7 Corners ©

A soap opera continuation of the book - *Flip*

by G. R. Ryan

V1.1

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Preface

Ever read a soap opera?

No? Well, here's your chance.

This is the first in a series of E-books to be published once a month and written in the fashion of an ongoing Soap Opera. The change in scenes between the actors will be denoted by three arrows ">>>" and each chapter will include four to six snippets into the lives of the 7 Corner characters. All events play out in the Virginia area just outside of Washington, D.C. and as you grow to understand those very characters, you will get to know them like they were your own family members – warts and all.

So, grab the book and take it along to work with you to read as you eat lunch, talk about it to your friends, but most importantly, please… please enjoy it.

In the book ***Flip***, due to be published in April 2007, the story ended after the first year of building a new life so as to survive in a post-apocalyptic world.

That apocalyptic episode started with the Beasts, four meteorites that decimated a good part of China and three weeks later, also caused the Flip. The Flip wiped out the world of electricity which in turn caused many other sociological flips in its wake. Food became the only real necessity in the beginning and overnight the gold standard was replaced with the greatest renewable food source of the time – chickens. A man rich in chickens was a very wealthy man indeed.

Rich men became the servants of the poor, the well

educated took a backseat to those with mechanical aptitude, and a man's worth was now judged by the weight he could carry. Unfortunately for women, the advancement of women's rights had been just as quickly dismissed by the Flip and replaced with the same rule of measure that men faced; they became worth only as much as they had to immediately offer. With men, it usually came down to their ability to endure hard labor and their ability to protect themselves and what was theirs. For many women, it most often came down to what they had to offer for their protection and their need for food.

As always, sexual roles play out no matter what happens to our world, and how that plays out is one of the main focuses of many characters from the 7 Corners area of Virginia. Many young women most understandably become fearful over the lack of medicines and doctors to help them through pregnancies, and a new world order comes from that in the form of Traps. These are the women so fearful of pregnancy that they adapt their relationships so as to maintain their safety and otherwise normal day to day lives, in any way they can.

I hope you enjoy the plots, the twist and turns, and the interactions between the groups of people, but please try to see them from their eyes as they fight to survive in the new world.

And one last thing; as in any good soap opera, pay careful attention to the very last snippet. It will display the very epitome of what 7 Corner cliff hangers look like.

7 Corners ©

A soap opera continuation of the book - Flip

by **G. R. Ryan**

For the Month of February 2007 **V1.1**

Chapter 1

Welcome to 7 Corners, Virginia. My name is Owen and I'm 33 now. This is the first installment of a bi-monthly series that will allow you a peek into our little world here in this new post apocalyptic time. The Flip occurred a year ago, but ever since then it has become a story more about the human condition of trying to survive in this new world. Society needs to be built all over again and the heinous acts of those most desperate to outlive the starvation, disease, and human degradation has, for the most part, given way to the mundane intricacies of everyday life once again. How we work to rebuild society, barter to feed ourselves, handle love affairs, and finding our way back to those sexual beings we had been before the Flip is the real story now. And in the weeks, months, years to come, this series of stories will lay down the new rules that foster our social interactions. I hope you stay tuned to see how… and if we learn to survive.

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The sun was nearly blinding to me as it had just successfully made its way past the window frame and

into my eyes. I turned away to shield my sight from the stinging brightness and there was the most heavenly sight; my new wife, holding our little girl between us. The two of them were still asleep and I remembered how she had heard a gunshot in the middle of the night. She had bundled up our new daughter into the safety of her cradled position between us.

So much had happened in the past year and never would I have ever guessed that before the Flip that I would have ever brought a new baby into the world. She was so beautiful and being born on the one year anniversary of the horror that had catapulted us into this fractured state, there was only one name that ever came under consideration for her; Eve. She came to us in the early morning hours of May 8th, and despite a very trying birth, was a very healthy and loud little bundle of joy. Some say she was born exactly at 10:18 and was the very manifestation marking our little world's success. We had survived that first year despite everything that had been thrown at us.

It never ceased to amaze me that from that day on, all I ever had to do to forget all the horrific events of the prior year was to take a peek at Eves' chubby little red cheeks, her bright and smiling eyes, and count her as my greatest blessing. She was just beginning to stir and that instantly invoked a protective cradling from her mom. When I saw Sue wasn't ready to wake up yet, I pried Eve from her mother's grip and went to change her diaper.

We had planned on having Sherri over for breakfast and since I often looked on her as one of my "other" daughters, I was anxious to see her. Eve was

coming up on her second week with us and I wanted Sherri to have the opportunity to become a positive force in her life. It was just as important for Sherri in her own way. She was fifteen now, and doing well. Her body was filling out again from the emaciated appearance she had been in when I rescued her from her father. Ever since that day, she had never seen him again and even knowing what he had done to her, my heart still ached knowing that it was only the circumstances that we had been tormented with that had made him do as he had.

As with such a large portion of the female world, trading use of their bodies had pretty much become a way of life for the simple benefit of getting a days worth of food. We had lost some estimated five hundred million people to the Beasts that had decimated China just weeks before the Flip. Many people considered those dead as the lucky ones. Those that suffered in the first days and months after the Flip rendered us back into the ice ages of technologies were the ones that really earned our pity. Not one person could afford to put their pride or integrity before the growing necessity to do something as simple as eat.

It had been three months after it all happened that I found Sherri in the market being sold into sexual slavery. When I look at her beautiful locks of hair today, I still remember how her father had been tossing her about with them that day. She had been beaten into such a bottomless pit of despair that I had even had to use my sidearm to force her to run with me. It has been such a long road from that day I had to kidnap her from the only family she knew. But if your only family is

forcing you to prostitute yourself for food, perhaps it's best to be an orphan.

Unfortunately, as hard as I tried to reclaim this poor girl from the acts that she had been brainwashed into thinking was normal, I still saw hints that she was way ahead of her age when it came to sex. It had taken a full month living amongst the safety of the United before she regained the ability to smile again, but now she knew how to use that smile to get her way in any matter. Unlike her smile coming back though, her trust in people wasn't so forthcoming. When I would see her speak to men about nearly any subject, I could see her sizing them up with her eyes. She was placing some sort of value on them as to what it would take from her sexually to get her way. There had only been a couple of incidents since I had brought her to our group over the past nine months where she assumed sex was her best method of getting her way; at least I was hoping that was the case.

I looked out over the roadway that had once been a major freeway into Washington. It's just six miles down the road and use to be a parking lot at this time of the morning. Now, there were just a few remaining useless cars and one truck in sight that hadn't been reclaimed or salvaged for its parts. Now the road was for foot traffic on the east bound lanes, and bicycle traffic on the west bound side. At seven in the morning, it was disheartening to see less than twenty people making their way by foot or bike… to wherever they were headed.

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“Get the hell off of me!”

“Come on Danny. It’s been a frigging year now. Other people are having sex all over the place. Are you ever going to let me touch you there?”

“You know I’m not going through what those other women have. There aren’t any hospitals anymore. Hell, just finding a doctor can take days. I’m not taking the risk of getting pregnant just so you can have a good time with my body. We’ve been over this enough times now. If you need someplace to park it that bad, then go. Go find some cheap little whore. But I’m not it.”

This was being heard a lot more than one might think these days. For years things had progressed to a point where it had become almost impossible to find time for sex, and now that time was all we had, is was viewed as a major health risk. But Danny was right about the lack of healthcare. She had grown up in the city of Falls Church and had barely been introduced to the fact that women once had babies all the time without the benefit of pain killers or hospitals. Back then, a clean room was considered luxurious. Being a city girl, she was among a majority of young women that feared pregnancy as much as any social disease; maybe even more. Chick Traps were becoming a common thing to see these days.

Her boyfriend Thomas, whom had chosen to team up with her in the first weeks after the Flip, had his points too though but on a much more basic level of urgency. His plight was far more biological than anything. He didn’t want to bring a baby into this world now any more than the next guy, but the driving force to

release his pent up urges needed extinguishing. Biology is after all, the most difficult force to restrain from its appointed course in nature. The women had one major ally in their aid to dismiss their own needs for sex; fear. Fear of the life threatening complications that a pregnancy might bring, fear that they may not even be able to nourish the baby properly, and always in the forefront of a woman's mind had to be the fear of all the aches and pains, especially the biggest one; the birthing itself.

Thomas and Danny, short for Danielle, lived right in the middle of what had once been a growing city. Danny was about to turn twenty in a couple of weeks and her other half was a year and a month older than her. They shared a little two bedroom ranch style house that they had acquired through successfully squatting there for the required six months. Marshall Law rules that had been introduced to make sure that housing was available to as many people as possible stated that a full six months of squatting on unclaimed property meant it was yours to keep. Danny had known that the prior occupants had moved out to the Left coast just a month before the world rewrote history and it had been left empty and up for sale. She had been tossed out of the apartment she had been sharing with a girlfriend just after the incident in China and had stayed with another friend until the new Squatting law had gone into effect. That was when she first met Thomas. He had shared a can of beans with her that he had acquired from one of the food deliveries from the army and soon vowed to take on the world together.

"Anyways, we've overslept. You're friend said to be

there early to get the chickens and I'm not missing out on that." Danny was getting out of bed to wash up and turned to see the ever growing ire on Thomas' face. She felt his plight, but it was still easier than the alternatives she faced. Again, she hung her head over what she was doing to the poor boy and resumed walking out of the room. She realized that in her state of nudity that she was seriously making an already bad topic much worse, so she snatched her robe off the chair by the bed and turned her form away from Thomas to cover up. She looked back at him from the doorway to see the heavy weight he felt over her dismissal of him, and offered him a ray of hope. "Remember the birth control pills the News Board was talking about? If the government ever does come up with them, then you can screw my frigging brains out."

Thomas came back with, "Yeah, right! And we can always trust what the Gov's say. They can't even get us water on a steady basis."

His frustrations were understandable, but Danny had told him right from the beginning that nothing was ever going to happen in that particular region of her body. She had even gone far past her pre-Flip bag of enticements for young men and pleasured him orally on many occasions. She had even allowed her dear friend the benefit of molesting her in ways one could only consider perverse to care for his needs as well as she could afford.

That topic would just have to be set to the side for now, or at least for the two mile ride into the southern part of the city. Danny and Thomas had been promised a half dozen fresh eggs and even a chance at a lottery

to win two chickens. This was not anything they could afford to pass up. Food was never anything passed on anymore. They had to hurry though, because lines formed early these days and a friend of Thomas' was one of the well known members of the United that promised him a chance in the lottery. They grabbed their bicycles and headed off down Broad Street.

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"Wait… wait up. I need a break… I can't breathe." Lisa jumped off her bike and was bent in half over the frame of it while desperately trying to catch enough air to ease her wheezing.

Her new roommate pulled to the side of the road and yelled back, "Come on girl. We have to get there and make our trades."

Cynthia looked back at her friend and laughed a little under her breath. Lisa was hitting her mid twenties and yet looked like an eighteen year old. She was wondering what she might look like today if a year earlier food hadn't become such an ongoing problem. Lisa had shown her several pictures from before the catastrophe and even though she had never mentioned it to her, Cynthia knew she was headed for the big girl stores. Now on the other hand, she had a nice figure that stayed that way because of the exercise involved with finding food and the lack of it in the first place.

Lisa was gasping for air by the time she hit the top of the hill and noticed that every time she took a deep breath that her friend was checking out her heaving bosom and smiling broadly.

“Stop that… you know I don’t like being… ogled. I need a few minutes. Pleeease?”

Cynthia took pity on her panting and wheezing, and waved her hand in the direction of the next really big hill. “Look down there. It’s all down hill; until it goes back up again. You can make it, but we don’t have any time to spare.”

Lisa smiled at first when she saw it was almost a half mile all downhill, but frowned again when she saw the other side of the road went up at nearly the same slope. She asked, “How far up the hill do we have to go?”

Cynthia frowned herself knowing that her friend wasn’t going to like her answer. “Just about all the way up. See that trailer truck by those towers? It’s just about that far. But you can make it, just hang in there. Once we get there it’ll probably be a two hour wait anyway.”

While the girls took a moment to survey the leftover carnage from a years worth of toil, and the reclamation efforts for raw materials from the hundred or so broken down cars and trucks, they began talking about their wares. They had four dozen candles that they had brought in trade to get into the lottery. They both had high hopes that they wouldn’t have to haul their load back to Fairfax and would rather have the problem of dealing with the live cargo they hoped to win in trade.

The young women talked for a while about how many people they expected to find at the top of the next hill. It had become rather well known just how valuable live chickens were, and these were promised egg layers at that. Cynthia reckoned that there would probably be far more people than chickens going out

and that spurred both of them to remount their bikes and push off for the half mile glide down the hill.

Cynthia was taking the lead for more reasons than just to act as a carrot to her best friend. She was feeling guilty about the night before. The guilt was washing over her for breaking Lisa's trust in their pact; a pact that made it the two of them against the rest of the world. Lisa had known what she had been doing to earn food when they first met three months earlier, but she also thought that was all in the past now. And for the most part, it was. But it was the guy next door that had tempted her last night. Even smiling over what they had done made her feel guilty for just remembering how good it had felt to feel a man hovering over her prone body again. His name was Robbie and was just a young buck next to her. He was twenty compared to her twenty-six years, but she had often watched him working in his back yard with his shirt off and viewed him as all man. With the summer heat, the accompanying sweat made his body a lasting memory, and the flush of heat running through her wasn't being abated by the wind blowing past her.

By the time they were half way down the hill, Cynthia was beside herself with the captivating thoughts of what she and Robbie had gotten away with; at least so far. Even though her relationship with Lisa was purely plutonic, she knew deep down that the girl had a deeply hidden crush on her. That was pretty obvious when she made sure she was always around at bath time or suddenly came into the bedroom they shared when she was changing her clothes. That was when her heat vaporized and her guilt refreshed itself.

She knew that there was something about having Lisa jockeying for peeks at her body that gave her a perverse little thrill. Before all hell had broken loose in the world, her favorite sport seemed to be driving the young men crazy by flashing a little more skin than a "good girl" might do. That was a very risky thing to do these days that could easily wind up with her getting raped; or worse.

Lisa was just catching up to her blonde friend as they hit the gentle change from downhill, back to uphill. They were side-by-side as they began pumping away again, and each took a long look at the others sweat soaked tops, necks, and faces just before sharing a smile with each other.

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"Columbia Pike has got to be one of the oldest damn roads in the county. It's like they just followed every hill and mountain to build the roadway and time never caught up to straighten it out. We only have a few more miles to go though. Why don't you take the lead this time, Frank?"

"I'm too damned old for this crap anymore. Beth wore me out last night, and now I just want to lay under this tree the rest of the day and sleep. Why don't you go on without me?"

"Yeah, okay! I'll just tell your kids that you needed your sleep, ol' man. You have any idea how pissed Melinda will be if we don't come back with fresh egg layers. We went into this as a team and our families won't be too damn happy if we miss the lottery all

together. Let's kick it."

"If Beth doesn't kill me, you're going to for sure."

It wasn't all that long of a ride from their Annandale homes, but Frank was in his late forties and getting use to riding a bike again hadn't been very easy for him. He was still quite fit and a force to reckon with, but the muscles needed for sustaining long rides had relaxed over the years for the easier comfort of his pickup truck. His friend of several years, Dillon, was a much different story and in his mid-thirties. Taking long rides on his ten speed had been part of his exercising regime for many years, so when the vehicles were all rendered useless, he was the perfect specimen to conform as a throwback to less comfortable times. As a young black man that had struggled to work his way through college, riding a bike simply made good sense, especially since his school was only a mile down the road from where he lived at the time.

The pair didn't have anything in trade for the lottery, but there were actually two lotteries going on at the United home front and one was for people that had a plan to further propagate their windfall so as to help others. The chickens had become a symbol for the group that had eventually become well known as the United. They showed their commitment as one of the first groups of people to make a successful fight for survival and now their hope was to help other groups of people do the same thing.

Dillon had been the first to get wind of the United. They were located in the southern tip of Falls Church, called Seven Corners, and had become the "sponsors" of the local outpost for the Guardsmen sent to enforce

the common laws. I guess the group really became well known after they had knocked down an insurgency of illegals that had ambushed them one day back in August. As the story went, it had been a major bloodbath for the gangs dumb enough to attack them in broad daylight. Some people told how they had become a target because of the very chickens they had successfully propagated to the point that was making this day so huge for so many other people. Dillon and Frank had talked for days over how they would handle raising the chickens if they were lucky enough to be one of the winners of the lottery. Whoever won those chickens being given away had to be well aware that they could very well be the next targets of the roving gangs that dotted the new world.

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“There it is! There’s the flag… Fort United.” Lisa had had enough of this peddling bullshit and hopped off her bike to walk it the last block to the lottery site. She grinned at Cynthia as if to tell her that her doubts that such a small girl could have made the ride from Fairfax had been unfounded.

Cynthia had been looking over the sight before her and told her friend, “Damn! They weren’t kidding about this place turning into an armed camp. Look at that wall they made from junk. I guess they built that after that attack.”

Lisa, still huffing for sufficient air, “Can you imagine? We’re walking on the battlefield where dozens of men died. I guess there’ll be all kinds of armed

guards all around the place. I wouldn't mind checking out those soldiers we heard about; bet they're some real hunks."

The guilt came back to Cynthia's mind about her brief love fest from the night before, and Lisa mistook it as fear over losing her as a friend.

"Don't worry Cindy; I won't abandon you… at least not for a guy."

Cynthia hated being called Cindy, but it was still better than the SinSin Lisa would call her after a talk over what sex with guys had once been like for her. As much as she valued her friendship with Lisa, she still had cravings that drove her into fits of frustration at times. Strangely enough, her flirtation with her neighbor the night before really didn't do as much for easing the mental lust for a mans touch that she had hoped it would. The tryst had left her very satisfied for the moment, but that moment vanished the minute she woke up with another girl next to her in the morning light.

She remembered how when they first decided to live together that she had often wondered what making love to another woman would be like, but neither of them found it possible to make a first move. The closest they had ever come to having an intimate affair had been one night when she watched Lisa changing into her nightclothes. First, Lisa had caught her peeping her way, and then when she got into the bed next to her, they were facing each other. It was nothing more than intense eye contact, but she remembered how she heard both their breathing grow labored and expected her to go for a kiss. Instead, she had bit her lower lip

and turned away from her. It had been really hard for her not to run her hand along the sexy, lithe body right in front of her, but she had never been with a woman before and worried over what her reaction might have been.

"Hey girls, going our way?"

Cynthia and Lisa turned to see two young men in their late teens riding up on them. It was extremely easy to see that they wanted to make time with two possible hotties, and despite the ruggedness of the one talking to them, there were more important things going on at the moment. But it was the second guy that really worked over Cynthia's devotion to her immediate chore. He was shirtless, sweat-drenched, and boyishly handsome to a fault. His eyes seemed to bore a hole into the composure she was trying to focus towards their mission at hand.

She finally replied quite flirtatiously, "Sorry boys, but we need to get in here to see some people. Maybe you could call us sometime."

Lisa grinned at her knowing that the last call anyone was able to make was well over a year ago. She eyed her friend in such an uneasy way that Cynthia had to turn away; she was still quite uncomfortable allowing anyone to think of her as a lesbian; especially since she wasn't… at least not yet. But in her mind, there had been times when she had taken care of her own needs while fantasizing over the possibility of giving it a try.

The first guy asked if the girls were there for the lottery and they responded with, "Naturally! Why else is anyone here."

Actually, there were only a very few people behind the barricades so far, but enough to make the point valid.

"You girls care to get acquainted over a little relaxing material? We have a few minutes to spare."

Lisa instantly knew what was going on and didn't like either the underlying statement, or the chance they were seeking to hook up with them sexually. She first sneered at them for invading what she considered to be her situation with Cindy, and then told them that they weren't pot heads. She expected her friend to back her up, but when she didn't hear anything, she turned to see Cynthia eyeing the second guy like a piece of prime rib. That got her really pissed off.

"My dad's a cop in Maryland you know. You really think we want anything to do with a couple of druggy losers?" Lisa never took her eyes off her friends and was now getting mad at her for her intense staring at the shirtless guy. "You know, that stuff's still illegal."

That was when the hunkier, shirtless man stepped in to speak, and he made it very clear that it was to combat the annoyance Lisa was displaying towards them.

"Hey, we don't give a damn where… or who your daddy is, or what the hell the laws say. And guess what little girl? There are no more pharmacies, no more drugs, and no more doctors. You think people give a damn that pot's illegal?"

Lisa spit right back that, "We do! We don't smoke that crap and you shouldn't be selling it just to get people hooked."

Again, the young man defended his position. "What

you gonna do when you get hurt? When you have a fever? You're sick and nauseous, or even on your death bed? The Asians are the only ones with any medicines anymore and most of that stuff is pointless. This shit is helping more people than ever now and it's like gold."

"The government is bringing medicine. It's been posted on every News Board and I think we can wait for the real stuff, thank you." Lisa again looked for some help from her friend, but when she saw she had turned away to stay out of the fight, she added, "I hope you get busted."

Now, extremely annoyed with Lisa, he made one last point that really had to weigh heavy on his detractors mindset, and he was beside himself trying to contain his overwhelming anger at the mere mention of the government authorities.

"The feds? The feds? Where the hell are they? They've been talking about bringing medicines for months now. So where the hell is it? You better grow up little girl and see the truth here. This is the best medicine we have for the moment and it seems to help more than anything coming out of those Asian markets. Even doctors are giving it to women giving birth, because even if it isn't good for the kid, the moms stay relaxed long enough to keep from killing them. Haven't you heard? Nearly a third of babies are born dead these days and the stress of birth has a lot to do with those numbers."

Lisa was so frustrated with those facts being thrown in her face and with her friend failing to help her out, that she turned away herself and started crying. No one liked having these horrible truths pointed out to

them anymore. It was bad enough that they were true and people had to live with that daily; but no one needed to have their hopes dashed that way.

Cynthia knew she had abandoned Lisa and went to wrap her arms around her. She tried as calmly as she could to tell Lisa that the guys were basically right. Pot had been around as one of the most natural medicines on the planet since ancient times. It only made since that it was making a comeback now. And even though she was clutching her weeping friend to her chest, she couldn't help but watch the two young men going through the gate in the barricade. She was starting to question how much longer she could allow Lisa to think that anything might ever happen between them, and seeing those two firm rear ends walking away from her in such a confident manner only made her feel worse.

She finally pushed Lisa back a little, brushed her hair out of her face, and told her that they'd better get in line for the lottery. Then came a very awkward moment when their eyes locked. Seeing the tears in Lisa's eyes made what she had just been thinking about seem less right, and that under the right circumstances that she could very well enjoy kissing the trembling lips of her friend and all that went along with it from there.

When they walked their bikes over to the gate, they asked the man standing guard with a shotgun slung over his shoulder where they were suppose to go. First they were asked if they had any weapons and Lisa pulled up her shirt enough to show the grip of the handgun that one of them always carried these days; at least on the longer trips from home. The guard gave them a warning about not displaying the weapon while

on the property of the United, and then sent them off towards a table to check in with the people running the lottery.

Guns were an expected accessory these days and considering that they knew in order to win in the lottery they had to show they could care for the safety of the chickens, they had to come prepared. As a matter of fact, that turned out to be one of the deciding factors for being able to register for the lottery. At the table, they were asked for the required floor plan of where the chickens would be kept to make sure that the perspective winners were serious about their propagation efforts. Next came the question of available security measures and that meant their gun and their willingness to use it if needed. The last qualifier was if they had brought a secure method to safely transport the chickens if they won. Cynthia held up the four bags they had fashioned for carrying the chickens in and after a quick inspection was told they were in the lottery.

“Which one? I mean… we came here to trade.” Cynthia stood waiting for her answer and was met with a question of what they had to offer. Lisa produced the pillow case of candles and spoke to how well made they were and that they were long burning. The girl behind the table was smiling to see that two girls had come so well prepared and told them as much. She told them to hang onto the candles and that they would only be accepted if they won the lottery. But in case they didn’t, they would be free to hang around for a while to trade them before they left.

Lisa asked, “What are our chances? You know… to

win. Are you expecting a lot of people today?”

The girls’ smile waned when she told them that she didn’t really have an answer for them. It was their first such lottery and it was a learning process for them as well. She tried to impress on them something that everyone already knew by word of mouth. After the Flip, they had been fortunate enough to have successfully raised their chicks into an industry that they hoped might help save the world from food shortages. This was an experiment to try and share their good fortune, but they took the disbursement of the chickens very seriously. She warned them again about keeping their weapon under wraps and informed them that the Guardsmen were the chief protection for the event.

“So, we meet again.”

The girls spun around to see the two men they had just met standing behind them to register for the lottery. Cynthia pulled at Lisa’s hand to pull her away from what she very well expected could be a nasty scene and one of the young men placed a back pack on the table. The girls went back to their bikes to talk because they had a while to wait. The real part of things wasn’t going to start for another couple of hours, so they had a lot of time to kill. Cynthia elbowed her friend and nodded her chin off towards the gate. Frank and Dillon had just arrived and were looking around to take in the scene.

There was another reason why Cynthia had elbowed Lisa though. She knew that Lisa had a deep secret desire for handsome black men and sought to tease her over it. There was something about their smooth ebony skin tone that really made the girl quickly

become enthralled with men, which was something she didn't often hear her express a concern over. It made her feel good knowing that her dear friend still had a desire for guys and it served to take a little of her own guilt away over what she had done the night before. When the two men began walking towards the girls instead of the registration table, Lisa got a very evil little smirk from Cynthia that told her how much fun she was going to have teasing her.

"Hi… are you from here or just here for the lottery?" Dillon's face twisted up a little when he didn't get an immediate answer and went on. "We just wanted to know what to expect?"

"My friend's a little tongue-tied at the moment, but we're new to all this as well. You have to register over there at that table." As Cynthia turned to point to the table, she suddenly had her own embarrassing moment to deal with when she saw a spitfire of a girl talking to the two pot heads. The girl was just about Lisa's size with a small frame and long dirty blonde hair. She wasn't even smiling, but there was something about the confident look on her face as she conversed with the much taller men that were keeping her from pulling her eyes away.

Lisa was worried that her friend was eyeing the shirtless man again and now bumped her own elbow into her ribs. "A little star struck?"

Cynthia finally came back to the present and said, "I was just wondering what's going on." A lie perhaps, but it sounded like a plausible reason for her stare.

The four of them watched as the girl suddenly led the men away with the backpack along with them. They

watched as the three made their way into the rear door of the house associated with the driveway hosting the event. It seemed like odd behavior for some reason and it became the topic of conversation for a few minutes. Cynthia tried keeping Dillon close to them for Lisa's sake, but all the while she was trying to understand why the girl had attracted her attention so much. Sure, she was cute, but she had just been thinking about telling Lisa how she was never going to be able to be with a girl. Yet, here she was feeling the undeniable heat welling in her lower extremities to a point where she kept looking around in an effort to catch another glimpse of the girl. But perhaps even worse than the guilt of thinking about another girl, was the fact that she had only appeared to have been around sixteen at the most.

Eventually, Dillon and Frank made their way to the table to register and received a good bit of news. To get into the larger lottery they had taken a long shot chance that offering to give back the same number of chickens as they received might be considered a good enough trade. The problem was that it could be months before they could do that. The girl said she would pass it on to those running the event.

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"Is this the place we go for the lottery? I'm Danny and this is my boyfriend, Thomas. How do we register for this thing?"

The guard had to struggle to get his own questions in between the fast talking girl, but soon the young

couple was making their way towards the table. There was a line beginning to form and the long driveway was becoming rather full. Danny kept asking Thomas what his opinion was as to what their chances might be to win, but he kept trying to brush the question away. He was still chafed over the earlier rebuke Danny had heaped upon him and had his own situation to ponder.

Thomas had grown to love Danny more than any other girl he had ever known, but there are just some things that a guy needs that he felt were too easily dismissed by women. And it was made worse for him by the way she didn't feel like he even had a right to voice his opinion. He understood her concerns over all the risks, but there were still the old time methods of preventing pregnancy that she wouldn't even consider. So, it shouldn't have been very surprising that when a young girl came out of the house that he was a little smitten with the curt smile she offered him. Danny shot him eyes full of daggers, but her timing was off. He decided to take this moment to give her something to think about.

Thomas took a step forward and asked, "Excuse me. You work here?"

The girl stopped and responded with, "Yeah, what do you need?"

"I was wondering how much longer before things get started? And um… what are the chances…"

The girl stopped him and said, "I have no idea and in about an hour."

Danny was happy to see her preemptory and brusque reply and that she was going to move on, but it didn't happen quite that way. Instead, another woman

came up behind them and asked, “Did you say another hour?”

It was Cynthia and she had overheard their conversation, and since it was with the same girl she had fawned over in her mind earlier, she jumped at the chance to have her own interaction with the girl. Much to Thomas’ dismay, the two girls worked themselves closer to each other for a less open talking area.

“My name’s Cynthia. I saw you earlier and I was wondering if you lived here. You guys have quite a thing going on… you’re so lucky.”

The girl stared at her for a moment as if searching for the proper way to answer her, but then it seemed to come to her that there really wasn’t a serious question in there to answer. But there was something that she liked about the woman and answered, “Hi, I’m Sherri. I wouldn’t call my life lucky, but things are a lot better now than they were ten months ago.”

“Why? What’s your story? Wait a minute, let me guess?” Cynthia grabbed at her chin the way a guy might, thought a moment as she looked over the girl’s body, and said, “I’m guessing you had to ply the trade just to eat once a day, right?”

Sherri caught something in Cynthia’s body language that started a passionate twinge in her own eyes. She was clearly ten years older than her, and she was a lot taller and had a heavier build than hers. Perhaps it was those very characteristics that intrigued her enough to kick in that fabulous smile of hers. She decided to reveal a little about her past to sort of test the waters.

“You know how it is. You gotta eat, right?”

Cynthia replied, “You don’t, and you die. I guess it was pretty rough on a girl like you.”

Sherri detected a put down in the comment and asked, “A girl like me?”

“No, don’t get me wrong. I mean… look at you. You’re cute as a bug, young, and with those curves I would have gone after you myself. But you’re so petite… that had to make it hard to handle those assholes. Then again, you come off as the kind of girl that could wrap a guy around her little finger if the want came over you.”

Something was in the air of conversation between the girls and now Sherri was a little smitten herself. The conversation went on for a few minutes until Lisa came over to see what was going on. As soon as Sherri was introduced to Lisa, she got the real picture and excused herself to get back to work. But she walked away wondering if something more had just transpired than a simple conversation between girls.

Cynthia on the other hand was getting questioned over her intentions. Lisa started out in a conservative mode, but it quickly turned into a more accusatory tone. Despite their close friendship, Cynthia didn’t like having Lisa talk as if they were in some sort of romantic relationship that precluded her from speaking to other people; especially other girls. However, she didn’t want to make a scene at such an important event and asked her to trust her until they could talk later. It was agreed to do just that and they began greeting the other people also waiting for their chance to win. And the place was filling up quickly.

Meanwhile, Danny and Thomas were just coming

together to focus on the task at hand and decided to mingle with other people waiting for the results to be announced as well. That brought them together with Cynthia and Lisa just as the two peddlers of pot were being escorted out of the event area… with four chickens in burlap bags with only their heads exposed for air.

When Cynthia realized that they were leaving with chickens even before the lottery had started, she became very animated and began asking the men accompanying the dealers why they were leaving with chickens. No one wanted to talk about it, but everyone within earshot was beginning to chime in seeking an explanation. Finally, Lisa saw the girl that had been talking with Cynthia earlier and pointed her out to the group. She looked like a deer in headlights when a small mob demanded answers of her. She wisely deferred all their questions to the one person in the position to best answer them; me.

>>>

Ten minutes later I was standing on our makeshift stage doing the one thing I feared most in life which was speaking in front of a lot of people. There were probably a hundred people in front of me and it seemed that everyone already knew about the deal that had just been made. But it was nice seeing that so many people had heeded our advice to come in pairs. To us, that meant a greater chance that the “seeds” we were about to disseminate had their greatest chance at survival.

“Excuse me… excuse me people. I happen to be

the one you all hate at the moment." I gave them all a minute to quiet down and looked over all the hopeful faces, most of which were about to go home empty handed. "What some of you saw isn't related to the lottery. We had twenty-four chickens to seed out today and that hasn't been affected. The four chickens just traded came from two members in exchange for… medical goods. I know, because two of the chickens came from me. That means, in a way, that we just upped the anti to twenty-eight chickens which also makes your odds that much better. In the end, the medicinal needs being dealt with here far exceeded the lottery and that's why we did this.

Now, in about ten minutes, the lottery will be getting started and Bill Putman will be up here to run that part of this affair." I watched as the crowd simmered down for the most part. What could they say after all? We had every right to trade as our needs predicated, and whether they believed what I had just explained to them or not didn't really matter; though it was the truth. There was just too much need arising for the medicinal properties of the marijuana we had just acquired to overlook, and my neighbor Steve had agreed so greatly that he threw in two of his chickens to make the trade.

Since the crowd never really dispersed, Bill decided to get things going and all the men we had guarding the proceedings were put on alert. We knew the potential for trouble would be at its peak during and immediately after the winners were announced, so we had prepared for it.

Bill took to the stage and called out for everyone's

attention.

“This is the way things are going to work. Most of you will be leaving here depressed over losing, but we couldn’t come up with a more fair way to do this than what you’re seeing right now. We’re able to hold this lottery just a year after the Flip because we pulled together, worked hard, and remained patient through days of hunger. As you can see, our faith and hard work has paid off.

There will be three parts to this lottery. The first is the trade portion where those that registered will offer whatever they have to trade for four chickens. They will each get three laying hens and a rooster. As you know, we expect those that win will be doing the same as we have and will spread the seeds of their efforts just as we are doing here today. Everyone that wins today will have to stay to learn everything we know about raising chickens and how we will work to support you on down the road.

You must understand and appreciate what these chickens mean. You should get eggs to eat almost immediately and will have some that get fertilized to expand your numbers. You will have their manure for your gardens, albeit not the greatest quality, and after a long wait you will even have fresh meat.

The second winners will get two chickens, both egg layers without any sort of a trade required. We have a program that will provide those winners with the use of a rooster about every two to three weeks so that they can increase the size of their own roosts just as we did.

And after all that is said and done, we will give out all the eggs we have saved up over the last four days to

everyone left over. Just so you can see what your devotion to this project means, look around you. We have the most stable living conditions here than any other place we have heard of in an urban or suburban setting. What started with one block that came together to form the United, now encompasses four entire blocks of this neighborhood. What that means is our progress back to a civilized world has afforded us the ability to sacrifice all of our own use of eggs for the last four days so that we could share them with you people - free of trade. We have almost seven hundred eggs to give out, and it is our sincerest hope that our goodwill will go on to inspire all of you to do better by your neighbors."

Bill had to hold his thoughts because he was drowned out by the applause of people that most likely hadn't had real eggs for nearly a year now. When he started again, it was with the news that many that hadn't come as well equipped as the others would hate to hear, but it was the fairest and most encouraging way we had come up with to propagate our work.

"Not many of you will like this part. We didn't want to give out these chickens to anyone that simply had the ability to come up with a good bunch of lies, just to find out they went home and barbecued them immediately. We didn't advertise this point so that those that really had made sincere and well thought out plans would become part of our program of expansion. We aren't drawing numbers out of a hat, or anything like that. All we looked at was what you showed us at that table over there when you registered. We were looking for sincere efforts to work for the good of all, well thought out plans for disbursing their rewards as they

come, and the ability to secure their new family members. And believe me, when you see those first eggs coming to you, you will value them as part of your family.

Now, when I call your names raise your hands and make your way to the right of the stage. But before I call any names, I want you to take a look around and you will see a number of soldiers and members of the United standing guard over these proceedings. Keep your heads people because we handle disruptions… very quickly.

Lisa Miller and Cynthia Porter of Fairfax, please raise your hands."

The pair of girls began screaming wildly and jumped up and down like crazy people. They immediately began working their way through the crowd of people with everyone shouting taunts at them over having won and shouts that indicated those that didn't win expected them to do right by them.

"Dillon Masters and Frank Hubert, from the Annandale area… please come up."

The newest winners were just as happy as the girls, but they remained reserved with nothing more than smiles on their faces. They understood how easily they could piss off those people that didn't hear their own names and tried to contain their excitement. As a matter of fact, so did most of the others that won. Personal celebrations could wait till later; there was no good that could come from glib actions now.

Bill called out the third names which was actually a three person team. The next winners seemed like a callous thing to do, but for the United it was a definite

plus that gave them the ability to watch over their winners.

“The last people chosen for the four chickens will get four laying hens only. As I said earlier, the United now encompasses four blocks, but a fifth and maybe even a sixth looks like it’s just around the corner. Henry and Sarah Brigham please come up on the stage.”

It took a while for them to make their way up to Bill and was a little confused themselves as to what he wanted to say to them. When they were assembled, and the crowd quieted down, Bill explained the particular importance of these people.

“When we planned this lottery, our intent was to spread our rewards out to other parts of the county for the greatest benefit. But the plan these people came up with was so persuasive that we decided to include them amongst the winners. They only live three blocks away from us, but we saw this as a way to expand the very process that has allowed us to be doing this for all of you today, that much quicker. Will the two of you work every bit as hard as you stated in your proposal?”

Henry and Sarah confirmed they would do whatever it takes and they were immediately rewarded again by hearing that their block, as well as the block of houses between them and the United, was expected to be annexed into the United within six months if they did as they planned. Since a number of people from the immediate neighborhoods were present, a roar of cheers rang out.

Being invited into the United meant a major improvement in so many areas. Safety and security was the greatest initial benefit, but the United was a

symbol to everyone what could be accomplished when neighbors worked together.

“Now we’ll call the names of those people getting two layers without a trade being needed.”

The crowd hushed to hear the first three sets of names being called out. Danny was getting really upset because she had seen a distinct pattern in the dispersal of the first winners. All but the last couple had come from several miles away and she knew she was just two miles away. There were tears in her eyes when their chances of winning were down to their last shot. She was about to throw a fit at Thomas when she saw he was smiling at her. But unlike the way she had been viewing things, he had a much different take on things.

“Haven’t you been listening?” he asked. “Everyone in this part has been closer in to this area.”

Before she even had time to realize that he was right, Bill was calling their names. He then went on to explain that the winners of two laying hens only, were kept closer to home to make it easier to get the roosters around to increase the size of their flocks.

Danny had the breath knocked out of her and instead of going to the side of the stage, she jumped into Thomas’ arms and hugged him with both arms and legs. Something good had finally happened to her. It was just a seed, but as they say, from acorns come the mighty oaks. Unfortunately, her clutching onto Thomas the way she was only mucked up his mind yet again. He knew that despite her apparent happiness that it would be short lived with him. The chickens were sure to garner more of her attention than he would.

“I’m glad you guys won.”

Cynthia turned to see Sherri standing off to her side. Lisa turned just in time to see Cynthia giving her a huge hug in appreciation and even decided to give the girl a hug herself. I guess she was considered their representative here in the United and they had to thank someone.

Knowing Sherri as well as I had come to know her, I saw the same thing in her that Cynthia was at the moment. I probably should have interceded, but we had come to an agreement many months ago that I would stay out of her private life as long as she kept it somewhat under control. My problem was that since I had rescued her from the life she had been living at the hands of her father, I felt like her adopted father. And since she was just fifteen, I knew she was at a place in her life that required a lot of friendly touches to diminish her insecurities. In the old days of a year ago, I would have fought her promiscuity tooth and nail, but in this new age, fifteen was a grown woman. At least she would be adding a year to her age in another month.

Lisa should have been a little more vigilant over watching her friend. Cynthia asked Sherri where the bathroom was, an outhouse these days, and she offered to show her. Cynthia told Lisa where she was going and asked her along, but she was antsy to get her hands on their winnings and opted to stay by the stage until the eggs had been passed out to the non-winners.

It was probably the most innocent of actions that caused the next situation to arise, but Sherri grabbed

Cynthia's hand to lead her through the crowd to the communal outhouse in the middle of the block. Evidently, that innocent touch perpetuated an intense emotion that was enough to tell each girl what the other was really feeling. I had held Sherri's hand in the past and knew how warm, soft, and delicate it felt. There was no way another woman would not be able to sense those same things. It would have been obvious to anyone what was going to happen if they had seen that after they had cleared the crowd that their hands never fell apart. When they got to the bathroom, Cynthia opened the door, looked around, and pulled Sherri in after her.

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Thomas and Danny were finally making their way to the side of the stage when they saw me talking to other winners. When I saw Thomas, I greeted him with a handshake and a smile that said a lot more than it indicated. I had known this kid for a few years now and had personally invited him to the lottery. I knew he had his problems with Danny and when I had seen him at the market at the bottom of the hill one day, he was in the mood to unload everything onto me. He was in a tough situation at his age. Where everything use to evolve around sex and closeness at his age, he was now one of the cast offs that pitted his biological callings against his love for the girl he was living with at the time. I could see both sides of that coin, but I was just as sure that his side was less clear to him than it was to me.

Thomas exchanged his smile my way and introduced his girlfriend to me. Danny thanked me for the chickens.

I said, “I didn’t have anything to do with that part of things. I put in a good word for you, but I stayed out of the decision process altogether. It wouldn’t have been fair otherwise. But I do have some eggs for you inside. You see, after we had enough chickens to share, we split them up so half became our personal property and the other half remained communal property. That means I saved some of my own eggs for you guys.”

Danny reached over and gave me a huge hug. The affection she displayed towards me wasn’t enamoring Thomas any closer to her, but hopefully the look he was shooting my way would get abated by their new windfall.

Everyone was herded off to a closed area to learn all about chickens. It was a very intense training session on how to properly house, feed, and mate the chickens for their greatest chance at replenishing their own neighborhoods. When it was over, we asked all the winners to hang around for a while before leaving to lower their chances of being robbed on their way home.

While most people were standing around talking and seeking to learn as much as they could from what we had done within our neighborhood, one girl was missing something. Cynthia hadn’t come back yet and Lisa’s exuberance was wearing off. Now she began looking around and trying to figure out what was keeping her dear friend. She remembered how Sherri had led her away to find the bathroom and her rage instantly hit a boil.

Lisa beat a path directly towards the outhouse and just before she got to it, she heard the door unlock and it popped open a little. It looked like a hand was pushing it open, but then it was obvious that the hand was pulled back by another. She went to the door, took a deep breath, and opened it quickly. Her rage was diluted in a split second with a healthy dose of depression when she saw Sherri leaning her head back and upwards, as she worked to kiss Cynthia. Her hands were on her friend's bared tummy and rubbing upward, while Cynthia had a hand on either side of Sherri's head as if to hold her in place. There was no mistaking what she had walked in on.

Chapter 2

Both girls had been actively exploring the other, and that hurt her so much that Lisa slammed the door and walked swiftly back to the stage area. Cynthia and Sherri had been so engrossed in their passion for each other that they had barely noticed the door open. But when it came to Cynthia over how much she had hurt her friend, she ran after her.

"I'm sorry… I'm so sorry, Lisa. It just happened, I didn't mean it to, it just did. It has nothing to do with you or me…"

"I saw what I saw."

Cynthia knew that sometimes eyes knew more than the heart and struggled for some way to make things less hurtful for her friend. When she went to put her arm around her, Lisa yanked away, yet stood there for whatever attention the loser of such an action might receive. She needed to hear something, anything that might be believable enough to ease her fears of being dumped for another girl. That's when a very "guy" kind of thing happened. Cynthia just stood close to her with her mouth shut. She knew anything that came out of her mouth would only provoke a negative response and all she wanted was to make things better.

As if things couldn't get more muddled, that was when they heard their names called and they went to the staging area, but the closeness they normally shared was now miles apart.

Bill asked, “You girls Lisa and Cynthia?”

Cynthia waited for Lisa to say anything, but when she stayed silent, she spoke up. “That’s us… but my friend would probably call me SinSin instead. Let me get our bags.”

On her way to their bikes, she caught Sherri watching her walk away. Her emotions were all torn up and any girl in Sherri’s place would understand that no matter what they might feel for each other that taking care of the problem at hand was much more important.

It took her several minutes to untangle the bags they had fashioned to carry their winnings in and by the time she got back, she was aghast to see Sherri had gone to Lisa and was talking to her. The amazing thing was that she wasn’t getting her eyes scratched out. She did her best to edge up on them to overhear their exchange, and was pleasantly surprised to see Sherri falling on the sword for her.

“… so, it’s not her fault; it’s mine. I live here all by myself and I’m not allowed to socialize with any of the guys here. Hell, the soldiers have been warned they’ll get court marshaled if they get caught messing around with me.”

Sherri looked back and saw Cynthia listening and added, “Look, at first she told me to leave, but look at her. She’s so pretty and self assured that… I just had to have something. She even told me that she was with you and how…”

Cynthia knew she had said nothing to her about Lisa, but she was seeing a cunning skill of manipulation come from her new friend unlike anything she had in her own arsenal.

Sherri continued, "… she told me how afraid of you she is." That elicited a look of disdain from Lisa, but it went away when she added, "She's afraid you don't want anything to do with her… in that way."

Cynthia watched as the two girls spoke silently to each other through their stares into each others' eyes. Sherri was so skilful and years ahead of her age when it came to reading people. It was like she knew every detail of their situation and used it to pacify Lisa like a pro. When Lisa saw Cynthia standing there, her anger was clearly diminished from the plateau it had been at moments earlier. And when Cynthia saw how intensely Sherri was staring at her friend, she also knew what was coming. It seemed like such an odd thing to expect, but Sherri saw it as a way of making things even.

Bill told Cynthia it would be a few more minutes until they grabbed her chickens and the next thing she saw was Lisa in tow by her hand. Sherri was leading her into my garage next to them and Lisa's eyes looked like those of a zombie. She had just experienced the power of Sherri's touch for herself and knew Sherri was making things right in her own way. The thought of what was happening behind those closed doors had to be driving Cynthia crazy with the possibilities, not to mention her own form of heightened euphoria.

"Got your bags ready?" Bill looked around and saw a girl missing and asked, "Where's your friend?"

"I think she went to the bathroom, or look for rope maybe. She'll be right back."

The two of them managed to get all three hens into the bags, but the cock was another story. He wanted

nothing to do with the sack planned for him and he fought like hell to hang onto his freedom. Bill offered her a few last bits of advice and helped her carry the bags to her bikes. A bag was secured to each side of their handle bars and just as the last one was getting tied down, Cynthia saw her friend and Sherri creeping out of the garage. Lisa was smiling broadly and had the eyes of a girl that just done something very untoward. The girls came over to the bikes and all three of them were smirking as if they had swallowed canaries.

Just as Lisa and Cynthia were ready to push away, Sherri asked them to come back to visit her again. Lisa was still flabbergasted, so Cynthia told her it was pretty much a sure bet that they would be seeing her again.

>>>

Inside my house, I was giving the eggs to Danny to safely tuck into her backpack. Sue came downstairs with Eve and I asked where her other kids, Cindy and Tommy were at. Danny tried not to take notice of my little girl, but when Thomas insisted on holding her, she was right there to see he knew more about babies than she did. It hadn't occurred to her that his having two younger brothers and an even younger sister had taught him anything, but she was seeing first hand that he had a soft touch at holding Eve. I looked on and felt somewhat grateful that he was getting this opportunity to show off a little. Plus, I was a very proud daddy.

We talked for a while and I caught Sue up on how I knew Thomas. I added some things to their knowledge base about caring for the chickens they had won and

how I was just a short bike ride away if they needed any help. Sue gave me the old hairy eyeball when she noticed that Danny couldn't take her eyes off of Eve and even asked her if she thought she would ever have a baby. Things turned ugly for a bit while she blurted out her fears of getting pregnant and that turned to the topic of recreational sex. It seemed so odd that they were suddenly in their own female world and spoke so freely as if Thomas and I weren't even in the same room. But it was a good thing for Thomas when Danny confessed to Sue under her breath that she wouldn't let Thomas anywhere near her baby maker and the reason why.

The next thing I knew, Sue was excusing herself and headed back up the stairs. The three of us took turns passing my beautiful little daughter around and it was inspiring teaching Danny how to properly hold what appeared to be the first child she ever held. When she held her close to her chest to smell her hair, I thought her next reaction would be to jump her boyfriend right there. No one can resist the feelings of holding a newborn next to their chest.

Sue came skipping back into the room and had a little bag to give Danny. I started to ask her what was in it, but she shook her head ever so slightly. I knew what she had done and smiled. Thomas was holding Eve at the moment and Danny peeked into the bag. A very hushed, "Are you sure?" came from her and Sue wrinkled her nose to her in answer. I never put the problem they were having together with the bag Danny had just received, and that was one of the many reasons I loved my girl. She was always trying to find a

way of helping others.

About this time, Sherri and the kids came through the door. Tommy was so proud of himself for having been the one that caught most of the chickens to hand out. He had a knack for sneaking up on them, and even showed several dried blood trickles to his mom from where a couple of the roosters had bested him. Cindy looked like a real farm girl and the kind of girl that most fathers would hide from boys. She had just turned thirteen and her figure was filling out to my great dismay. She was going to be a hard one to control, which made me avert my eyes to where Sherri was leaning back against the kitchen counter. She was staring a hole into Thomas' chest and it wasn't very long before Danny caught her. The weird thing was that Danny just smiled and seemed to purposely turn away to allow her to fantasize over her boyfriend. Even when Thomas finally noticed her checking him out, his first reaction was to look to see what Danny was thinking of things.

"Oweeennnn…"

I knew that whine well. Sherri wanted something that she knew she had to wheedle out of me. "What?"

"Can I have just a little glass," holding her thumb and forefinger in gesture of how much, "pleeasse?"

She was referring to our home brew. Several of the neighbors had learned to distill their own versions of corn alcohol and on a rare occasion I would allow Sherri to have some of the watered down stuff. She never got more than a glass, but it was one of the few ways I had of keeping her behaved. I told her okay, but under the standard rules that everyone got a glass;

except for the kids of course.

I don’t think that Sherri was really aware that I already knew Thomas, nor that her flirtation with him was growing rather obvious. At first I saw it bothered Sue a little, but after she saw how Danny was acting, she realized something I didn’t. Danny wasn’t so upset with Thomas over being made to feel more attractive to other girls. She would have fought like hell to keep him, but she knew that he was locked into her and saw other girls hitting on him as a way of keeping his manhood in tiptop shape. Danny had been denying him for so long that she had come to terms with the little gestures that gave him the feeling he needed without the risk of her getting pregnant.

I on the other hand, sought to put a stop to it when she brazenly walked up behind him and ran her hand through his hair. I asked her to check on the calves with the kids to get her away from him, but instead when Thomas asked to see them as well, he went along with them.

We talked about things for a while and how Sue giving birth had indeed been a trying time for all of us. Later on, Danny confessed to us that she had been having some problems meeting Thomas’ expectations of their relationship. I had a lot of hope for the girl though when after trying to fill her in from his perspective, she really seemed to have learned something. That didn’t mean anything was going to change, but at least it gave her another side she hadn’t been thinking about. Another strange little thing came up and why Danny didn’t explode had me, as a guy, totally confounded.

Cindy came upstairs and not having the school socialization of normal times, blurted out something best left untold. It seemed that Thomas had “saved” Sherri from falling into a pile of manure from the calves, and she promptly rewarded him with a very long kiss, as Cindy put it. My eyes darted to Danny in expectation of seeing her rage out, but she was just smiling. I told Cindy that such gossip wasn’t a good characteristic and she apologized for saying anything.

“Its okay, Cindy. A man that saves a girl deserves a little reward, don‘t you think?”

Cindy was just as confused as I was, because neither of us would have blown off something like that so easily. But there was definitely something going on between Sue and Danny that I just wasn’t getting. Either way, when the rest of them came back upstairs, Thomas was greeted with arms around his neck and a “job well done” for having saved Sherri. And now, even Sherri didn’t seem at all perplexed at having been caught kissing on another girls’ man.

>>>

Dillon and Frank couldn’t stop screaming as they made that first glide down the back road headed for home. They had held their tongues in front of everyone else, but now they were letting loose with their celebrations. Thinking of their wives and the responsibility they had gained to represent their own neighborhoods was quickly overwhelming them. Frank kept losing his balance due to the lack of his cargo’s participation. He even had a small accident by running

off the edge of the road while trying to see if his two birds had fallen off the rear carrier.

“I can’t wait to get back man. I didn’t want to jinx us, but Melinda and I have been holding out on you guys. About a month ago we remembered we had one bottle of champagne left over from our wedding. We put it away for that one day we considered to be a life changing experience for us, and we agreed if we won the lottery that we’d use it to toast our good fortune with our new partners in crime.”

“I have to hand it to you, Dillon. You said we’d get it if we had the plans, and that turned out to be the selling point.” Frank was struggling to keep up with his neighbor. “I thought it was just going to be the luck of the draw, but when that guy said it was already decided… I knew it was a win. And just for the record, if I knew you had a bottle of hooch, I would have been slicing your throat last night as you slept to get at it.”

Dillon grinned and said, “You damn hillbillies. Can’t trust you as far as you can be thrown.”

As always, it had to be a jib for a jab and Frank countered with, “Well, first thing we have to do when we get back is hide that damn barbecue of yours.”

Women have their version of looks that say everything to each other, but the looks these men shot between themselves spoke to a brotherhood that was stronger than any marriage. They had been helping each other since the Flip and had often given more than they had to give. The bond these men had developed while watching each others’ backs was akin to soldiers on a battlefield. And it showed when they were close to the top of the biggest hill on their path

home.

“You see what I’m seeing up there man.” Dillon saw the first hint of trouble when three men suddenly appeared on the left edge of the road. “Any chance we just happened to run into these guys at the worst place for an ambush?”

Frank looked around and saw the truck they had passed on the way to Seven Corners off to the right side of the road. “Slow up, Dillon. If it’s an ambush, they’re trying to force us towards that truck. I bet there are more waiting for us behind it.”

Both men came to a stop and only had a few moments to make sense of what they were seeing. They only had two choices; take the chance that no one was behind the vehicle and an ambush didn’t exist, or head back down the hill in a hasty retreat and hope they hadn’t passed a rear assault team that might box them in.

Dillon nodded towards the far side of the truck and said he would head around it and told Frank to keep going straight. Being the fittest man of the two, he knew he could speed around the right side of the truck if necessary to instill their own ambush if warranted. They pushed back off and returned to peddling up the hill with Dillon taking a rear position. The closer they grew to the lot, they recognized them to be younger men that most would ascribe to being gang members. The three men were wandering somewhat aimlessly, but were definitely taking up more of the road in an effort to narrow their path.

Just as they got before the truck, Dillon sped up and flew to the right side of it. The men turned into

attackers and began running towards Frank. Being out of breath from having just peddled up the steepest hill in the area, Frank had to fight his fatigue to head off to the left side of the road. Unfortunately, he didn't have the energy left to power past the men and they were forming a ring to physically stop him in his tracks.

Dillon was just coming around the far side of the truck as two more men were joining the assault on Frank and never saw where Dillon had gone. A shot rang out and one of the men that had been in hiding fell. Dillon had shot him with the .357 magnum he had pulled from the rear of his shorts and it had found a good target. As the man fell, a large hunting knife hit the ground. His partner turned back to see Dillon holding his gun.

Frank, no slouch in size was fighting to keep on his feet and his bike under him. He took a hard punch to the side of his face which only made him more defiant and he reached out for the closest throat to him, and grabbed the man in one hand. He slammed the head of his captive into the bicycle handlebars while another attacker was trying to rip the bags holding his chickens off the bike.

Another shot rang out and Dillon was standing now as he took aim at a second man. It took another shot to end his life and Dillon then ran to his friend to help fight off the two men still grappling with him. With the gun in his hand, he couldn't throw a punch, so he turned the gun around and slammed its butt against the nearest head. Blood splattered back into his face, but it took several more whipping motions before his target finally released his hold on Frank. With only one of the

ambushers left to fight, he turned like the coward he was and backed away as he begged not to be shot.

Frank's face was covered in blood and he tried desperately to clear his vision. Dillon looked down the hill in the direction they had come from and saw two groups of men that had indeed been lying in wait for them and they were now running as fast as they could towards them. He saw one of them was carrying a rifle and commanded Frank to get moving. His age and beating didn't afford him a fast take off, and Dillon ran back to get his own bike. He mounted it and got beside his friend and sought to put a fire in his belly.

"Move that lazy white ass boy. One of them has a gun. We got to get out of here."

Frank worked his legs as hard as possible while Dillon started aiming his own bike back and forth to try to confuse their assailant just as he heard the recoil of a shot being fired. He caught a glimpse of feathers being chucked into the air and knew they had lost one of their chickens. But the real fight was to be alive themselves a minute from now.

"Come on buddy. Move those damn legs faster. Let's go."

A second shot rang out and hit the pavement beside Dillon. Both of the men were just hitting the crest of the hill and their speed was picking up. Another few turns of the peddles would put them out of sight of their attackers and Dillon felt safe to purge ahead into the lead to lessen his own chance of being shot.

One more shot rang out and the men cleared the hill top, leaving the sight of the gunman. They peddled hard as they made the turn onto Columbia Pike, and

then sped their way down the hill towards Annandale. Dillon kept looking back; first to see Frank was right behind him, and then to see if he could see that the four bags carrying their precious goods was still with them. They had outrun their assailants and were only a half mile from the main streets of their hometown.

Both men were heaving heavily as they crested the hill into Annandale. Dillon felt it was safe to pull over and Frank was all too willing to stop himself.

"We made it man. Another mile and we'll be home." Dillon lifted his hand for a high five slap over their success, but all he got from his friend was a blank stare. He didn't understand what was wrong at first and suspected he might be having a heart attack. He threw his bike down and went up to Frank trying to get him to respond.

Frank's eyes finally blinked and he fought between his gasping for breath to say, "I think we have a problem buddy. I think…"

Dillon looked him over and when he got to his friends back, he saw his problem. Frank had taken that last bullet in his right shoulder and his shirt was soaked in blood. He lifted the shirt for a better look and the wound was still weeping blood heavily. Dillon ripped his own shirt off and began tying it as tightly as he could under Frank's arm and around his shoulder in an attempt to control the loss of blood.

"Hang in there buddy. You're gonna make it. Just remember your kids and that'll keep you going." He was afraid his face might give away the fright he felt over Frank's condition and tried to lighten his outlook. "I think we really have to be worried about how many chickens

we lost. After all, we have plenty of you white hillbillies."

Frank choked out a laugh, gulped hard for a breath and said, "Get on your damn bike, you lazy son of a bitch. We're not done yet."

Dillon saw the determination in his buddies face and told him to take the lead. He would take the rear to keep an eye on him. It wasn't a pretty sight for him with his friend's blood still soaking his shirt, but seeing how tough Frank was to endure his pain, he knew he had invested well in his many years of friendship.

>>>

Lisa and Cynthia were taking a break by the side of the road. They had sought the safety of a wooded area to keep their wares out of sight and were really getting worn out from their ride. It seemed natural to stop when they hit the half way mark. Little had been talked about along the way other than mundane topics to pass the time… and to stay off the topic that they both were trying to avoid. But when Cynthia saw Lisa was obviously feeling hurt over her earlier betrayal, she knew she had to say something. She was trying without any success to find the words she had been practicing ever since they got back on the road, but they weren't coming to her now that it was time to say them.

Lisa beat her to the punch. "Do I really scare you?"

That question left Cynthia all messed up. Now she had to keep the story going that Sherri had begun weaving. "A little… I never did anything like that before you know."

"Well, to be honest, I never did either. I mean, I sort

of wanted to, but I never felt like…" Lisa was struggling to finish her own sentences. "If I had of… made the first move? I mean, how would you have reacted?"

"I don't know. To be honest, getting close to another girl has always been a little intimidating to me. You know I really like guys, and I don't want to mislead anyone… especially you. You know I love you, but… I don't know if it's in that way." Cynthia was searching for anything to make her friend smile, but everything seemed to form around another confession. She was still feeling very guilty over her carnal act from the night before. When Lisa turned away to hide her saddened face, she took a good look at her form. She had always admired her figure and even considered her breasts to be far more attractive than her own, and when she saw the side of her belly area exposed, she remembered the kissing and groping she had done earlier. Her heat began to build and she decided to let her guard down.

Cynthia reached out to run her fingers through Lisa's hair, and when she turned to try to understand what was going on, she leaned over and kissed her square on the lips. Lisa began to respond to her touch and within seconds she was reaching out to touch the taut belly of her dearest friend. She had been thinking throughout most of their ride how she had seen Sherri doing the same thing and had dreamed of feeling her bare skin for herself. They intertwined their tongues and moaned their desire for each other. When Cynthia ran her hand up her back and into the hair on the back of her head, Lisa needed to feel even more of her friends' softness. She ran her right hand up under Cynthia's shirt to graze the side of her breast. When she felt no

reluctance, she brought her fingers and thumb together to twist at her nipple until it grew hard under her touch.

This was the first time she had touched another girl's breast and it made her melt. It seemed so much softer than she imagined it would, and when her nipple grew taut so easily, she wanted to feel so much more. They continued kissing for a while, breaking only long enough to stare into each others eyes. Then Lisa couldn't hold back her question any longer.

"Did you like… kissing her, too?"

Cynthia wondered if the truth was something Lisa could deal with now, but since they were together at the moment, she went for it. "It was pretty hot, but in a fling kinda way. You know what I mean?" She had her own question that she had wanted to ask for a while and put it out there. "What did you two do in the garage?"

Lisa bit her bottom lip and answered, "About the same thing we're doing right now. I see why you got hooked… the girl may be young, but she's so damn hot."

That led to another passionate kiss that was abruptly interrupted with, "Look at this little show, Billy. I think we have a couple of lesbians here."

Both girls turned towards the voice and saw a couple of apparent Dwellers. Dwellers were people that had taken to living in the woods and were often associated with criminal behavior; modern day gypsies, if you will. They broke their hold on each other and under her breath, Cynthia said, "Let's grab the bikes and get the hell out of here. They got to their feet slowly and when the men started towards them, they made a fast break for their bikes and ran from the woods. They

hadn't gotten father than a block down the road when they began laughing at getting caught being "gay". Their nervous, but somewhat excited chatter littered the air all the way back to their home in Fairfax.

>>>

Danny and Thomas pulled into the yard of their small house and immediately hid their bikes and cargo in the garage. A small pen had already been made using half of the garage and they worked to empty the bags of chickens. It was an odd sight seeing them running around. Since the Flip, not many pets were around. No one in the urban settings had the extra food for them and they were always susceptible to someone wanting to turn them into food.

They talked for a while over their new responsibility and how they would work to secure the hens. Luckily, they had inherited an eight foot high wooden fence around the rear yard from the previous owner. Apparently, they were a little bothered by their neighbors. But there was something nice about having these animals to look after. They needed their care and nurturing, and both Danny and Thomas were going to take the job very seriously.

After watching the hens settle in and even try out their new roosts, Danny knew there was something that Thomas would love to hear. She felt so devilish and went over to whisper in his ear. His eyes lit up for the first time since they had heard they were invited to the lottery.

He answered, "You better believe I want some. I've

been dreaming about this for a week now."

They smiled at each other and then ran to the kitchen.

"Today, me lord, we have something special on the menus. If you look quite close, you will see that we have managed to import the finest of fresh eggs. No expense has been spared to import them from the quaint little resort of Seven Corners. Would you care to sample them, me lord?"

Danny was prancing around the kitchen and trying to offer up her best cockney accent, and Thomas was watching his girl in the best mood he had seen her in for months. It was amazing how a few fresh eggs had turned them into such carefree individuals so easily. And it got much better for Thomas when Danny came closer to him. She grabbed a thin cookbook that had been on the counter gathering dust, opened it in front of him as if it were a menu and pointed to the bottom of it.

Her eyes grew dreamy and she stared into her best friends' eyes and said, "And if you take notice at the bottom of our menu, me lord, we have an any even more delectable list of desserts to choose from when you've finished your feast." She looked mockingly at the bottom of the open page and added, "I'm flabbergasted, me lord. There appears to be some kind of a dreadful mistake. There's only one choice on the menu."

Danny let the book fall to the floor, stood on the tip of her toes, and wrapped her arms about Thomas' neck. She let her eyes and the heat from her body rubbing up against his break the news to him, and when he had a questioning look over her abrupt turnabout, she whispered, "Me!"

Danny had never seen him so confounded and enjoyed the control she had over his mind for a few moments. Finally, his eyes lit up with his own explanation of what was going on.

Thomas asked her, “It was the baby, wasn’t it?”

She very slowly shook her head and answered, “That… would have only worked against you. You heard the trouble she went through giving birth.” And when he went back to his look of confusion, she pushed back away from him. She went to her backpack sitting on the counter, gently set the eggs to one side, and then told Thomas, “There’s something in here you might find even more valuable than fresh eggs.” She took out the small bag Sue had given her and threw it to Thomas.

He nearly dropped it when it turned out to be very light. As he worked to get the bag opened, he eyeballed Danny trying to figure out what she could possibly think held more weight to him than an almost exotic meal. He peered into the open bag and at first couldn’t believe his eyes. This had been one of the first items to disappear from stores when the looting had begun and he hadn’t even thought that they existed anymore.

Thomas was about to ask Danny a very stupid question; especially after the almost goofy production she had just presented to him. She went back to melting her way into his arms and asked him the dumbest question she could possibly ask herself.

In her most sultry and seductive tone, she asked, “So, if I’m the only item on the dessert menu, will you have a go at me, me lord?”

“Where did you get them from?”

She smiled and said, “This was what was in the bag that Sue gave me. It looks like you have six wishes to make come true… so you better use them carefully.”

Thomas had his own game to play and pushed her back abruptly. “How could you do this to me?” Danny’s face took its own turn at confusion and then Thomas clarified his actions. “You offer a starving man the finest of desserts… or a bland egg. You can’t be that dumb.” His smile turned into a wryly grin and added, “For my first wish… I wish to have the most beautiful girl in the world wrapped around my hips.”

Thomas turned to empty the bag of condoms on the counter and ripped one away from the strip they formed. Their eyes met and the games ended right there. Danny came back close to her lover to present herself to him, and he lifted her into a cradling position in his arms. Her arms went around his neck, and he carried her off to the bedroom.

Chapter 3

The door slammed open from Dillon's kicking it and he saw Beth and her two kids jump from the unexpected nature of it. Beth let out the loudest scream over her fright, but the kids were a close second. He was carrying most of Frank's weight on his shoulder as he helped him to sit down at the kitchen table. Frank's blood had now begun to soak around to the front of his shirt and Beth screamed again.

"What the hell happened? Are you okay honey?"

Dillon had to speak for him and answered, "He got shot… in the shoulder. We were attacked on our way back. We need some supplies to clean him up." Beth ran for the bathroom and Dillon turned to the kids and ordered, "Go out and get the bikes. Hide them in the garage for now. And then go get Melinda." When they seemed more worried about their dad, he did just what his injured friend would do and barked at them. "Now dammit! Get running… and be careful with those chickens."

Beth ran back into the kitchen with a first aid kit just as Dillon was ripping the tee shirt in half to get it off his friend.

"You asshole… that was… my best shirt."

Dillon laughed nervously. It was just like Frank to make a serious injury into something to laugh about. Beth soaked a towel with water and carefully wiped away the blood from his shoulder to reveal the entry

wound. It was a lot smaller than she expected to find, but without a doctors help, every intrusion into a body could be life threatening. She looked around to the front of her husband in hopes of finding an exit wound, but there was none. But there was a curious lump where she had hoped to find one. She pointed it out to Dillon and he knew immediately what it was.

Melinda flew into the house. “Frank… is he okay?”

Dillon turned to his wife and quickly told everyone what had happened. The kids had come back in and were extremely worried for their father. Miranda was only eight and she started to cry. She rarely saw her father ever exhibit any loss of control and it frightened her. Her older brother Frank, Jr., had become a doting brother since he was two years older and tried to keep her under control and out of the adult’s way.

Dillon pointed out the lump on the front side of Frank’s shoulder and stated, “I bet this is the bullet. It almost came out, but his hillbilly’s hide is so thick it couldn’t make it.”

Melinda felt the lump herself to a quick cry of pain from Frank and agreed. She grabbed a box cutter that she knew Frank always insisted on keeping on the counter next to the door and brought it over to the kitchen table. Dillon was right there with a lighter to burn the blade into a sterile state and then Beth wiped the blade with an alcohol wipe. Everyone knew what Melinda was going to do and when she grabbed a second wipe to swab at the area of the lump, Dillon got behind Frank to hold him still.

Melinda grabbed the cutter tightly in her hand and got right in front of Franks face.

“I wish I could say I was sorry, Frank. But to be honest, I’ve wanted to do this for such a long time now.”

Frank choked out a little grunt of laughter and said, “Take your best shot.”

With that, Melinda gauged where she had to make the cut, and without allowing the actual act deter her from her best effort, she dragged the blade of the knife deep into his skin. Dillon grabbed Frank tighter, and Frank tensed up and grabbed for the table edge to try to help keep his cool.

As the knife went deeper, blood started obscuring Melinda’s sight, so Beth dabbed away around the blade with the edge of a towel. When Melinda was sure she had enough room, she wiped her fingers clean of the blood and began foraging thru the open wound to fish out the bullet.

Frank was grunting over the agony and finally had to do something to voice his pain. In a muffled scream, “Melinda… you are such… a bitch!”

She laughed and replied with, “But I’m having so much fun sweetie. Now stop crying like a baby.”

In another moment, she was prying out the lead projectile with the very fingernails that Frank had always deemed as being way too long. She threw it on the table and quickly covered the spewing blood that followed its exit with her hand. After working to stop the bleeding from both ends of the wound, Beth took over to add two stitches with sewing thread to suture both wounds.

When the kids were finally noticed, it was too late to bother sending them away. Frank was beginning to relax and knew he had no choice but to endure the

pain, and he also knew he needed to say something to Melinda. He pulled her close to the good side of his chest and whispered in her ear.

"You know I love you, right? But, you're still a bitch for having so much fun."

She backed away a little to look him in the eye, and with tears filling her own said, "I know honey, and I sure did. And… I love you too."

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Thomas turned over to look at Danny and stared into her deep blue eyes. Beads of perspiration were still on her forehead from their coupling and her hair was soaked from it and scraggly, but she never looked more beautiful to him. She was glowing and smiling, which indicated to him that she had had just as good of a time as he had. For this brief moment, the decimated world didn't exist, their ongoing spats had never happened, and thoughts of food were finally not so important.

"You know how beautiful you are? Or how empty my life would be without you? And it's not because of this, but it's that way all the time. This though… this was a dessert to the meal of life we share every day. I know I've been a pain in the ass to you lately, and I try hard not to be, but you're just so damn beautiful that you have no idea how hard it is to be close to you… and then see you pulling away. I know why, and I understand your reasons, but that doesn't make it even slightly easier to see. I'm sorry for acting like…"

Danny smiled and shushed him quiet. "I know what you mean and I'm just as sorry. I just freak out every

time I think of what it would be like to be pregnant nowadays."

She bit her lower lip and that was an unmistakable sign to Thomas that she had something she wanted to say and he called her on it.

"Did you… think about her? You know, when we were doing it."

Thomas was puzzled and asked, "Who?"

"Oh, come on. I won't get mad. Were you thinking about that girl and the smoochie woochie she gave you?"

"No! Of course not. Why would you even ask that?"

Danny grinned and was having fun teasing her man, but she was also intrigued by what men needed to think about while "doing the deed". "I know guys have to fantasize, and I do it myself. Why don't you think I ever get mad when a girl flirts with you? You're always so faithful to me that I'm not worried about losing you. I sort of like the benefit of them working you up because I'm the one getting close to you when we fool around. And I have to admit, it made for one hell of a first time for going all the way."

"You have me all wrong, Danny. I'm not one of those guys that think of one girl while making love to the one I'm with. I've never been that guy."

"Well, you have to at least admit to me that it helped get you ready for our little thing here. How could kissing a totally strange hottie like her not have gotten you randy as a sailor on leave?"

Thomas looked into her eyes and answered her as truthfully as he could. "Okay, kissing her was a rather inspirational thing, but she wasn't on that menu, was

she? You were and even if she was listed right below you, you were the only dessert on that menu I would ever order. And you know what… waiting all these months to see you relaxed enough to be able to enjoy it with me, made it entirely worth the wait. Plus, I still have five or six wishes to go, right?”

Danny felt more than ever that she had made a perfect choice in Thomas, but she still had seen his reaction earlier to getting an extracurricular kiss and blamed his untruthfulness on wanting to protect her. For that, she swung out of the bed and performed a little bare-butted dance for her man. For a change, she didn’t have to feel at all guilty over teasing him and enjoyed being naked to the world. Seeing him eye her moves as she spun around and twisted into contortions meant to inspire a ravaging beast, she finally felt like a whole woman again. She had regained her womanhood and wanted to flaunt her power over him to make sure he knew it.

>>>

I was watching Sherri as she prepared a tuna salad for our celebration. She had herself a pretty eventful day and that was just what I had seen of it. I admired the girl so much after what she had gone through. She had become a huge inspiration to me and I often referred to her as my daughter. I would get rewarded for such a claim with a look of pleased satisfaction from her. Other than a few slips in behavior, she had been a reward to my life just being around. She became Sue’s right hand girl whenever she needed help and though

smiling never came easy for her, her feelings never went unnoticed.

Cindy and her brother came up from feeding the calves and I smiled again as they passed me to go outside to clean up. Cindy gave me her normal playful slap across my shoulder as she passed me as if to tell me to straighten up. It was her way of giving me a hug for all the things I had helped them with over the months. She use to hug me a lot, but it felt awkward having a twelve year old girl at the time doing that when she wasn't my own real daughter. When I told her why I acted odd during her hugs, she really seemed to understand and then came that first swat. When I asked her why she had hit me, all she said was, "If I can't hug you to say it, then I'll hit you instead. It means the same thing." It's been our special thing ever since. I even feel a little left out now and then when I don't get a slap from her. When I finally told Sue why she was slapping me, she nearly cried the next time she saw it happening.

Her brother Tommy was also Sue's kid, but we hit it off right away. He was in love with my dogs and never knew how intelligent dogs could be until he hung out with me as I trained Dizzy and Havok. He took a lot away from watching me prod them into action by feeding them one step at a time to learn a new trick or command. At ten years old, he was quickly becoming a hardened young man that sought to learn all he could. Since he was only one of two kids on the block, schooling had become whatever any of the neighbors had time to teach them. So, it wasn't that much of a surprise to see what he asked to learn from his own

mother.

Every time we talked about what would be Eve's birth, he would make sounds displaying how he considered the whole thing as absolutely gross. Sue was hearing it so much that I took him to the side one day to help him understand it in a way he could grasp. I equated things to Dizzy because I knew how much he loved her. I threw a few scenarios at him where she might need his help despite it being so "gross". He made the right decision each time, even when I asked him if she were giving birth and a pup was stuck inside her, he agreed he would play the role of a vet and reach into her to grab for the puppy to save her life.

However, it still surprised me just as much as it did Sue when he asked if he could watch his new sibling being born. Sue instantly tried to gross him out in an attempt to change his mind, but between us having been rendered into farmers and his sincerity to understand the rejuvenation of life, she relented and said he could. But the second we were alone, she became all red faced and asked me about it. I told her how I really didn't see anything wrong with anyone learning the process, especially in an era where every tiny fragment of caring for our own bodies was a lesson we all needed to learn. Without doctors as an easy thing to find any longer, we were going to be on our own for many years to come.

And when that day did come, both Cindy and Tommy were right there at their mother's side to help her through the birth of Eve. As a matter of fact, she got her name at Tommy's suggestion. You see, since birth was no longer one of the surer bets in life, very few

people were naïve enough to pick names ahead of time. So, while waiting out the nearly twenty hours of labor, it went past midnight and we began talking about the subject on everyone's mind. Two of our female neighbors had come over to help out and were teasing Sue about forcing them to stay awake on such an important day for us. It was now May 8th and that day marked the one year anniversary of the Flip. Everyone had been making plans to celebrate the day. Not because of the horrific nature of the event, but to celebrate making it through that first year. The food shortages hadn't killed us, the winter hadn't overtaken us, and even the advent of the Migrant War hadn't defeated our ability, nor will to survive. So, when Tommy saw his new sister being born, he immediately called her Eve and was almost coaxing her to finish coming out on her own.

We lost most of little Tommy that day, because a large part of him sprung into premature manhood, along with all the pride, stature, and dignity that came with it. During our wait to first see Eve, he had been right there taking turns holding his mothers' hand and doing his best to keep her calm during her contractions. He watched over her and hid the fears he held so well, that Sue kept pulling his forehead close enough to kiss her baby to thank him for his help.

Actually, it was Cindy that really got freaked out during Eve's birth. When she saw Eve's head crowning and Sue asked her to gauge what stage she was at, we all laughed at her innocence. As a virgin, it seemed so funny to hear her suddenly promise her mother that she was never going to have sex after checking the babies'

progress. I don't know how she did it, but Sue forced herself to abate her screaming just long enough for an awkward smile and to tell her that she had no doubt that one day she would gladly be giving birth herself. We all laughed again when Cindy slowly shook her head while looking at the top of Eve's head stretching her mother beyond limits and said, "No way… am I ever going through this."

Life had been hard, no doubt about it, but despite all the crap we had gone through in the past year, I have to admit that life was worth living again. There were stories of simple engines coming back to life at the hands of backwoods mechanics, everyone was working at growing their own gardens, and on the occasional day we even got to eat meat again.

Most of the supplies I had hoarded before the Flip had been depleted. That had been a main contention between me and my neighbors for many months. I still can't explain why I was so sure the earth was going to fail us, but something drove me into action that others seemed oblivious to in those days after the Beasts destroyed most of China. Whatever it was, I just knew that after such a catastrophe that our government couldn't be trusted to protect us, or to even tell us the truth.

It wasn't until after that first major battle that brought the Migrant War to our doorsteps that the United really decided to get united. When times were their most bleak, I would dole out whatever food I thought was a fair ration that wouldn't leave all of us of death's doorstep. Even though the battle made it easier to hand over the occasional canned ham, a few cans of

tuna, or whatever I thought best fit the dire situation of the day, the faces of my neighbors was always a mix of two emotions. I was hated for having stocked the survival food, and at the same time greatly appreciated for that same act.

Now that we had that first winter behind us, we had good reason to think that natures fury had banished all the people she thought was fit, and now it was truly the time to look forward for those of us that had survived.

And Eve, well she was a great symbol of that new directive.

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By the time Lisa and Cynthia made their way home, they were thoroughly worn out. They barely had the energy to release the chickens into their spare bedroom that they had prepared to keep them in for the time being. After looking over their new wealth and seeing the rooster naturally herding the hens, they went to sit on their couch.

Long a go, they had turned the picture window in their house into their new age television. They had moved the couch square in front of it and would watch the world go by, one moment at a time. They lived right next to a main roadway, so there was more foot and bicycle traffic than there use to be automobiles. Making fun of people in all their disarray had become a favorite pastime to overcome their own feelings of hopelessness.

They had each sat at opposite ends of the couch and it was pretty obvious why. Their little interlude from

earlier had left each of them unsure as to where they stood. They sat there nervously for the longest time hoping for the other to be first to speak. Each wanted to take a nap, but each as well knew they had to clear the air before allowing their fatigue to overcome them.

Lisa finally offered an opening.

"She kisses really nice, but when she slid her hand under my top… I freaked out a little. I mean, it felt good, but… well, you know. You two did the same thing, right?"

Cynthia had gone over a hundred emotional thoughts in her head but it was the mere thought of another person having sought to touch her that sparked her into steering the exchange towards her desire to feel it again. But she had also been feeling guilty all over again about the night before with her neighbor, Robbie. She turned to look over her friend, but couldn't bring herself to look into her eyes. That guilt made her stay silent, but not Lisa.

"So was it fun? You know… doing it again?"

Cynthia needed to respond and answered, "She's really hot… but I don't now about this whole… lesbian thing. It's still a little weird to me."

"That's not what I meant. He's only twenty you know."

"What do you mean, 'he'? I thought we were talking about Sherri. Who's he?"

Lisa looked rather sad and was biting at her bottom lip again; a habit that told Cynthia that she was withholding something from her.

"I heard you sneaking back in last night. And when you couldn't face me… it's pretty obvious, you know."

Cynthia realized she had been caught, or at least highly suspected that her tryst with Robbie was known. She could have lied, but she was sitting next to the best friend she had in the world and had to come clean.

She started slowly, and finally managed to say, “I’m so, so sorry Lisa. I didn’t mean to hurt you, but… he was there and I needed… I’m just so sorry.”

“I understand,” she pouted, “but I just thought… that we had something special between us. Don’t get me wrong… I know you still like guys and all. I see you checking them out. I guess I was expecting you…”

She had never felt like such a betrayer in her life and fought to make her friend feel better. “What can I say? It’s been months since a guy touched me, and I had to…” Everything was becoming too overwhelming to put into words for either of them.

Lisa stated, “It put you in a really good mood at least. I had a really good day with you today. Even that thing with Sherri wasn’t so bad. I’m happy when I see you happy; I just wish I was the cause of it.” She paused to finally look her friend in the eyes and went on, “I don’t want you to feel guilty about any of it. It’s just nice to see you smiling and having fun.”

“I’m having a lot of it right now, Lisa. Sitting here with you next to me is all it takes with you. Robbie was just a two minute fling to quench my frigging thirst, but you’re here by my side every day, and that’s what really makes me smile.” She scooted across the void between them and wrapped her arm around Lisa. “I guess that girl was right, maybe I have been afraid of you. It’s not easy for me because I’ve never thought of myself as a lesbian. I’ve always liked guys and I don’t

think I could ever really give up that part of my life, but I know that's what it would take to make you happy. I don't want to hurt you; not for anything in the world."

"You're such a slut!"

Cynthia couldn't believe those words were coming from her best friends' mouth, but as she stared at her trying to understand why she would seek to hurt her that way, the corners of Lisa's mouth pulled back into a smirk.

"Well, you are, you know. It's a good thing I like sluts I guess."

Cynthia realized Lisa was trying to let her off the hook as far as needing to feel guilty. Clearly she was still bothered by her recent escapades, but at least she was able to joke about it enough to diminish some of the horrible feelings she had been having all day. It might have been Lisa's ability to accept her needs, or it might have just been her forgiving nature, but it was most likely that sweet smile of hers beaming outwardly that made her run her hand up the side of her head and pull her closer. She leaned over and kissed her full on, and soon was probing her mouth with her tongue. This time, she ran her hand along Lisa's firm belly and under her shirt. She rubbed back and forth while slowly edging her hand upward. Lisa was trembling slightly under her touch, but holding still out of fear of ending her friend's advances. Her breathing went as shallow as if she were sleeping.

When Cynthia's hand reached her breast, she toyed playfully with the bottom of the warm globe with her fingertips and listened to the nearly inaudible moaning coming from her. They both closed their eyes

and Cynthia reached around to cup her left breast in her hand and gently felt the warmth and softness of it. She was relishing the feel, the closeness of being able to enjoy the intimacy of her friend, and then her fingers fell over her nipple and ever so slightly twisted it into attention.

They opened their eyes to share their feelings with each other like only women can do. Lisa's eyes were on fire with heat when she felt Cynthia lifting her shirt over her braless breasts, and then melting into a volcano when she bent her head downward to suckle the nipple she had hardened.

Chapter 4

“Hi dad, how are you feeling? Mom heated up some soup for us.”

Frank looked over at his daughter Miranda coming through the doorway holding a large cup of brew. He had been wondering all the way back from the scene of his ambush if he was ever going to get to see her smile again.

Junior was right behind her and smiled brightly seeing that his father was wide awake and sitting up in bed. He chimed in, “Does it hurt much?”

Being the natural pain in the ass he always projected himself as, “Only when I laugh, so please take that face of yours back downstairs.”

Miranda swatted at his leg and told him to be nice.

Little Frank began telling his father how proud everyone was that he and Dillon had made it back and even won at the lottery. Dillon had come over to get the chickens and put them in the garage as planned. And it appeared that they took to the roosting boxes made from old milk crates very easily and that the boxes were going to work fine.

“How many are left? I remember hearing Dillon saying something about some of them getting shot.”

“All four made it, dad. The rooster got shot in the wing, but he seems okay now. You’re the one that has to get better.” Miranda pointed to his shoulder and then saw her little brother smirking away. “Oh, go ahead and

say it. He's been waiting to ever since he found out."

Frank looked at his son with a puzzled look and asked him what he had to say. With the biggest grin his father had probably ever seen from him, he said, "I guess you could say the bandits winged both of you, huh?"

Frank chuckled so hard it tugged at his stitches and grimaced in pain. But how could he not laugh at his kid being able to find humor in the face of adversity. He asked where their mother was and Miranda said they'd go get her. She gave him a big hug and whispered in his ear how she was glad he was okay. At first he expected a hug from his son too, but he stood back and said, "Let's just shake on it instead." He knew what that meant and the two Franks just began shaking their upper bodies in a spastic rhythm. It was an old joke they had once pulled to annoy Beth, but it was one of those special things that fathers and sons remembered forever.

Miranda quipped, "You two are two nuts in a peanut shell." Frank kept chuckling and then immediately wincing in pain over his sons jest until he heard his wife coming up the stairs. He threw his spare pillow on the floor and then faked being in the most severe pain imaginable. When his wife came in with Dillon and Melinda right behind her, he begged her to get his pillow for him.

When she turned around and bent over to pick it up, he let out his typical wolf whistle at her presenting her backside to him. She stood up and whipped the pillow at his grinning face. "You're such an ass. I don't have a clue in the world why I would love someone like

you.” Her face wrinkled up a little trying to keep from crying and said, “I guess it’s lucky for you that I fall easy for heroes.”

Dillon came up to Frank with a big smile, shook his left hand gingerly and reiterated that he was a hero, and to more than just his own family. A couple of the neighbors that had been waiting to see if they had won came by to congratulate them. When they found out he had been shot, they went back home and brought as many scraps as they could afford for the chickens to eat. They already knew that the two men had put together a plan to become the next block to be as successful as the United, and they wanted to know how they could best pitch in.

Frank wanted to discuss it right then, but Beth demanded that he rest first. She saw his color wasn’t great and worried about his recovery. Everyone started to say that they just wanted to see that he was okay and was going to let him sleep, but he needed to say a special thank you first.

“Wait a minute,” he said, “get over here.” He gestured to Melinda to come next to the bed. She walked over and looked a little queer at him. He made a gesture as if he was going to grab her crotch and she hastily backed away. “No, get over here. I just want a hug.” She went a little closer and wearily bent over his chest. He hugged her tight and whispered in her ear. “I just wanted to see how big a pair you have… it took a couple of big ones to do what you did for me. Thanks. You’re the best girl a guy like Dillon could ever hope to find. Now shut him off for a week. You should have seen the way he kept hiding behind me.”

Melinda pulled away and stared at him for a moment and responded with, “You’re one tough hillbilly. I’m glad you were with Dil.”

The three of them went back downstairs and the immediate topic was his pale color. They all knew that despite having removed the bullet, his worst enemy now would be fighting an infection. His color didn’t make it look good for that happening so far. Beth was beside herself in fear of losing him and Dillon’s wife tried to comfort her. He looked at her and thought about Franks’ kids, and then called his wife outside.

“He doesn’t look good at all. He needs antibiotics and bad.” Dillon lifted his chin towards the kids and said, “I need to do something for them.”

Melinda knew what that meant. All the available antibiotics had been used up in the first weeks after the Flip and people had taken to burning small cuts and such to stave off minor infections, but Frank wasn’t just going to have a minor infection.

Dillon knew his wife wouldn’t like hearing what he was about to say, but his friendship was too strong just to sit back and do nothing. “I have to go and try. The United is our best bet. If anyone has any medicine, it would be them.”

“That means going right past that hill again.” That was all she could say. She knew her husband well and trying to talk him out of doing something this important was out of the question. She dropped her head and then gave him a big hug. Decisions like this meant a quick goodbye and she didn’t want him fretting over her when she wanted him to be paying attention to covering his own ass. She gave him a kiss and said she’d get

some water bottles ready for his ride.

>>>

Watching the two chickens running around their new pen was a more inspiring sight than most would imagine. It was what they represented; the hope for reclaiming the easy going past that had been so quickly stolen away from everyone that fateful day. With darkness falling quickly, the hens found their way into their roosts as Danny and Thomas talked about how long it might take them to calm down enough to resume laying.

After putting to use the first condom Sue had given them, they had each dined on two hard boiled eggs. Danny was still glowing from the first real sex she had in almost a year and Thomas' agitation had melted away. The real eggs were better than any drug and was somewhat of a marking point for the start of a new life that they hoped to be able to spread to their neighbors in the months to come.

Thomas was already beginning to talk like a farmer in a weird attempt to impress his girl. Danny on the other hand was singing and dancing seductively and enjoying having her womanly power over her man again. It had been such a long time since she felt that she could let her guard down and really enjoy just being a girl. She wasn't intentionally trying to tease Thomas, but there really wasn't any way of preventing it without acting like the very prudish image she was trying to cast off. But on the other hand, it was very empowering to see that she still had what it took to drive a guy

crazy, and kept sampling catching his attention.

"So… are you ready to tell me yet?"

Thomas raised his eyebrows and wondered what she was asking of him.

"Come on," she whined in her most seductive tone, "I promise I won't get mad. You liked it didn't you?"

He now knew what she was talking about; the kiss he had shared with the young girl at his friend's house. But there was no way he could see this as anything but fodder to be used against him at a later date. Still, there was something intriguing in the way she was questioning him that made him believe that there just might be something in it for him to come clean and admit the truth. After going so long without a total submission to his desires, it had been a huge boost to his ego knowing that a girl would throw herself at him.

"If I tell you the absolute truth what I thought about it, will you let it go at that?"

Danny smirked, giggled a little, and answered, "No!"

"You giggled… you actually giggled. I can't remember you ever doing that before. What's your fascination with this?"

Danny began walking around him and running one finger over his chest and up along his neck. "How could she not fall for this hunk of man? This chest, this cute boyish smile," and as she stood in front of him and reached around to grab his buttocks in both hands, "and this great ass. It's just nice to know that another girl gets so driven crazy by the very thing I have, that she can't keep her hands off him. Like I told you before, I don't have a single doubt that you're my guy, and…"

She suddenly bit at her lower lip and became very subdued. She eventually looked up to search his questioning face and said, “I know I’ve been such a bitch about this intercourse thing. I feel so guilty putting you through that… and I came to the conclusion a long time ago that eventually, you’re going to need… more than I can give.” Thomas tried to interrupt her, but she stopped him and added that, “As long as I have you and your love, when I can’t give you what you need, then I can’t really say anything… about you going elsewhere to get it. I love you so much, that your happiness means more to me than anything. When I saw how you reacted and your cute little red face over just a kiss, I felt so happy for you. Besides, I already knew about the condoms, so she just got your engines revving up for me.”

As any smart guy might think about it, he felt a second edge to this sword. But when Danny began rubbing up against his chest and lifting her leg into his crotch, he was nothing more than clay in her hands.

“So, once more, did you like it?”

“It was okay, but I felt guilty as hell. I mean, you were right upstairs, and those kids were there watching. But I didn’t do anything to provoke it.”

Danny began kissing his neck and cooed in his ear, “I know, Cindy told us.” She began nibbling his ear lobe and went on to say, “You know, you should remember this because those condoms won’t last forever.”

Thomas countered with, “And you should remember that even though we weren’t going all the way, what we were doing was pretty damn good. It kept me hanging around for all these months, didn’t it?

Remember this morning just before you put your robe on? Just watching you walk away from me without any clothes on had me so frigging hard that I would have been satisfied with a warm hand from you. I always have been, haven't I?"

Danny reached up with pursed lips and pressed a kiss into Thomas to shut him up. The heat she was radiating was overcoming his ability to control his own actions and he said, "Well, it doesn't matter at the moment anyway. We still have five left."

Danny shook her head and corrected him, "Wrong! I counted them and we actually have six left."

Thomas reached down, grabbed the bottom of her shirt, and began drawing it over her head. When her hands were freed, she ran both of them down his chest and into the tight opening between his stomach and pants until she grazed the top of his pubic area. He ran his fingers around her sides and up her bare back, pulled her tightly to him and corrected her, "No, you're wrong! In a half hour, there's only going to be five left."

Danny found herself being backed into the wall of the garage and one of her legs was being hoisted into the air while Thomas forcefully massaged her groin with his. One last look into each other's eyes forced them to close to enjoy the feeling of a closeness that had been long over due.

Sometime later, there was a knock at the door and Danny pushed Thomas out of the bed to check it out. As everyone knew, any knock on the door after dark had to be met with a challenge of static aggression.

Danny scrambled from the bed, threw on her robe, and went for their hand gun only to remember it was downstairs.

Thomas had gotten on his pants and the two of them made their way through the dark and down the stairs. Danny stayed on the stoop while Thomas went to the kitchen for the gun. Then through the closed door came a familiar voice.

“Danny? Danny? It’s me, Christy… and Kyle. Are you okay in there?”

Danny had to think for a moment and remembered the girl calling to her.

“Just a minute.” She went over to Thomas as he came back from the kitchen. “It’s okay. It’s that girl I told you I met two days ago.”

They went to the door and peeked out to make sure it was them and opened it up. Thomas tried to hide the gun behind his back and they immediately began asking Danny if she was okay.

“Yeah, why? What makes you think I wouldn’t be?”

Christy replied with, “Well, we heard all these muffled screams and thought you were getting beaten up.”

Danny thought for a moment, her jaw dropped open, and her eyes went wide with a hysterical smirk. She covered her mouth and spun around until she was almost kneeling and began an embarrassing laugh. When Thomas asked her what she was laughing about, all she could squeak out was, “They heard us.”

Thomas grew a little red-faced himself and began laughing. When Danny gained her composer, she turned around and said, “I’m so sorry. I wasn’t laughing

at you." Her eyes went up as she grinned and said, "We were in the middle of…"

Christy started laughing when she understood her embarrassment. Since there was no electricity, sounds tended to carry much father these days and she realized she had heard Danny in the throes of passion instead of the midst of an assault. Kyle started catching on and now everyone had a nervous laughter going.

When everyone got a hold of themselves, Danny invited them in, lit a couple of candles, and received a formal introduction to Kyle. Thomas made his presence known and thanked them for their concern for watching over Danny. It turned out that they had just moved in next door to assume Christy's grandmothers house. She had died several months earlier and the family had worked to make sure no one tried to squat in the house until they could secure it.

They sat around talking about the whole embarrassing situation and got to know each other a bit. And after a while, Danny noticed a couple of things that her other half seemed oblivious to noticing. Kyle, with a broad chest and squared off chin, seemed a bit taken with Danny and her short robe as her only cover. And Christy seemed totally engrossed in every word that came out of Thomas' mouth, yet neither of them seemed at all jealous that the other was paying so much attention to their hosts. That was when Danny took a serious look at her counterpart and saw a very sexy girl about her age, a smile that could win over a gay guy, and just the kind of chest that she had always wished hers had grown into.

There was something about the whole setting that

was enticing the bad girl side of Danny into the open. Maybe it was the recent sex, maybe it was the new hunk sitting off to her side, but whatever it was it had her feeling extremely flirtatious at the moment. This was a feeling she hadn't had since her high school graduation party. When she turned to her side to see what Kyle was making of her attempts to tease him so perversely, she was met with a stare at her own chest. Since Christy and Thomas were engrossed in their own conversation, she felt free to stare back at Kyle.

His eyes weren't leaving hers for a moment, so hoping he wouldn't notice she dropped her hand into her lap while grazing the sash that held her robe closed. Her thumb hooked the sash and undid the gentle fold that held it into itself. She could feel the air making its way under the bottom of her robe and her nipples were obviously swelling with the emotion flooding over her. She had only flashed herself one time in her life and that was one of the first times she had gotten drunk. But she knew with the eyes boring into her under the condition of darkness only brightened by the flickering candles, she wanted to expose herself to this handsome stranger sitting five feet away.

For the longest time she tried to focus on what her boyfriend and Christy were talking about, but all she could think about was the tingling sensation between her legs. When she made a gesture towards Thomas, her robe fell apart slightly. It didn't really reveal anything because of the darkness, but when no one paid any attention to it, she went for an action meant to heighten her own passion. At first she glared at Kyle until he understood she wanted his attention, and then she

turned in such a way towards Kyle that the robe opened even further. By the wide eyes Kyle was sporting now, the flickering candles afforded him enough light to see between her legs. She had never flashed that part of her body before and it made her nipples harden even more when she saw the interest Kyle was paying towards her.

Danny took another look to make sure Thomas and Christy were still unaware of her actions, and then bent forward towards Kyle to reposition the candle on the cocktail table in front of her. She felt her breasts falling forward and her nipples grazed the fabric of her robe. It was obvious that Kyle was getting as full of a peek at her body as anyone not a boyfriend ever had of her. She turned and stared right into his eyes and suddenly he felt caught, and averted his eyes. Danny had had enough of her flirtation and cinched her robe closed. That forced Kyle's eyes to her face and that made her turn flush again with embarrassment.

Neither Christ nor Thomas had any idea what she had just gotten away with and that made her hot all over again. But she also felt quite guilty over it and began trying to make up for it by talking about Christy's pert little chest. She knew that openly talking about such things had an amazing effect on Thomas' sexual outlook, and when she saw the swelling in his jeans, she kept doing everything she could to exploit the situation. It was another half hour before they left, and Danny and Thomas were headed for bed before the talk of sex came up between them.

Danny asked, "So, what did you think about her? Pretty hot bod, huh?"

“What’s with you Danny? Are you trying to get rid of me or what?”

“Oh, come on. I saw her flirting with you. Something tells me that if Kyle and I weren’t around, she’d snap you up like a well done steak.”

After they crawled into bed for the night, Danny did something rather abnormal for her; she stretched her body half way over Thomas’. She worked the front of her upper body over his smooth chest and licked from his nipples up the side of his neck. He tried pushing her away a little and reminded her that they only had five “wishes” left. She went back to nibbling at his neck and then his ear lobe and whispered, “I thought you liked what we did before them.”

She waited for his response and when he couldn’t quite understand what she was implying, she slithered her tongue back down along the front of him until she was at his waist and heard him finally say, “Oh, I see.”

>>>

I took an elbow to my ribs and told Sue I was already awake. Hearing a knock at my door after dark was always something that was met with a gun in my hand. Eve had been snuggled between us, so I told Sue to secure her and grab her own gun. I made my way down the stairs to the front door. It was all but permanently sealed shut, but I looked through the peep hole to see who it was and vaguely remembered the face.

“Go around to the back door.”

Even though he had a familiar face, I considered

the possibility that he had been at the lottery earlier and had come back to rob us. I met him with my magnum and he raised his hands in front of him.

"Hey, remember me. My name's Dillon Masters. I was one of the winners today. I need your help."

I asked, "And what kind of help would that be?"

"My friend that was with me, Frank, he got shot. We were ambushed at the top of the hill just before Columbia Pike. We got the bullet out, but he's really pale; even for a white guy."

"And that should concern me… why?"

"Come on man. You invested in us enough to give us the chickens. You telling me that now you don't give a damn about a human life. He's my partner. You have to have some antibiotics. He has two kids and a wife for Christ's sake."

I stood there for a minute thinking about my extended family and what they might need when all of a sudden we both heard, "Come on in and shut the door."

It was Sue and she was forcing me to make a decision. I told him to come on in as Sue lit a candle to guide us into the living room. I knew what our assets were better than anyone, but I also knew the value of them. But there was no way in hell I was going to fall for a line of crying wolf.

"What makes you think he has an infection already?"

Dillon took a deep breath and started telling us the whole story about the ambush and how they had gotten away. He went on to tell us about how his wife had cut out the bullet and Frank getting sutured by Beth. When he explained his extremely pale color, Sue agreed he

was fighting a severe infection. She stared at me trying to hold to her responsibility over our own security, but her words were booming in my head.

"Stay here and fill in Sue on every detail you can remember. And don't leave out a thing about those guys that tried to kill you. We'll tell the Guard about them tomorrow."

I grabbed a candle, went downstairs and into the bunker to search through the pills I had stolen from Mr. Chang's house over a year earlier. I finally found the bottle I was looking for, threw it into my waistband and went back upstairs. I sat down across from the very flustered black man in front of me and stared him down. When he didn't flinch a bit, I made my decision.

I took out the bottle of pills, saw it called for two a day, and counted out ten of them. I dumped the rest of the pills onto the end table and placed the ten back into the bottle.

"This is the deal. Give him one pill, two times a day. Three days should be enough to help his own system kick in, but if he's not well enough… then use all of them. But if he dies or you have any left over, I want them back." I held out the pills until his hand was ready to take them and added, "Have I got your word?"

"I'm playing it straight up man. He's depending on me. His family is depending on me. He's the best friend I have… why else would I have risked coming here in the dark of night?"

I dropped the bottle into his hand, and both he and Sue smiled.

>>>

When I woke up in the morning, the sun was shining despite our forecast for rain the night before. I really missed the weather reports. Either way, I got dressed and went downstairs to find Sherri was the only one in the house and sitting at the table.

“They all went over to Sue’s house to check on it. Want me to cook you something?”

I thought it was a typically nice thing for her to offer, but declined. I did want to talk to her about her flirtatious behavior from the prior day and sat across from her.

“You know I love the hell out of you right?”

Her face went sour and out came a dismayed, “Nooooo…”

We had this discussion before and she knew what was coming as well as I did, but after seeing several instances of promiscuous behavior the day before during the lottery, I had to take another shot at it. For the most part she made me very proud to know her, however she seemed to have a particular weakness whenever a sexual situation presented itself.

“Had a pretty busy day yesterday, huh?”

“No clothes ever came off and I thought we had an understanding that my life was mine to handle?”

I shot her my typical look of doubt and told her that what I had thought we had was an understanding that she wouldn’t “get around” in any manner. She started rolling her eyes and steeling her looks.

“It was a little bit of kissing. No big deal.”

“You don’t really get it Sherri. It is a big deal to other people. And you’re too young to be tempting such

fate."

She shot back with, "And I'll be a year older next month."

What I wanted to say to her wasn't something that came easily and I didn't want her to mistake my views as also being my desires. I kept searching for the words to tell her that she was the hot little vixen of most people's fantasies, and that sooner or later, it would catch up to her. Despite her knowledgeable background from before I found her, there was still a lot of evil in the world she hadn't seen.

I told her, "What about Thomas? You did that right in front of the kids. You had to know that Cindy was going to tell us. How do you think that kind of thing makes someone like Danny feel?"

"Oh, come on Owen. You know she's a Chick Trap as well as I do. Tell me you didn't see that yourself?"

It hadn't come to me as quickly as she had picked up on it, but she was right. Danny did come off as a Trap and it was pretty evident when I thought about her reactions after Cindy had blurted out what she had seen.

In the post-Flip era, there were a lot of girls like her that were so afraid of getting pregnant that they would do just about anything involving sex except intercourse. It was far different than it had been before the world changed. Withholding the typically final act of most sexual interactions had once been more on the level of malicious teasing just to boost their own egos, but now it was born out of a true fear. Many of the girls would make it well known themselves that they were Traps and that they had a bevy of options to offer their mates,

but when it came to getting between their legs for any reason other than orally, they were off limits. The term Chick Trap came about because when the mere suggestion of intercourse came up, their legs would slam shut like a mouse trap. Most descent men understood their fears and worked through it.

As with most stereotypes, it was known to be fairly common that as long as the girl felt safe in every other aspect of her relationship, that allowing their guys the right to roam on an occasion to get what they were unwilling to provide had become acceptable to them. Most young women that referred to themselves as Traps seemed to be saying right up front that allowing their lovers to wander went right along with the name.

I asked, “And the girls?”

My own words came back to doom me on that subject.

“You were the one that said it was safer to be a lesbian nowadays.”

“You’re taking everything out of context to justify your actions, Sherri. And you’re anything but stupid. I’m just trying to get you on a better path.”

I watched her steel her looks again and I could have almost said the words myself.

“You’re not my father. I can do what I want and your values aren’t always going to be mine.”

There they were and she was right. She had used those four words before and I had hoped to never hear them again, because I did want to be able to think of her as my own. This time was a little different though because she was beginning to understand how hurtful those words were to me. Her toughened look went

away quickly and she came around to my side of the table to sit across my lap. Her arms went around me and she buried her face in my neck.

Sherri never cried and rarely felt sorry for her actions, so in some ways it was nice to see her growing by this display of regret. Eve may be my only real daughter, but Sue's kids and Sherri have been in my heart as my own the moment they came into my life. There wasn't a thing in the world I wouldn't do for them and I made sure they always knew it.

Sue came walking through the door and knew how easily embarrassed Sherri got when caught showing her emotions. She raised her eyebrows to me and kept going up the stairs with Eve. She had known the talk was coming again and even liked the fact that I did my best to keep my thumb on her.

When Sherri pulled away from me, she said she was going for a ride. She needed some time to herself and I understood that, but when she filled three water bottles for her ride I began to get worried. One bottle was all that was needed for a ride around the area, but I held my tongue.

I wrapped my arms around her and told her the two things I always made sure to tell her whenever she went past the barricade by herself; I loved her and I expected her to take her weapon. None of us went out on our own without a gun close at hand. Other than that though, I had little fear that she could take care of herself better than most men. She had proved that several times in the past.

One time a man walking down the road came through the barricade in a drunken state from too much

home brew. She had told him to piss off, but when he kept staggering towards her, she not only held her ground, but her mood changed into seduction instantly. She became sweet and smiling, and invited him closer. Jason, one of the soldiers that were stationed at the far easterly side of our block had seen it happen and told us about it later. The man had been dumb enough to allow himself to be lured to her and when he went to force a kiss on her, he straightened up in severe pain. She had grabbed him by his balls so hard that even in his state, he did as she commanded. Sherri walked him in what had to be a very awkward gate back to the roadway. Knowing that she would probably lose control of him the minute she released her grip, she had him go to his knees. The instant she pulled her hand away from his crotch, she wound up her hand and slapped the hell out of his face. It was hard enough that it knocked him backwards to the ground.

Sherri gathered her supplies and left. I went to the front of the house to see which way she was headed. My heart sank when she headed down the hill towards the market place. That was where I had taken her from her father at gunpoint and I was always worried what he would do if he ever found her again.

“She’ll be fine, Owen. You know she can take care of herself.”

I felt Sue’s hand on my shoulder and grabbed it in my own.

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“What the hell was that?” Lisa demanded in a

hushed voice.

Cynthia was stretching her arms over her head and laughed a little. “That’s our new male houseguest. I told you we shouldn’t have put them in the house.”

“When you’re as important as they are, the spare bedroom is better than risking them outside. He’s probably in there doing every one of those hens. You gonna help me feed them?”

Lisa stood up to get dressed and for a change, Cynthia decided to watch rather openly. And this time it wasn’t just a glancing peek, but a very purposeful stare. She never really gave a second of serious thought to getting it on with another woman before, but since that first kiss she shared with Sherri she really didn’t feel safe referring to herself as just into guys anymore. That’s when she started to think about feeling her friend up last night and making out with her. It never went past second base really but it had certainly been enough for her to consider herself bi-sexual now.

Lisa turned around as she pulled a shirt over her head and smiled when she caught Cynthia eyeballing her. Her nipples instantly grew to taut points under her top and she returned the stare while twisting her jaw to one side. She was obviously remembering the moments they shared yesterday. It never got to the point she had been dreaming about for months, but it was sure to be a pleasant memory during her more private moments in the near future.

Cynthia asked, “Still mad about that girl?”

“That girl? You don’t even know her name, do you?”

“Do you want me to remember it?”

Lisa bit her lip and admitted that she would rather Cynthia forget her, and then added that she knew the physical stuff wouldn't be nearly as easy to forget as her name.

A few minutes later, the two of them were looking over their new brood of family members and began looking around the dried tall grass they had used as bedding in search of eggs. When Cynthia remembered their lessons from the day before she went to the boxes they had built and sure enough, there wasn't just one egg, but two among the four boxes. They began jumping up and down and screaming hysterically. Already they had realized a reward from their efforts.

Without a wasted minute, they went to the kitchen to celebrate with eggs for breakfast. It always took a while to cook anything because all they had to cook on was a modified stove they fired up with wood. Lisa was the appointed chef and Cynthia just sort of hung around setting the table while she did the real cooking. Today was going to be a much more memorable day in every detail.

Lisa came up behind Cynthia to see what was capturing her attention so much as she stared out the window and quickly saw a disappointing sight. Their neighbor, Robbie, was in his back yard and when Cynthia became aware of Lisa she realized what her staring was doing to her friend. She began to apologize until Lisa told her to knock it off, so she went for a different approach.

"Come here and take an honest look at him. Look at that ass. Wouldn't you just love to sneak up on him and squeeze those hard little cheeks in your hands?"

She started to walk away, so she grabbed her, spun her around and forced her to check him out. After a moment Lisa agreed that he was a pretty fine example of the opposite gender.

"So I guess you really had a good time with him the other night?"

"Look, enough of the guilt trip. Why don't you go out and talk to him and take a ride for yourself? Then we'll be even and we can drop the whole thing."

Lisa snapped her head around in disbelief over her suggestion. "No way! I don't need a dude to be satisfied." And after a long pause, "I pretty much liked what happened yesterday."

The young women went back and forth for a while and they even stayed glued to the subject through their breakfast. Cynthia got Lisa to finally admit to her past flings with men and it didn't take much more to get her giddy over some of her liaisons. At some point it turned into a mission for Cynthia to help her friend experience the same casual sex that she had with the boy still working in his backyard. It became her mission to show her exactly what she had taken away from it all and thus why she had sort of cheated on their relationship.

Lisa became a bit indignant and asked, "You can't believe I would go over there to meet him just to get laid. And why would you assume he'd want to make love to me anyway? I'm not even close to being in your league."

Her lack of confidence was brushed aside by Cynthia and she was soon tugging her friend outside to meet their neighbor. He was chopping wood from a limb blown down weeks earlier, and that meant sweat was

rolling down his chest. While Cynthia was beating the drum, Lisa was taking in every nuance of the man; his muscular build, his pumped up biceps from his work, and the seemingly hard as rock stomach.

"Hey girl. Who's your friend?" Robbie looked at her like she was a fast food meal and asked, "Is she a gift for me?"

Lisa raised her eyebrows at his bluntness. "Excuse me?"

Robbie answered, "I'm just kidding you. Nice to meet you. I've seen you around and knew eventually that you'd come by to say hi to me."

Robbie had taken over the house a few weeks earlier and they had hardly seen him. They assumed that someone in his family died or that he had bartered for the house in some way. Those were the most probable situations for gaining a home these days.

Cynthia got right to the point as she often did and told Robbie, "She knows all about us the other night." She turned on the flirtation and added, "And since you did such a fine job of smoothing out my wrinkles, I was thinking you might like doing the same for her."

Naturally, two things came from that; Robbie grinned from ear-to-ear, and Lisa swatted her friend in disbelief over her blunt assertion. She began apologizing for Cynthia's remarks and denying that they were there for that exact reason. However, when Robbie worked to put her at ease, her apprehension quickly turned to the very desire she was trying hard to keep hidden. The turning point came when Cynthia began bartering her friend off as if she were a well prepared meal. Lisa was greatly humiliated at first, but

as the two of them continued negotiating over her as if she were some sort of item to be traded, it also left her speechless. Later on, she would confess to Cynthia that that had been a huge turn on for her because of the shear decadence of it all.

Lisa was dumbfounded and speechless as her friend just about handed her over to Robbie like a sacrificial virgin. But when Robbie saw the inevitable outcome, he turned on his charm and aimed directly at her. Within minutes, he was inviting both girls into his house and took a hold of Lisa's hand. The three of them headed toward the rear door of his house. Robbie held the door open for Lisa to enter first, and suddenly Cynthia "remembered" she had work to do back home. Lisa protested and wanted her to stay, and when she saw she wasn't going to, tried to leave with her. But between Cynthia and Robbie, they talked her into visiting for a little while. There was no real effort on anyone's part to hide what was really going on. So, when the door began closing and separating the two girls, Cynthia turned to go home and smiled over how she knew Lisa would enjoy herself.

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When Cynthia heard the door slamming shut, she ran to meet Lisa.

"I feel like such a whore. I can't believe you did that to me."

Cynthia tried feigning a look of apology, but it only lasted as long as it took to chirp out, "So… how was it? Pretty amazing after all this time, right?"

Lisa's face was stoic for a moment, but then she burst into a smile and went into a teenagers rant. "Oh, my god. It was so awkward at first, but when we got right down to it, it was frigging awesome. I forgot all about how good it could feel being physically manipulated by a guy. After all this time is was so good to let someone else be in charge of things. But you… why did you leave me like that? I was scared to death when you started walking away."

"You didn't need a third wheel. Besides, I knew I could trust him to treat you nice. Didn't you just love his rock hard abs?"

For a moment Lisa was too flustered to answer, but when she did, she went on and on about his body and how for a younger guy he had a fairly proficient way of making love. She described every detail of how it felt getting ravaged by the apparently sex-starved young man. It became very clear to Cynthia that Lisa was the kind of girl that felt a little guilty about sex, so when she described her greatest moments as those that involved him taking charge, she understood what it tool for her to enjoy a good romp. She filed that away in her brain just in case things progressed between the two of them.

"So, are you mad at me for talking you into it?"

Lisa put on a slight pout, and then answered with, "I guess I'll get over it. But, I hope… this doesn't change things between us."

Cynthia smiled and said, "Girl, we'll always be best buds. But I'm really happy to see you can still appreciate a good guy. Now I feel like that uncomfortable pressure is off the table."

The rest of the morning was spent setting up

everything the chickens were going to need and talking about the intimate details both of the girls had to share. They were getting along better and more openly than they had in quite a while. It was even suggested that Robbie might be a useful “tool” to keep in their arsenal for future use when one of the girls needed a little relief from that special kind of tension.

About the only downside of the day was over a remark about how Cynthia could appreciate taking a run at Robbie on a daily basis. But that statement that had put a sulking tone into Lisa’s demeanor was squashed when Cynthia made up for it by kissing her and making a sensual grab for her ass.

Lisa was walking by the front windows of her house when she caught someone riding into their driveway on a bike. She called to Cynthia and she came running to the door. Cynthia pressed her body against the door and waited for a knock, and when it came she called out, “Who is it?”

“Open the door and look.”

Lisa tried to peek around the front window to see the visitor, but she was out of her view. The two of them stood in front of the door to block it while Cynthia opened the door every so slightly. When she saw who was there, her face brightened like a second sun.

“What are you doing here? We didn’t expect to see you this soon. How did you find out where we lived?”

She opened the door just in time for the girl to say she had taken their address off their registration papers from the day before. Lisa’s eyes grew huge when she saw who it was, and then immediately regressed into a state of almost submissive behavior.

“What? Was all that kissing just you guys using me?”

They invited Sherri in.

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Robbie called out for the person knocking at his door to calm down. He knew who it was and when he opened it, he met the girl there with a wild and passionate kiss.

“What took you so long? You’re an hour late. And you won’t believe what happened today.” Robbie led her into the house and went for another kiss that lasted for minutes. “You remember what I told you about that girl, Cynthia? You won’t believe this… but she brought her girlfriend by today.”

“What for, a threesome?”

The girl had a devilish grin on her face and Robbie was sporting a smug smile.

“She handed her over to me to give her the same treatment… and left. They treated me like I was some kind of gigolo. I’m telling you, these two are begging for it. They haven’t invited me over to their place yet, but they will soon enough.”

The girl looked a bit grim and said, “I’m getting more than a little irritated over sharing you with all these other girls. They better have something good and a lot of it.”

“Be nice now and retract your claws. I keep you fed don’t I? If I don’t give them a little of the ol’ Robbie treatment, then we’ll never know for sure what’s behind that door, will we? One thing’s for sure; they apparently

have no shortage of food. I suspect in a day or two that one of them will be inviting me over for dinner with them. I've already lain down the "I'm famished routine", so I'll be finding out what they have real soon. I just want to make sure that gun of theirs is out of the way so I don't get my ass shot."

The girl turned away from Robbie and he knew she was feeling a touch of jealousy, so he stroked her feathers a little to calm her down. "You're not getting jealous now are you? You know you're the only one I love. Don't forget, you're the Trap and I fell for you with certain agreements in place. I've held up my end of the bargain, so don't go getting all pissy on me now. We have a pretty comfortable life and I aim to keep it that way."

"I know… but when I think about you with other girls it just kills me. Why can't we move out to the country? They have more food out there."

Robbie flung around in almost a rage. "Yeah, and they have a lot more cops and guns. It's easy pickings around here and I'm not risking my life robbing well armed farmers just to get hunted down like an animal." He realized he was raging at his partner and took a deep breath. "Look honey, you know I only bed them for one thing and that keeps you safe and well fed. I thought you liked our arrangement? Without knowing I have you to come back to, I'd never make it into anyone's house."

"I know, I know. I'm just so damn tired of being a Trap. When are they going to get those damn pills to us? And I swear, as soon as they do, you're not going to be with another tramp ever again."

Robbie went to her and took her in his arms again. He looked deep into her eyes and invoked his love for her, and began kissing her neck in the slobbering way she liked it. He was about to kiss her when there was another knock at the door. They looked at each other and each took a step back.

The girl whispered, “Who’s that? Should I hide?”

Robbie shook his head and went back to the door to peek out through the sidelight. When he saw who it was, he turned to the girl and grinned. He worked to undo the deadbolts and opened the door.

“Hello girls... and what brings you back so soon?”

Cynthia and Sherri walked into the foyer with broad smiles until they saw the other girl just inside the living room area. In an instant, they both grew rather irate, yet kept it subtle; Cynthia mostly over the fact that she had just about handed her best friend over to him on a silver platter, and Lisa because she felt more used than what they had done to him earlier in the day.

Robbie invited them in and took a sickening pleasure over the apparent estrogen battle looming in the air. He took a slow look at each of the girls so as to savor the hold he had over each one of them. He was making a bet with himself over who would be the first to get catty, and he was right.

Lisa in a very perturbed voice asked, “Who’s this?”

He watched his neighbors go into an immediate repose when he introduced the girl to them. “Cynthia, Lisa, this is my sister, Crystal. And these are my lovely neighbors I was just telling you about. I was just telling my sister here that I wished I had the resources to invite the two of you over to dinner one day.”

Lisa, feeling rather disgusted with her jealous thoughts, held out her hand with one egg they had just found in offer for her neighbor. Cynthia explained it as a neighborly welcome gift and suggested that maybe they could invite him over for dinner instead.

Robbie looked at Crystal and they shared a quick and evil little smile.