes.

There are only two of us, but that's enough to make the difference. Half the gang turns around and starts shooting at us instead, surprised by the unexpected advance from behind, and that gives the folks in the church the advantage.

It lasts about five more minutes. I keep shooting and reloading and shooting some more, and I'm almost positive that I actually hit a few of the bad guys—only wounding shots rather than killing ones. It's too dark now to see very well, and my vision is whirling from fear and adrenaline.

I'm almost surprised when it's over. Logan comes out of the church, calling out orders, and Deck and a few others go through, making sure all the fallen are dead or incapacitated. I finally emerge from behind the tree and limp over, checking to see if any of our people are hurt.

I'm relieved when Burgundy runs over to hug me, saying something about how she knew I wouldn't have left and that she's so glad Deck managed to find me.

I only hear her in a blur. Everything is a blur. Something unfinished sits in my gut like a predator poised for attack.

When I see Trisha, it finally does. It attacks. She's standing there with the others—my group, my people—still acting like she's one of us. Since her cohorts lost, she's going to pretend she had nothing to do with them. She actually thinks she might get away with it.

I launch myself at her. There's no other way to describe it. Heedless of my own injuries, I race toward her and tackle her, the force of my motion pushing both of us to the ground.

She's bigger than me, but she's taken by surprise, so I have the advantage. She does fight back, but I hit and kick and scratch like a wild animal—completely out of

control in my rage—until I claw the gun she pulled out of her hand.

I'm holding her down with the weight of my body, and I point her own gun at her.
My fingers are hot and damp on the trigger.

And I hate her. More than I've ever hated anyone in my entire life.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:46 am

She's been actively working against me and everyone I love while pretending to be one of us.

If anyone needs to die, it's her.

But my hand shakes. And I see her. I see her.

She's scared now more than angry. She's a human being who was cornered into a terrible position by a world that rarely shows mercy. Just like I was. She made bad decisions because of it, but in a different situation maybe I would have too.

My hand keeps shaking. Everything inside me keeps shaking.

"Lilah." The voice comes from behind me. Cool. Quietly authoritative. Logan.

"I can do it," I choke out. "She was working with them. She betrayed us."

"I know that. I know that now."

I try to summon all my will and fortitude into the simple act of pulling the trigger. My whole body is trembling with the effort.

Logan draws closer until he's standing right beside me. He puts a hand on my shoulder.

"I can do it," I say again.

“I know you can, sweetheart.” The gentleness in his voice surprises me more than the endearment. His expression is ice-cold when I look up. “But she was one of us.”

He carefully helps me rise to my feet. I sway slightly but don’t fall.

“You don’t have to carry that,” Logan tells me before he leans over and hauls Trisha up to her feet. “I do.”

I stare, dazed and stunned and shatteringly relieved that this will get done but that I don’t have to be the one to do it. Logan walks Trisha away until they’re out of sight behind the corner of the church. There’s a single gunshot—just like there was months ago after Pete tried to rape me.

When Logan reappears, there’s blood spattered on one of his cheeks. I can see it in the flickering light of the bonfire nearby.

He meets my eyes. I silently mouth, “Thank you.” He nods and turns away, giving some instructions about cleaning up the dead bodies.

I turn back to Deck, who has been standing nearby all this time.

When we look at each other, we both understand.

One of the open questions between us is settled for good.

Because I’m never going to leave Logan either.

26

A week later, I’m leaning over Deck with a pair of scissors I borrowed from Burgundy. His eyes are on me as I carefully trim the coarse brown hairs of his beard.

He's seated on a small bed, and when he shifts slightly, the springs creak. I step back. "If you keep moving, you're going to get an eye poked out." I try for a disapproving expression, but I'm in much too fond a mood at the moment to manage it successfully.

Deck grows still except for his eyes.

"And stop staring at my tits," I add since his gaze has slipped lower to the neckline of the worn tank top I'm wearing. "I'm trying to work here."

His mouth twitching just slightly, he uses both hands to make a gesture like he's squeezing invisible boobs and then shifts to two thumbs-up signs.

I dissolve into giggles and can't resist the urge to wrap my arms around his neck in a quick hug, being careful with the scissors I still hold.

He hugs me back, but when his hug starts transforming into something else, I step back with a shake of my head. "Nope. Haircut first. Sex later."

He gives an exaggerated sigh and straightens up again, holding still so I can return to trimming his beard.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:46 am

The hair on his head was easier since I mostly just chopped off the length of it and tried to shape the ends so it didn't look too weird. His hair is thick with a slight wave, so it's never going to look particularly neat anyway. But I'm more hesitant about the beard. It's closer to his face and one wrong clip could really mess it up.

So I focus as I snip and snip and snip again until his beard is relatively short and not too ungainly. "There." I step back. Get a good look at him. "Uh-oh."

With a frown, he reaches for the hand mirror I also borrowed from Burgundy and peers at himself. Then he glances up at me in confusion.

"You're way too good-looking now," I tell him in a resigned tone. "Every available straight woman in the territory will be making a play for you."

I surprise him. He gives a soft bark of laughter and then studies himself in the mirror again. He does look really good. I've always loved his appearance, but I never considered him traditionally handsome before. But it's not just me who will like the looks of him right now.

When he sets down the mirror, he meets and holds my eyes. Gestures toward his chest. Me... only for you.

My smile melts. My heart melts. I step over and let him pull me into his lap so he can hold me. We kiss for a minute and then hug each other for a long time until he finally swings me over so I'm on my back on the bed.

We found this little place earlier today as we were scouting the area. It's a tiny, run-

down hunting cabin, but the structure is sound, and it still has an intact bed and a table with chairs. Everyone else is camped out in an abandoned commercial property, but Deck and I decided to spend the night here instead.

Might as well take advantage of the privacy while we can.

Logan found his daughter and ex-wife's parents two days ago in a small settlement deep in a thick forest. It might have been pure luck, but I think he must have had an idea where they might be since we basically made a straight line here. Maybe his ex described where her folks were from to him at some point.

Whatever the reason, he found them a lot sooner than I would have imagined, so we've been in this area for a couple of days.

Logan is a closed book. It's impossible to know what he's thinking. We don't know how long we'll be staying here or whether we'll be circling back regularly so he can see his daughter or if he'll take off and never think of her again.

Surely he's not going to try to take a baby with us on our travels.

So we've been in limbo since we arrived, waiting to find out what comes next.

I'm happy to have a bed for the night, especially in a private space with Deck. He climbs over me, lining up his body with mine so we can kiss. He holds some of his weight on his forearms, but his lower body presses into mine. I love how it feels. Love how deeply and earnestly he's kissing me.

Love everything about his man.

I still can't believe that he's mine.

Eventually he starts kissing his way down my body, taking off my tank top to spend time on my breasts before he drags off my leggings and nuzzles between my thighs. I'm already turned on from the kissing and foreplay, but my arousal goes into overdrive when he nudges me open and licks my pussy.

I arch up, clutching at his hair and making helpless little whimpers as he teases me with his lips and tongue.

When he slides two fingers inside me and sucks on my clit, I come apart completely, crying out loudly as the orgasm shudders through me.

Deck is smiling, his mouth and beard damp, as he straightens to gaze down at me.

I try to summon the spirit to give him a dry comment, but all I can manage is a hoarse "Wow."

His big body shakes with warm amusement. He pulls his shirt off over his head, pulls off his boxers, and then leans over to kiss me again. I'm really getting into it when he suddenly flips us over so I'm on top. He helps me adjust my legs so I'm straddling his hips.

I rub his chest, saturated with pleasure from the awed, adoring expression on his face as he gazes up at me. "You shouldn't look at me that way."

Why?

"Because... I don't know. It makes me feel weird."

Why?

"Because... I don't think I deserve it."

His face changes. He lifts both hands to cup my face.

“I love you too,” I whisper, suddenly emotional.

Page 76

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:46 am

He nods.I know.

For some reason, that makes me giggle again.

Deck is smiling as he signs,Can we fuck now?

“Yes, please.”

I lift my hips and together we line his cock up at my entrance so I can ease down, taking him inside my pussy. Then I brace myself and ride him steadily, finding a rhythm that works for both of us.

He holds on to my hips and gazes at me the whole time, his hot, ardent eyes moving from my face to my bare breasts to the place where we’re joined. Those looks get me going as much as the friction of his cock moving inside me. I accelerate so I’m bouncing above him and move one hand to rub my clit as the sensations build.

I’m making silly sobbing sounds as my orgasm crests, and he’s right behind me, pulling out just before he comes all over my belly and breasts.

I collapse on top of him. He wraps his arms around me. We both gasp and shake with little afterquakes.

Finally, I smile against his chest. “I like having our own place.”

He grunts softly, one big hand caressing my messy hair.

“And it’s barely dark out, so we have the rest of the night if we want to do it again.”

He laughs breathily. Signs, Need a minute.

“I wasn’t suggesting right now. Maybe we’ll wake up in the middle of the night and want to have sex again.”

Sounds good.

“You don’t think...” I hesitate, wondering if I should say it. Then I do. “You don’t think Logan will want to stay around here, do you? I mean, because his daughter is here. Elizabeth. Maybe he’ll want to stay close to her.”

Maybe.

“You don’t think so?”

I don’t know. It’s new. For Logan. No idea what he’ll do.

I sigh. “Me either. But it would be nice. We could fix this place up. Make it ours for real. Would you want that?”

Yes. We can do it. With or without Logan.

“I know. But I don’t want to leave him. Or the rest of them. They feel like... our people.”

I know. Me too. Let’s wait and see.

“Okay. That sounds good.” I’m still sprawled on top of Deck’s body, and I have no plans to move anytime soon. “Let’s just wait and see.”

A half hour later Deck and I are still naked in bed, not sleeping but lounging comfortably together, when there's a loud knock on the door.

We both jump up. Deck grabs for his rifle, aiming it at the door while wearing no clothes.

"It's me." Logan's voice is slightly muffled through the door. "Sorry to interrupt, but I need Deck."

"He's here," I reply as Deck sets down his rifle and reaches for his clothes. "Just a minute."

When we're both dressed, Deck swings the door open to Logan, who looks as composed and matter-of-fact as ever.

He blinks slightly when he focuses on Deck—probably because of the difference the haircut makes—but he doesn't mention it. "I need help gathering everyone to talk. Can you start rounding them up?"

Deck nods with a yes sign. I'm the only one who uses sign language with Deck, but the gesture is probably second nature to him now.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:46 am

Logan knows exactly what he means. “Thanks. I’m going to stay here.”

Both Deck and I grow still. “What?” I ask. “For good, you mean?”

“Yes. I’m not going to leave Elizabeth, and I’m not going to take her away from her grandparents. This area is as good as any. It’s isolated and protected by the forest, and I think we can set things up to defend ourselves here. Pretty soon most of the scavengeable supplies will be used up, so we’d have to settle somewhere. Might as well be here. We can work on growing produce. Maybe trade with the folks around here. I think we can make a life for ourselves in this place, so I want to try. But I’m not going to make anyone do it who doesn’t want to settle. Anyone can leave if they want.” He pauses. Glances at me and then over at Deck. “Would you want to stay?”

Deck and I look at each other. A smile breaks on my mouth that matches his.

I’m speaking for both of us as I tell Logan, “Oh yeah. We definitely want to stay.”

EPILOGUE

Six months later, I’m behind Deck again on an ATV, driving along an old hiking trail.

There are a couple of roads through this forest, but they’re barely passable now from disrepair and overgrown foliage. So to get around, we use the ATVs and take whatever trail will get us closest to our destination.

It’s a different life. Living here in the woods, cut off from the rest of the world, isn’t like traveling on the old highways and finding abandoned buildings to scavenge. It’s

been an adjustment for all of us, but we're making it work.

Logan gave everyone a choice as to whether to stay or not when he decided to settle.

Not a single one of our group left.

The abandoned commercial property we were camping in has become Logan's headquarters—all our work and trade and food storage and supplies are centered there. Some of the group even sleeps there, although a lot of us have found or built our own places. Deck and I are still in the little hunting cabin we discovered. For a couple of months, we spent all our free time fixing it up, so now it's in good condition, comfortable, and pleasant.

I love it, and Deck does too. It's home when we never had one before.

We still work for Logan. That's never going to change. We have a variety of duties—including guarding headquarters, working in the garden and kitchen, and running errands.

For the past two days, we've been on the western border of the forest to see if there's a possibility of trade with the farming community that Greta and Jimmy were a part of. It's not really that far away from us, but Deck and I traveled the entire length of the border, and none of it allows safe passage anymore.

As far as we can tell, gangs of ruffians have taken over there. It won't be worth trying to get through.

So now we're on our way back. I'll be glad to see the others. I'll be glad to get home.

I'm so excited I squeeze Deck's waist and rub my face against the back of his shirt.

He turns his head over his shoulder.

“It’s nothing,” I say, answering his unspoken question. “Just happy to get home.”

He signs a quick Me too, smiling as he faces forward again.

He’s been smiling a lot lately. Far more than he did when I first met him. He still doesn’t speak. Maybe one day he will, but we do just fine using a mix of ASL and our own signs and gestures we’ve come up with. I’m closer to Deck than I’ve ever been to anyone. I don’t need to hear him speak to understand him.

As deeply as he understands me.

Life has been really good these past several months. Better than I ever believed life could be again.

And there’s no reason not to hope it can get even better.

We reach the main gates to the compound two hours later. In the guard post, Micah gives us a friendly wave and says it’s about time we got home while Carl turns the crank to open the gate. Deck accelerates through and drives up the driveway to park the ATV with the rest of the vehicles.

When we dismount, he pulls me into a hug.

Of course I hug him back. But when I pull away, I ask, “What was that for?”

Because I love you. And you felt happy behind me the whole trip. His expression is teasing but warm.

I giggle. “I was happy behind you the whole trip. Remember when I was angry all the

time and you finally got me to punch it out?”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:46 am

His shoulders shake slightly with suppressed amusement. I remember.

“How did you get so smart?”

From living through the same thing. I saw it in you because I felt it too.

“Well, you helped get me through it. It’s the same shitty world, but I can see hope in it now. In fact, I’m thinking... if it’s still good with you... maybe we can start...” I don’t know why I’m suddenly slightly insecure, but I make myself finish the sentence. “Start trying.”

My nerves disappear when I see Deck’s expression brighten. He knows exactly what I’m suggesting. Yes. Yes! Let’s try to make a baby.

He still pulls out every time we have sex, but we’ve talked about trying for a baby, and now feels like the right time. I give him a wobbly smile. “Okay. Good. We can get on that this evening. I know it’s not a sure thing anymore, but I think it’s worth trying.”

Yes. He cups my face until I beam up at him.

“No wonder I’m just randomly happy these days.”

Me too. Mostly because of you.

I stand on tiptoes and stretch up in an attempt to give him a kiss. He has to tilt his head down to get our lips to meet.

We may not have made it back to our little cabin yet, but it still feels like we've finally made it home.