The Threads of Fate
by CharlotteAshmore

Summary

He had loved her for so long. Carol was the one constant in his life which he clung to, especially during the dark times. Now if he could just find the courage to tell her and pray she could find it in her heart to feel the same. How couldn’t she when they were bound by the threads of fate?

Notes

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A/n: I know I shouldn’t even be writing this when I have my other story to finish, but it came to me while I was in the hospital with another bout of pancreatitis (groovy drugs apparently induce plot bunnies, who knew?) and it just won’t leave me alone. Hope you enjoy!

See the end of the work for more notes.
“Huh …”

“What?” Daryl asked around a spoonful of chicken noodle soup, leaning over to peer at the history book resting between them on the cafeteria table. Carol ignored his question and scribbled furiously in her notebook before digging in her bag for the ancient Greek mythology book she had stuffed in there.

He went back to his lunch, the same one she packed for them every day with care. Draining the container, he set it aside and reached for one of the brownies her mother had baked the night before, devouring half of it in one bite, moaning as the rich chocolate burst over his tongue. Carol had barely touched her food, only taking a bite when he prodded her gently. When she got caught up in her studies, the rest of the world faded away to her single-minded focus. It had been this way for as long as he’d known her.

Daryl felt the corner of his mouth turn up in a small smile as he watched her. She was the most beautiful girl he’d ever known, though that might have something to do with the fact that he loved her to the very depths of his soul. Her azure eyes sparkled with interest as she read the text before her, and the sun shining in through the cafeteria windows highlighted her fiery auburn locks, framing a heart shaped face dusted with a sprinkling of freckles. She’d changed dramatically from the little hoyden he’d met that first day of preschool.

He’d been an overly shy five-year-old, sure he wouldn’t make the first friend. He’d even begged his mother to keep him home, to school him herself. He didn’t want to go to school with kids who were only going to mock him because of his name. He might have only been five, but his brother Merle had been sure to tell him how it was going to be. How many times had the elder Dixon already come home in trouble for fighting? Even the teacher had been cool and distant, her lip curled with disdain as she’d led him to a seat at the very back of the class.

And then Mrs. Mason, the lady who owned the bakery on main street, had barged into the class ten minutes after the bell with Carol in tow, apologizing for her tardiness. Daryl had watched, his heart in his throat, waiting to see that uppity teacher lay into them. Yet, she hadn’t. She had waved a dismissive hand and smiled at Mrs. Mason and then led Carol to the seat next to him, the only one left in the classroom. He remembered how he’d shrunk into himself, trying to make himself seem small so the girl wouldn’t notice him. Mrs. Mason was a nice lady. His mama had brought him by the bakery once or twice for a treat when his daddy had been off working and wouldn’t find out about it, but he hadn’t known she’d had a daughter.

Daryl had flinched away from her when she’d reached out and tapped his shoulder, his wide blue eyes staring at her as if she were crazy. None of the other kids had wanted to talk to him, but here was this little red-haired girl, smiling at him … him.

“Hi … I’m Carol,” she’d said brightly, her eyes inquisitive as she waited for his reply.

“D-Daryl … I’m Daryl … Dixon,” he added the last, averting his eyes, not wanting to see the scorn which would surely follow.

But Carol’s smile had only grown wider, her eyes alight with happiness. “We match! Carol and Daryl. We’re going to be great friends, don’t you think?”

His head had shot up, his little brow puckering in confusion. “You want t’ be my friend?”
he’d asked, too surprised to bite back the words which could lead to nothing but humiliation.

“’Course I do.” And that was the end of it. “My mama bought me new crayons, the big box. Want to share with me?”

He didn’t know what to think of her, but he hadn’t been stubborn enough to refuse her offer, especially considering he had Merle’s old crayons from last year in his box. She had chattered happily the whole morning, and he’d resigned himself to listening, wishing deep in his heart this girl really did want to be his friend. He knew it would all change at recess when she got a chance to meet some of the other girls in their class. She would skip off with them and he’d be left alone.

Daryl snorted, losing himself in memories of that day as he watched her prepare her notes. When the bell had rung for recess, the teacher had led them outside to the playground, and he’d reveled in the sun on his face after being cooped up inside all morning, but he’d hung back from the other children as they’d run to play on the equipment. He knew he wasn’t welcome to play with them, but Carol apparently had other ideas.

She’d grabbed his hand, her smaller one grasping him tightly, and dragged him over to the swings. They’d taken turns pushing each other, and for the first time in his life, he felt a tiny seed of hope take root in his heart. She actually seemed to like playing with him, and couldn’t have cared less what his last name happened to be. It was turning into a perfect day, something unknown to him, until …

Shane Walsh … the little braggart whose daddy owned the car lot in town. He had sauntered over to the swings and smiled at Carol, all shark-like teeth and charm. “Hey, Carol. Why don’tcha come play over by the slide with us? No use hanging out with Dixon trash.”

Daryl had felt his perfect day crash and burn, and he’d slowed the swing so Carol could get off and go play with the other children. He hadn’t expected her little cheeks to flame with anger or her eyes to narrow in menace. She’d leapt off the swing and glared at Shane. “You take that back!” she’d hissed.

Shane had laughed. “No. It’s the truth. Everybody knows his family ain’t no good, nothing but worthless trash. His drunk daddy beats his wife every Saturday and does it again twice on Sunday.”

Before Daryl could round the swings and punch Walsh in his smarmy face, Carol had balled up her little fist and socked him right in the nose before pushing him in the mud. “I don’t care who his daddy is, Shane Walsh, Daryl’s my friend and I’m not going to let you talk about him like that.”

All three of them had ended up in the principal’s office, but Daryl knew he loved her that day. No one had ever stood up for him like that aside from his mama … and maybe Merle when he was feeling generous. He remembered sitting on that bench outside the principal’s office next to Carol, head down as he picked at his cuticles, waiting for their parents to get there, praying all the while they hadn’t called his daddy. He’d been close to a full-blown panic attack by the time his mama had gotten there. He’d been so afraid she was going to be angry with him, but she’d just smiled – that special smile she reserved just for him – called him her sweet boy and marched him in behind the others to face Mr. Hovarth.

The kindly man had simply sat back in his chair and sighed, staring over his desk at the three children as he demanded an explanation. Their teacher had given her own version, but he’d wanted to hear it from them. He had been more than a little surprised when Carol had jumped from her seat and called Shane a ‘big bully’. The little red-head had been honest, owning up to her tempestuous actions on the playground, and clearing Daryl of any blame. Dale Hovarth’s mouth had gaped open
in surprise, sure the Dixon boy had instigated the entire affair. It hadn’t helped matters that Mr. Walsh had been pointing an accusing finger at Daryl the whole time, even going so far as to claim Carol was covering for him.

Mrs. Mason had then let it be known just where Carol had inherited her temper, jumping to her daughter’s defense. Carol had even gone so far as to show everyone her swollen knuckles to prove she had indeed been the one to bloody Shane’s nose. In the end, Mr. Hovarth had sent them all home for the remainder of the day with a firm warning that there was to be no more fighting.

Only they didn’t go home. Carol’s mother had invited them back to the bakery for one of the biggest cupcakes he’d ever seen in his short life, topped with rich Butterfinger icing. Hyped up on sugar, their mothers had let them run it off at the park. It really had been one of the most perfect days of his life. Carol had been right … they did become friends … best friends.

Carol had been there for every major milestone of his childhood, and he couldn’t imagine what his life would have been without her. She’d been the only person who could comfort him after the death of his mother. He’d wanted to die that day too, wracked with guilt that he’d been out playing instead of watching over her. It was Carol who had sat under the table with him at the wake, holding his hand as silent tears slipped over his ashen cheeks. She’d been there to scold him when he’d been lost in the woods, frantic with worry when he’d come home thinner than ever and covered in poison oak rashes. She’d blistered his ears all the while smearing calamine lotion over his skin. When she found out his daddy had never allowed him to have a birthday party, she’d begged her mom to have one for him. He’d been ten at the time, and though it had only been Carol, Rick and Glenn – more friends she’d pulled into their little circle – in attendance, it had been another perfect day.

After his mother’s death, Jackson Dixon had just gotten worse. The drinking, the beatings, the neglect and abuse. Of course, he could hide nothing from Carol. She could read him like a book. He’d been so afraid to see pity in her eyes. Instead, he’d found anger there radiating from her crystalline eyes. She’d never met the man, and she hated him with a flaming passion because of the way he treated Daryl. Carol had even asked him to come live with her. He’d nipped that idea in the bud quickly. He could just imagine the beating he’d get if child services showed up on Jackson’s doorstep. He shuddered now just thinking of it.

His back was littered with scars, and Carol was the only person who had ever seen them. She’d been there to patch him up, all the while trying to convince him to go to the hospital. And when he’d refused, she’d made him stay the night with her and held him until he’d stopped trembling, watching over him to keep his nightmares at bay. How many times over the past years had he spent the night in her bed after a particularly vicious beating? She’d never turned him away, welcoming him into her room and caring for him with all the tenderness he’d come to rely on over the years. How many times had he almost blurted out how much he loved her? And not just the love of friendship between them. He had truly, irrevocably surrendered his heart to her. He just didn’t know how to tell her.

Daryl unwrapped a ham and cheese sandwich and pressed half of it into Carol’s hand. He smiled as she absently took a bite, her eyes still skimming the page in front of her, wondering if she even tasted the food she was chewing. He sat there silently, knowing it was pointless to try to talk to her when she was preparing notes for them. Hell, his grades wouldn’t be what they were if she didn’t push him into study sessions three times a week, insisting he work hard to get into a good college. She knew how badly he wanted to become a veterinarian, but he couldn’t see himself being the first Dixon ever to go to college. She already had a stack of scholarship applications ready for him to fill out. He’d sit there and do it, too, just so he wouldn’t disappoint her, but he didn’t hold out the same hope she did. He was realistic. Good things didn’t happen to him.
He groaned as the rest of their friends finally joined them at their table, trays laden with barely consumable food from the lunch line. Rick gave them both a disgusted look as he sat down and reached for a fork to dig into his mac and cheese. “Studying at lunch should be against the law,” he mumbled around a mouthful of cheesy pasta. “In case you haven’t noticed, this is supposed to be our downtime.”

Daryl leaned back in his chair and sipped at his Coke. “Says th’ man flunkin’ Trig,” he snorted.

Glenn pulled a chair out for Maggie before sitting beside her. “Yeah, Dixon? What’d you get on Friday’s exam?”

Daryl flushed crimson. He didn’t like to discuss his grades with anyone but Carol. People tended to think he was dumb as a box of rocks because of his background, and what with his job at the garage, when did he have time to study?

Carol set her pen down and frowned at Glenn. “He made a ninety-four. How’d you do, Rhee?” she asked, knowing the boy was having Maggie tutor him daily after school.

Glenn flushed. “I passed,” he murmured defensively.

Rick snorted, and Carol’s eyes flashed to him. “And what about you, Mr. Football Star?” she teased.

Lori grinned at her as she chewed a forkful of her salad. “He won’t be playing in next week’s game if he doesn’t pass the next exam.”

It was Rick’s turn to flush a bright red, swinging his gaze to Daryl. “Well, if you wouldn’t keep Carol all to yourself, maybe she could help us out.”

Daryl smirked. He liked having Carol all to himself, but he’d never interfere if she wanted to do something. If she wanted to tutor their friends, that would be her decision. Carol packed up her books and stuffed them back into her bag before she returned to her sandwich.

Finally, she sighed. “Rick Grimes, the last time I tried to help, you expected me to do the work for you. That’s not how I operate. However, if you’re serious, I hold regular study sessions for me and Daryl on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday evenings at my house. Any of you,” she said, glancing at each of her friends in turn, “are welcome to join us.”

She pushed her brownie towards Daryl, knowing he wanted it without him saying a word. He was famous for his sweet tooth, and she was surprised he hadn’t developed diabetes yet. She wasn’t going to mention to the others she only tutored on those days because Daryl didn’t have to work at the garage.

Rick brightened, ignoring her dig at his study habits. “Seriously? You’re willing to help us?”

“I am. Seven o’clock, so don’t be late. It should give you plenty of time to finish up with football practice, have dinner and get over to my house.”

Lori smiled at her friend. “Carol, you’re a lifesaver!”

Carol waved her off and removed the top from her container of soup, intent on enjoying her lunch.
Daryl finished off his brownie as the others chatted. “Why were y’all late t’ lunch, anyway? You’re usually th’ first in th’ lunch line, Grimes.”

Maggie leaned over, her face animated with her ingrained need to spread gossip. “Mr. Durbin caught Ed passing notes to Beth,” she blurted out rather loudly, referring to their economics teacher. “He held us all back after the bell so he could read them aloud to the entire class.”

“BETH?!” Carol gasped. Maggie’s younger sister was a junior, but her advanced schedule allowed her to take several classes with the seniors. “Isn’t she a little out of his league?”

Daryl’s hand clenched into a fist, his eyes darkening ominously as he thought of Ed Peletier. The boy had tried more than once to corner Carol after school, trying to charm her into going out with him. Thankfully, his girl had more sense than to fall for his bullshit.

“Like that’s ever stopped him before,” Lori snorted. “He’s tried to charm every girl in this school at one time or another.”

Maggie nodded. “Anyway, apparently, he was trying to get her to ask him to the Sadie Hawkins dance in two weeks.”

Daryl groaned. “Stupid dance. I’d forgotten all about that crap.”

Glenn chuckled. “Well, it’s time to start hoping you get asked by someone, because in the notes between her and Ed, Beth made it clear she was going to ask you.”

“What?!” he growled, scowling at the boy. “I ain’t goin’ t’ some hokey dance with that girl!”

Lori’s dark eyes glimmered with mischief as she pointed her fork across the cafeteria. “Better run, Daryl. She’s heading this way.”

Daryl’s head swung in the blonde’s direction and he felt his body seize with panic. “Oh, hell no!”

Before he could shoot to his feet and beat a hasty exit, Carol’s warm fingers curled over his wrist. A beatific smile rose at the corners of her mouth, and he felt some of the tension leave his body. “Daryl, would you go to Sadie Hawkins with me?” she asked, batting her long lashes at him playfully.

He could see right through her, coming to his rescue just as she always had before. “Yeah, I’d love t’,” he grinned, feeling the tips of his ears burn.

She turned back to her lunch as if nothing out of the ordinary had transpired, as if she just hadn’t pulled his ass out of the fire, as if she went around asking him out on dates every day. Lori snickered as Maggie chortled with glee.

Daryl was still grinning when Beth finally made it to their table and came to a stop between him and Carol. “Hi,” she said to the table at large before turning her wide blue eyes on Daryl. “Hi, Daryl.”

He grunted a mumbled reply, still staring at Carol as she finished her soup and began to pack away their lunch bag.

Apparently, the younger Greene girl couldn’t take a hint. “I was wondering … the Sadie Hawkins dance is coming up, and if you’re not busy … would you like to go with me?” she
stammered, a bright pink tint to her cheeks.

Finally, he looked up at her. “Cain’t … sorry. Carol asked me an’ I’m gonna go with her.” He didn’t look apologetic in the least.

Thankfully, the bell rang, signaling a return to classes. Daryl dropped his leather jacket over Carol’s shoulders, knowing Ms. Atkinson kept her classroom so cold you could hang meat in there. And his girl was always cold for some reason. They left their friends behind, making their way to Biology II, talking about their plans for the evening.

“Y’ got anythin’ t’ do today after school?” he asked, lunch already forgotten.

“I thought you were coming for dinner before our study session.”

“I am … just wanted t’ show y’ somethin’ s’all.”

Carol waggled her brows teasingly. “Ooooh, mysterious, Dixon. Yeah, I’m free.”

Daryl opened the door to their next class and followed her inside. “Think you’ll like this surprise.”

Carol stared at him for a moment through narrowed eyes, trying to read him. “Mysterious and a surprise to boot? Now I can’t wait for school to be over.”
Carol snuggled up against Daryl’s back, reveling in the rumble beneath her as the bike sped off towards the north end of town. They’d stopped by her house only long enough for her to change out of her denim skirt in favor of a pair of jeans and her favorite boots, something far more suitable for riding. She’d giggled softly to herself as Daryl had waited below with her mother.

*Daryl, sweetheart, you need a haircut.*

*Daryl, I made cookies … help yourself. If I didn’t feed you half the time, I’d swear you weren’t eating. You’re far too thin.*

*Daryl, how’s that brother of yours?*

She loved it when her mother fawned over him, just imagining the blush on his cheeks. He needed all the motherly attention he could get, she thought, grabbing a scrunchie and pulling her hair back into a ponytail. When she’d gotten to the kitchen – where she knew he’d be – he was scarfing down a handful of chocolate chip cookies and chasing them with a glass of cold milk. Her mother had kissed them both on the cheek and shooed them off, calling after them with a warning not to be late for dinner.

Carol couldn’t imagine what this surprise was he was so anxious to show her, but frankly, she couldn’t find it in herself to care. She was with Daryl, wrapped tightly around him, speeding down the road to parts unknown. Nothing else mattered. She couldn’t remember a time in her life when he hadn’t been the most important person in her world, or a time when she hadn’t loved him. Even when they argued – which wasn’t often – there was still that deep abiding love she felt for him to keep her grounded. It was with the onset of teenage hormones which had complicated matters. It was then she’d realized her feelings for him had raced past mere friendship and into another realm altogether. She was *in love* with her best friend and didn’t know how to tell him, so afraid he didn’t feel the same way and it would somehow drive a wedge between them. If there was one thing she could bear, it was the thought of losing him.

She shook herself from her melancholy as they left Senoia’s city limits behind and headed towards his home. Her heart rate picked up. Daryl never willingly brought her out to the Dixon homestead. He was ashamed of his meager home, a dilapidated three room cabin out in the woods next to a seedy trailer park. As if she cared, but she respected his wishes. Which was why they spent most of their time together hanging out at her house where he felt more at ease. She was even more confused when they passed the road leading to his house and continued trekking north.

Carol tapped him on the shoulder. “Are we going hunting?” she yelled over the roar of the bike and the gusting wind. “We don’t have our bows with us!”

Daryl shook his head and took one hand off the handle bars to rest over her own which were clasped over his belly. “Nope. Jus’ be patient,” he called back over his shoulder.

“Humph!” she snorted. Patience was not one of her virtues.

The trees on either side of the road continued to thicken, a familiar path leading to the forest
where he preferred to hunt with her. She smiled, thinking of the lightweight recurve bow he’d given her two years ago for Christmas. It wasn’t long after he’d begun working for Jim, and he’d scrimped and saved every extra penny in order to purchase it for her. He’d been so excited, sitting there on the floor in front of the tree, his hair still sleep-tousled and wearing his sleep pants and a t-shirt. It was tradition – after his mother had died – for him to sleep over on Christmas Eve and spend the next day celebrating the holiday with Carol’s family. But this was the first time he’d been able to give her a gift, and he’d been so proud.

She’d been after him to teach her how to shoot his crossbow for ages, but it was too heavy for her, and usually knocked her on her ass. Sometimes, she wondered if he loved that crossbow more than sweets. Merle had given it to him for his eleventh birthday when he’d taught Daryl to hunt, and he toted it everywhere with him. It was his most prized possession. She’d looked down at the bow, nestled in tissue paper along with a quiver and at least a dozen arrows with hot pink fletching, amazed. It was the first time she’d ever cried over a gift she’d received. Not because of what it was, but because she knew what it must have cost him to buy it for her.

He’d seen her tears, and she’d had to watch his shoulders slump in dejection, thinking she didn’t like it. She’d crawled over onto his lap, uncaring that her parents were sitting there on the couch watching the scene unfold, and wrapped herself around him.

Daryl had banded his arms about her waist and buried his face against her neck. “Please don’t cry, Carol. I can take it back if y’ don’t like it.”

Carol had just cried harder. “Don’t you dare! I love it, Daryl.” He’d pulled back enough to shoot her a dubious look, but she’d been quick to reassure him. “These are happy tears. But it’s so expensive … you shouldn’t have.”

A tiny grin had teased the corner of his mouth as his gaze had sought hers. “Y’ needed your own. Cain’t have y’ keep fallin’ on your butt every time y’ shoot mine.”

He’d been ribbing her, but she could see the relief in his eyes at how much his gift meant to her. It was the same Christmas she’d given him his leather jacket. She’d gotten tired of seeing him in Merle’s hand-me-down denim jacket with the holes in the elbows. Carol had fallen in love with that jacket the moment she’d seen it, with its sheepskin lining sure to keep him warm when out on Merle’s bike or out hunting. She’d known it had been made just for him.

“Carol …” he’d protested the moment he’d unwrapped it from its shiny silver paper. “I cain’t …”

She’d pressed a finger to his lips and shushed him. “You can, and you will. It’s rude not to accept a gift from your best friend. Now try it on. I can’t wait to see how it fits!” she’d gushed.

She’d been glad to have bought it a size too large. He’d needed the room to grow into it over the next two years. He cared for that jacket much like he did his crossbow, having another treasure to add to his meager collection. But what meant most to her was the time he spent teaching her how to shoot the recurve bow. She knew she’d never be as good as he was, but that didn’t matter to her. His time, his patience, his friendship … those were her greatest gifts.

Daryl slowed the bike, turning onto a long winding drive. She stared at the mailbox, even more confused, thinking he was taking her to someone’s home. “Daryl, where are we?! We don’t need to get in trouble for trespassing. Is this someone you know? Are we allowed to be here?” she asked, the anxiety showing clearly in her tone.

He shook his head, his shoulders shaking with mirth. “Carol, for fuck’s sake, would y’ calm
down? We ain’t gonna get in trouble for bein’ here.”

“Yeahhh,” she scoffed. “You said the same thing before when Mr. Dupuy was trying to shoot us full of rock salt that time we got caught in his pasture.”

“That was NOT my fault. That was Rick’s stupid ass claiming he could hypnotize that damn bull.”

Daryl still had the scar on his hip where the bull’s horn had caught him when he’d rushed out there to rescue his friend from being trampled. Her father had put six stitches into him that day and given them all a firm lecture of the merits of staying off of other people’s property. It wasn’t the first time she’d been thankful her father was a skilled surgeon.

He brought the bike to a stop before a modest cabin set back in the trees. It was lovely, she thought, climbing off and removing her helmet. It had a wide porch with a swing, and looked to have been repaired in several places, and the front and side yards looked to be freshly landscaped, several newly planted Cherokee rose bushes lining the front of the porch.

“Oh, Daryl … this is wonderful. Look at the roses!”

“Y’ really like it?” he asked uncertainly, wondering what she’d think of the inside.

“I love it. Who lives here?”

He grinned sheepishly, ducking his head at her praise. “Belonged t’ my granddad. When he died, he left it t’ Merle what with him bein’ th’ oldest.”

Carol gaped at him incredulously. “And you’re just showing me now?”

“Wanted t’ get it fixed up first. Merle’s been sendin’ me money t’ make the repairs. When he gets home next week, this is where he’s gonna be livin’ … where we’re gonna be livin’,” he amended. “I’ll be eighteen on Wednesday. I won’t have t’ live with Jackson anymore.”

Carol squealed as she launched herself into his arms. “Oh, my god, I’m so excited. It’s like all my prayers have been answered! Oh, Daryl!”

Daryl grunted as her body came in contact with his, a low pained hiss slowly whistling through his teeth, but he wouldn’t have let her go to save his life. The feeling of her pressed so tightly to him was a little slice of heaven, and he wished he could hold her there forever. Unfortunately, she pulled away all too soon, tugging on his hand and insisting he show her every inch of the cabin.

“I still don’t know how you could keep something like this from me. I really should be mad at you,” she said, her full lower lip pushed out in a moue of displeasure.

“I wanted t’ surprise y’. I mean … what if our plans had fallen through? I didn’t want y’ t’ be disappointed,” he mumbled defensively. “And besides, you’d have wanted t’ come out here with me an’ spend money on shit y’ thought we might need, an’ –“

“Stop,” she whispered, pressing a finger to his lips. “I understand you felt you needed to do this on your own.”

He hid his relieved smile by opening the door for her and flipping on the lights. “They came out today an’ turned on the electricity. Gas company’s bein’ a pain though. They cain’t get out here until Monday after next to turn it on. Guess we can use th’ camp stove ‘til then.”
Carol’s nose scrunched up in irritation. “You’d think they could get out here sooner. But at least —” her voice trailed away as her eyes lit on the coffee table where discarded bandage wrappers and medical tape next to the open first aid kit had been abandoned. A pillow and blanket were messily strewn over the sofa, as well. “Daryl, did you spend the night here?”

“Yeah … should’ve cleaned up this mornin’, but I didn’t want t’ be late pickin’ y’ up for school.”

She whirled around to face him, her eyes flashing hotly. “What happened? Where are you hurt?”

His stormy blue gaze found the source of her upset and he cursed. “Fuck! Y’ wasn’t supposed t’ see that.”

Carol was already pushing the jacket off his shoulders and draping it over the back of the sofa. “Strip! Don’t make me tell you twice, either.”

A shiver passed over his spine at her authoritative tone, what blood wasn’t heating his cheeks quickly rushing south. With the lurid thoughts he’d been entertaining lately, he didn’t know if he could bear having her hands on his bare skin. “Damnit, Carol, I’m fine!” he growled, pulling away from her.

“If there is a need for bandages, then you most assuredly are not fine, Daryl,” she hissed, her eyes narrowing dangerously. “What did he do this time?”

“You’re not gonna let this go, are y’?”

“When have I ever?” she countered just as heatedly.

“Ugh!” He pulled at the buttons on his maroon flannel shirt and tossed it aside before whipping the black t-shirt over his head. He looked away as she clenched her jaw, seeing the blood seeping through the bandage taped over the left side of his ribs.

Without another word, she led him to the sofa and made him lie down, her fingers gentle as she pulled back the bandage to reveal blood seeping around the butterfly bandages holding his torn skin together. She sniffled, and he cringed, watching her bite back the tears sparkling in her azure eyes. “You need stitches,” she muttered quietly. “Why didn’t you come to me last night? You always come to me when he hurts you.”

“Christ!” he hurled into the silence which had fallen between them. He pulled her into his arms, ignoring the pain in his ribs, trying to soothe her. No one ever got as upset as his girl when he had a run in with his father. “Don’t y’ ever get tired of havin’ t’ patch me up? Maybe … maybe I wanted t’ let y’ sleep last night without having t’ deal with my shit.”

“Bullshit!” she growled from the crook of his neck where he could feel her hot tears soaking his skin. “You’re scared one of these days I’m going to drive to your house and put an arrow in his ass.”

“That too.”

“Tell me what happened, Daryl,” she commanded gently, her thumb caressing the hollow of his throat as he continued to hold her.

Daryl sighed, shuddering at the memories so fresh in his mind. “I didn’t think he’d be home last night. Y’ know if he hasn’t stumbled in by midnight, he usually don’t come home at all. I
thought it was safe t’ go t’ bed. After studying last night, I came by here to do a little work … wanted t’ finish cleaning th’ floors at least, ’cause I knew I was gonna be bringin’ y’ out here today. He came in about one in the mornin’, ragin’ about god knows what. All I know is he kicked th’ door o’ my bedroom open, his belt already in his hand. Dragged me outta my room, screamin’ at me about mama, about Merle bein’ gone. I took a few hits t’ my back, but it wasn’t bad. It’s when I tried t’ get t’ th’ door … he grabbed my arm and swung me around. The belt buckle caught me in th’ ribs, tore me open. Didn’t think about nothin’ else … jus’ grabbed my boots by th’ door an’ brought th’ bike up here."

“Oh, Daryl,” she wept against his shoulder. “Please … please don’t go back there.”

It wasn’t the first time she’d begged him not to return to the only home he’d ever known, one filled with nothing but pain and scorn and torment. “It’s just a few more days, Carol. I can survive a few more days. ‘Sides, it helps he’s hardly ever there.”

She reared back, her face twisted in disgust for his sire. “He’s there enough to abuse you!”

“Don’t matter,” he mumbled, averting his gaze.

Carol reached for his chin, turning his head back in her direction and forcing him to meet her eyes. “Don’t give me that crap, Dixon! That’s Jackson talking. Stop letting him get in your head,” she hissed furiously. “Why can’t you see how amazing you are?” she added, her tone gentling. “You matter, Daryl … so much.”

He shook his head, needing to change the subject. “So … y’ jus’ gonna let me bleed here, or y’ gonna patch me up?”

Carol snorted and reached for the first aid kit. “Stubborn ass,” she grumbled, dousing his wound with disinfectant. “This is going to have to be stitched and I don’t have a suture kit with me. I cannot believe you went the entire day at school without telling me about this.”

“Jus’ use th’ butterfly tapes. Y’ can stitch me up when we get t’ your house if y’ want.”

“It’s not an issue of what I want, Daryl. It’s what you need,” she said, working to bind his wound as best she could with the supplies available. “This should hold until we get home.”

He sighed when she pushed his t-shirt into his hands. “Y’ always make it about what I need. What about what y’ need, Carol?”

Carol smiled at him, tenderness and love radiating from her entire face. “I already have everything I need, Daryl. I have wonderful friends, an amazing family … and you. I don’t need anything else.”

Chapter End Notes

A/n: Short update compared to what I usually write, but this chapter just felt right to end it here. I want to thank everyone for the overwhelming response to the last chapter. The feedback was so amazing! I had several readers ask for more flashbacks, and I’m going
to try to add as many as possible. I hope y’all like the one I added here. Can’t wait to hear what y’all think.
“Mom! We’re back,” Carol called as she breezed through the front door and hung her light denim jacket on the coat rack. Daryl hung his next to it as Francine Mason stuck her head out of the kitchen, her lovely face wreathed in smiles.

“Oh, good. Did y’all have fun?” she asked, moving back to the stove as the teens followed the heavenly aromas into the room.

Daryl nodded, reaching for a cookie. “Yes, ma’am.”

Carol gave him a sharp look, knowing he would pretend everything was fine to keep her mother from worrying. “We had a nice time, but I need Daddy … has he made it home from work? I know he had that procedure to do on Mrs. Keating, but I need him now,” she fairly growled, her fingers tight around Daryl’s wrist as they stood together at the island.

“Is everything alright?” Francine asked, shooting her a concerned glance.

“Mom!”

“He’s in his study, dear, but –“

Carol didn’t wait to hear what else she might have added, dragging Daryl from the room and down the hall to the den where her father had set up his home office.

He dug in his heels, forcing her to either stop or let go of his wrist. “Y’ were rude t’ your mama, Carol. Y’ couldn’t’ve waited two more seconds t’ hear what she was tellin’ y’?”

Daryl had a soft spot for her mother, always had. Carol pursed her lips and lowered her eyes with a sigh. “I’m sorry, I’m just anxious to get you patched up. Is that so wrong? I promise to apologize when we’re done.”

Her assurances seemed to mollify him, and he got his feet moving once again. She didn’t bother to knock as she hurried into the den. Her father was on the phone, and she knew better than to disturb him if he was in the middle of a call. She simply went to the large cabinet next to the stone hearth and began searching for the suture kit she needed.

William Mason narrowed his eyes on his daughter, wondering what had happened that she’d need medical supplies she couldn’t find in the first aid kit upstairs in her bathroom. “Evelyn, I’ll call you back … yes, just confirm the appointment with Mr. Matherne for next week and email the updated schedule through the end of the week … thank you, Evelyn … same to you, dear,” he said, hanging up with his secretary.

His gaze flitted between Carol and Daryl, and he sighed. “Carol Ann, what are you hunting for?”

She blushed and smiled at her father over her shoulder. “Um … just … I need a suture kit. That’s all,” she said, her eyes wide and innocent. Her eyes glittered dangerously when she heard
Daryl snorted. He loved to watch her try the innocent act with her father for the simple fact that it never worked. That man could see through her every time. Much like Daryl could himself. She was an open book to the two most important men in her life.

William arched a brow and crossed his arms over his chest, perching a hip against the solid oak desk. “And just why might you be needing a suture kit?”

“Because I need to sew something up?”

Her father shook his head and sighed. “Alright, which one of you are hurt?” he questioned, his eyes instantly searching out Daryl. He and Francine were all too aware of the boy’s home life. They’d begged him on more than one occasion to allow them to help him. They would have adopted him into their family in a heartbeat, but Daryl had always refused, too afraid of how Jackson would react to such a thing. And to protect him from his father’s wrath, they’d abided by his wishes against their better judgment.

Daryl looked away, chewing the inside of his lip as a fiery red settled into his cheeks. He refused to meet the doctor’s eyes, and William had his answer. “Son, you know you have nothing to fear here, nor anything for which you should be ashamed. You know you can trust me not to break your confidence. If you’re hurt, you need to allow me to help you,” he said gently.

Carol abandoned her spot before the cabinet and ventured over to Daryl’s side, her fingers brushing lightly at the back of his hand. His shoulders drooped in surrender, willing to give her whatever she wanted as long as she remained at his side. “Please, Daryl?”

Her softly uttered words and luminous blue eyes were his undoing. He averted his gaze, nodding in William’s direction as his fingers began working the buttons open on his shirt. William’s dark eyes shot to Carol as he jerked his head towards the cabinet, silently instructing her to gather the supplies he would need. He had no doubt she’d already tended his wound once that day.

“Go ahead and stretch out on the sofa, son, and we’ll have a look. Are you in any pain?”

“Nothin’ I can’t handle, sir,” Daryl murmured, lying down before he whipped his t-shirt over his head. William and Francine had never seen the scars littering his back, and he didn’t want the evidence of his abuse on display now either. “Took some aspirin earlier.”

William took a seat on the ottoman as Carol brought him the supplies on a metal tray, setting them next to him. She knelt beside the sofa near Daryl’s head and clasped his hand in hers, offering him comfort as well as support. Her father was a gifted heart surgeon, and was well equipped to handle whatever wounds Daryl might have, but he was nowhere near as gentle as Carol could be when she patched him up.

“I think he needs stitches, Daddy. That laceration has to be at least an inch and a half deep,” she informed him.

William peeled back the bandage and frowned at the bruising surrounding the deep cut. “How long ago did this happen?” he asked, dousing the wound with disinfectant and mopping up the excess with a gauze pad.

“Last night,” Carol replied.

“Carol Ann, the boy can answer for himself,” her father scolded. He removed the butterfly bandages and checked for infection before glancing over at her. “You did a good job cleaning this up, by the way.”
She beamed under his praise, but her focus was on Daryl. Her fingers carded through his hair and she couldn’t keep the worried knit from marring her smooth brow.

“I don’t think he’s going to need stitches. I’ll apply some antibiotic ointment and some steri-strips to keep it closed. It should heal well on its own. It will need to be cleaned every day to prevent infection, though.” He gave Daryl a stern look. “I’d like to get some x-rays of your ribs, but I’m assuming you won’t be agreeable to that, right?”

Daryl nodded. “Y’ know I hate hospitals, Dr. Mason.” He grunted as William worked to close the wound and cover it with sterile gauze and a semi-waterproof bandage.

“Daddy, be gentle. Can’t you see he’s hurting?” Carol frowned at him, not having missed the telltale grimace on Daryl’s features.

William chuckled. “Well, I’m trying to hurry before your mother barges in here demanding to know what’s going on.” He nodded at Daryl. “Go on and get dressed now, son. I know it’s pointless to ask for specifics, but you know we’re here for you if you need help.”

Daryl reached for his t-shirt, swatting Carol’s hands away as she tried to help him. “Damnit, Carol, I’m fine. Stop y’ damn hoverin’.”

William returned to him with a pill and a glass of water poured from the pitcher he kept on his desk. He was always amused at Carol’s tendency to hover protectively over her friend. Well … not so much her friend anymore, he observed. He recognized the love shining in her eyes every time she looked at Daryl because he saw the same look in her mother’s eyes when Francine looked at him. He’d known it was inevitable the two would fall in love someday. He just wondered when they’d stop dancing around one another and admit their feelings. Oy! What a mess.

“What’s that?” Daryl asked, eyeing the pill William held out to him.

“Just a mild painkiller. Your body will heal faster if it doesn’t have to battle the pain as well.” He rocked back on his heels, eyeing the boy, waiting for him to take the pill. “And you’ll be staying the night.” He held up a hand when Daryl opened his mouth to argue. “I won’t have you getting on that bike with that in your system.”

Carol smirked smugly, happy to have him away from Jackson for the night. She refused to acknowledge her own selfish need to have him close. “Good. We have studying to do anyway.”

Daryl nearly plowed into Carol’s back as they exited the den to find Francine waiting for them in the hall, hands planted on her hips and one auburn brow arched, her mouth set into a firm line of displeasure. “Carol Ann, I need help in the kitchen.”

Carol bit her lip, eyes wide. “Of course, Mom,” she agreed instantly.

She sniffed in irritation as her daughter passed on her way down the hall, but she had a smile for Daryl. “Daryl, dear, would you please set the table? Dinner will be ready in just a few moments.”

Carol was already working to transfer their dinner into serving dishes when her mother breezed into the room. “Carol Ann, what is going on? Why did you need your father so urgently?” she asked, her tone daring Carol to blow her off.

Carol’s answer came through clenched teeth. “Jackson hurt him again, Mom. I thought he was going to need stitches, but Daddy said they weren’t necessary.”
Francine braced a hand against the counter and lowered her head, her face blazing an angry shade of red. “That man! He’s going to burn in hell for what he’s put our poor boy through. This wasn’t supposed to be his fate, Carol. I promised Emma we’d watch out for Daryl, and I can’t help but feel we’ve failed him,” she said, her voice laden with unshed tears.

Carol abandoned the food, and wrapped her mother in a fierce hug. “No, Mom. We’ve done as much for him as he’d allow. He’s terrified of Jackson, what he would do to him if we brought child services into it. It could have been so much worse. At least when things get too bad, he comes to us. We have to be thankful for that.”

“Is it bad?”

Carol shook her head. “No, not too bad. He was able to get away before Jackson could do too much damage.” She brushed away her mother’s tears. “Now stop crying. You don’t want him to see your eyes all puffy. It’ll just make him feel worse to know I told you what happened and how upset it’s made you.”

“I love him, Carol, as if he were my own son. I just want him to be safe, happy,” Francine whispered so her voice wouldn’t carry to the dining room as she pressed a cool wet paper towel to her eyes. “Thank god he’s going to be eighteen next week.”

Carol nodded and began carrying food into the dining room, smiling at Daryl as he took the platter of roast chicken from her hands and set it in the center of the table. She went back into the kitchen for the bowl of baby red potatoes, carrots and onions her mother had baked with the chicken, while Daryl followed and carried out the peas and tureen of gravy. She hoped he’d share his good news with her parents, knowing it would put their minds at ease.

Once they were all seated, and Daryl was happily shoveling potatoes into his mouth, Francine turned her smile on him. “What would you like to do for your birthday next week, sweetheart?”

Daryl’s fork froze halfway to his mouth, a blush creeping into his cheeks. He hated the extra attention Carol’s mother showered on him every year when his birthday rolled around. “It’s on a Wednesday. Me an’ Carol will be studyin’.”

William snorted. “Son, you will not be studying on your birthday. The two of you can afford to take one night off.”

Daryl pushed the food around on his plate, his fork making patterns through his peas as he averted his gaze from the Masons. “Y’ don’t have t’ do nothin’ special for me.”

“Nonsense,” Francine chirped. “How about we go into Atlanta and go to that new Chinese restaurant that opened last month? Then maybe go see a movie?” She knew all too well of Daryl’s weakness for a good Chinese buffet.

Carol brightened, grinning at him as she wiped her mouth on her napkin before setting it back on her lap. “That’d be cool, right? There’s that new horror movie we’ve been wanting to see, or that Marvel movie Rick was talking about at lunch last week.”

His eyes darkened at the thought of watching a horror movie with Carol. The last one they’d watched together up in her room, she’d ended up on his lap, hiding her face in his neck. It had been all he could do to keep his libido from betraying him. “I dunno, maybe,” he replied, looking down at his plate and sucking in a deep breath.
Daryl nearly swallowed his tongue when Carol leaned over to whisper in his ear, her warm breath teasing his skin. “Are you going to tell them your news?”

What with wound care with Dr. Mason and Francine’s need to shower him with attention, he’d nearly forgotten about his upcoming plans. For the first time that evening, he shot them both a genuine smile. “I, uh … I got some news.”

William lowered his fork, giving him his full attention. “You got into Cornell,” he said, his face beaming with pride.

“Dad! It’s too early,” Carol groaned. Granted, it was the college they’d chosen both for Carol’s pre-med studies and Daryl’s veterinary program.

“Uh … no, sir,” Daryl stammered, feeling panic begin to rise at the talk of colleges. He still didn’t think he had what it took to get into such a prestigious school, much less the money needed to fund his education. Instead, he focused on his more immediate plans. “I’m movin’ next weekend. Merle inherited granddad’s cabin, an’ he’s been sendin’ me money to restore it so we can live there.”

“Oh, Daryl,” Francine gushed. “That’s the best news I’ve heard in weeks. What are his plans?”

He relaxed, feeling the tension bleed off his shoulders as he shared his small victory with them. “Jim is plannin’ t’ sell the garage, and Merle’s already contacted him. He put in a bid, an’ if all goes well, Merle will be th’ new owner. He wants t’ keep up with th’ regular business, but he also wants t’ build custom motorcycles. An’ th’ best part is that I’ll be free of Jackson.”

Francine sniffed, biting back happy tears. “It sounds as if the two of you have everything planned out. This is just wonderful. I’m so proud of Merle. He certainly has turned his life around for the better.” She could remember the troubled boy he’d been, turning to drugs and alcohol to drown his sorrow over his mother’s passing. After more than one stint in juvie and more trouble when he’d become an adult, he’d had no choice but to either join the military or go to jail. Merle had made the right decision, entering the service. It had put him on a better path and now things seemed to be looking up for Emma’s boys. And about time too, Francine thought.

Daryl went back to his dinner, pride welling in his chest at their obvious joy. Carol went on to tell her parents all about the cabin as Francine rose to fetch the cake she’d made for dessert. “You’ll have to ride out and see it, Daddy. It’s so quaint, so Dixon,” she chuckled, referring to the boys’ outdoorsy appeal rather than the stigma of their name. “And it’s got the most beautiful Cherokee rose bushes planted along the porch. There’s two bedrooms, a kitchen and living room … oh, and a swing on the porch. I can’t wait to sit out there in the fall. We can study or build a campfire and roast marshmallows …”

Daryl grinned at her enthusiasm for his new home, pleased she seemed to like it so much. He let her ramble on until their appetites were sated and the doorbell was ringing.

Francine shot a curious look towards the hall. “Carol, were you expecting company?”

“Crud! I nearly forgot … Rick, Glenn, Maggie and Lori are joining us tonight for our study session.”

Daryl rose from the table and began stacking dishes to carry into the kitchen, but Francine waved him off to follow Carol. “Go on, dear, I’ve got this.”

“I don’t mind helping, Mrs. Mason,” he argued. She had gone to the trouble to feed him, it
was the least he could do to help with the cleanup.

“William will help me. Y’all get to your studying.”

*.*.*

An hour later, ensconced in Carol’s room, Rick was scowling over at his friend. He still had six remaining Trig problems out of twenty and Daryl was finished, already reaching for the English essay he needed to finish. “Wait a minute,” he complained, chancea peek at Daryl’s paper Carol was looking over. “You didn’t show your work.”

Daryl yawned, feeling the effects of the pain pill William had given him. “I never show my work when we study, jus’ in class so Daniels don’t have a fit.”

“But … don’t you need to show your work to understand how to solve the equation?”

He arched a brow and smirked. “Nope. Do ‘em in my head.”

Rick stared at him incredulously before he threw his hands up in frustration and collapsed back with his head in Lori’s lap. “Oh, no, mister,” she scolded, pushing at his shoulders. “We’re here so you can glean some understanding of your failings. Now, get up and finish those problems Carol gave you to do.”

Maggie snorted as she looked over the same problems Glenn had just finished. At least he seemed to be getting better with all the effort he’d been making lately.

Rick glared at his girlfriend. “So bossy,” he grumbled, turning back to his work. He’d never really understood before just how smart Daryl was, and he had to admit he felt a little intimidated.

Carol didn’t fail to notice as Daryl rubbed his eyes for the third time in the last half hour. She took his binder from him and set it aside. Whatever work he did on his essay wouldn’t be up to his usual standards, not as tired as he was. “How about I quiz you on your World History notes? You still have time to finish the essay since it’s not due until next week.”

He handed her his notebook, the current lesson dog-eared and easy to find, before flopping over and laying his head in her lap. He sighed and closed his eyes as she carded her fingers though his hair with one hand while the other made little marks next to each question she asked. Lori looked up from the stack of college applications she was filling out to smile softly at the sight of them. Maggie noticed too, a playful gleam making her green eyes sparkle.

“Are you two really going to the Sadie Hawkins dance? Last year, we couldn’t drag y’all there for nothin’.” She was fishing for gossip, but as usual, Daryl was tight-lipped about their plans.

Carol looked over at her and shrugged. “Maybe …”

“Beth was all broken up when Daryl turned her down,” Maggie chuckled. “She had to ask Zach instead.”

Daryl yawned again and rolled over, on the verge of sleep as he pressed his face against Carol’s belly. He couldn’t give two shits who her sister asked to the dance as long as he didn’t have to go with her.
Carol ignored the heat climbing her neck at his intimate embrace and focused on the conversation with her friends. “Zach’s nice. She’ll have a nice time with him. Anyone’s better than Ed.”

Glenn closed his books and looked at his watch, needing to get home soon. “Going with the janitor would be better than going with that asshole.”

Carol looked over Rick’s Trig problems and began marking them with her red pen. “You did ok, Rick, but you’re going to need more practice,” she said with a sympathetic look. “You got ten out of twenty right. I’ll pencil you in for Tuesday’s study session.”

“Gawd, I’m never gonna get this!”

Lori ran her fingers through his dark curls and smiled. “Sure you will. Carol won’t let you flunk off the team.”

Maggie grimaced as she looked at the clock on Carol’s bedside table. “Is it really ten already? Daddy’s going to have kittens if I’m not home in an hour.” She packed up her books as Daryl rolled back over and cracked his eyes open. “Oh, Daryl, I almost forgot. Patricia had to take an extended leave from the clinic. The doctor is worried about her pregnancy and put her on bed rest.”

“And this means what t’ me?” he asked, his brow furrowing in confusion.

Maggie huffed. “It means … daddy is looking for a new veterinary assistant down at the clinic. It’s part time, and just think how working for him will look on your college applications.”

Daryl sat up, his head swimming both from the possibilities and the pain medication. “Seriously? Y’ think he’d hire me?”

“I know he would,” Maggie assured him. “Come by tomorrow after school and talk to him before you go in for work at the garage. I’ll bring an application to school so you can fill it out at lunch. It’ll save time so you won’t be late to work.”

“Thanks, Mags,” he said, not knowing what else to say in his shock.

Carol walked everyone out, leaving Daryl to think about this new opportunity and change into the sleeping pants he kept in a duffel bag in Carol’s closet. He’d started keeping spare clothes at her house years ago, never knowing when he’d need them. She was practically glowing with happiness when she returned.

“This has been one amazing day for you, Dixon,” she fairly purred as she grabbed her pjs and ducked into her en-suite bathroom to change, continuing their conversation when she came back into her room. She smiled proudly at him where he sat cross-legged on his side of the bed.

“Everything is falling into place with Merle, you’re turning eighteen next week and won’t have to put up with Jackson anymore, and now a job offer in your chosen profession.”

He peered up at her from beneath his lashes as she turned off the light and climbed into bed with him, laying on her side to face him. He picked at his cuticle until she tugged on his hand, coaxing him to lay down too. “It all seems too good t’ be true, Carol. I’m jus’ waitin’ for it all t’ be yanked outta my grasp.”

“It’s not. You deserve this, Daryl, more than anyone I know. You’ve worked so hard for so long … just accept it and be happy for once,” she whispered into the darkness, the only illumination that of the moon filtering through the lace curtains covering the windows.
Daryl stretched out on his stomach, more than a foot between them in the big bed. He sighed, trying to relax, reveling in her warm fingers twining with his. It was nothing new, but how they always drifted off to sleep. The only thing which could have made it better would have been the pleasure of dragging her into his arms. Yet, he would never overstep the boundaries established so long ago. Francine and William trusted him to sleep with Carol … sleep … the door wide open and space between them. He wouldn’t disrespect their rules. And neither would Carol. Besides, she didn’t see him as more than her friend. As long as she was with him, he would accept that. He couldn’t lose her … ever.

He contented himself, forcing his eyes to remain open until hers closed and her breathing evened out. Only then did he allow himself to brush a barely there kiss to her brow, his whispered words of love getting lost in the soft sound of her snuffles as his eyes closed in slumber, safe with his girl in a cocoon of warmth.

Chapter End Notes

A/n: Really hope you liked this one. I wanted to show a little of the relationship he has with her parents in contrast to what he has to endure in his relationship with his own father. And of course, some study time with their friends. Please review and let me know what you thought! *hugs* Oh, sorry no flashback this time. Next time for sure :D
William rested his chin on his wife’s shoulder and sighed as she sipped her morning coffee. It wasn’t even light outside yet, and she was standing in the doorway to Carol’s bedroom, her eyes focused on the children. “You know, Fran, it’s really creepy when you stand there and stare at them like that,” he teased her.

She passed him her cup and let her fingers tangle in his tie, quickly tying it before patting his chest affectionately. “No, it isn’t. There’s nothing wrong with a mother looking in on her children.” She took the cup back from him and once again peered at the sleeping pair. “I’d be willing to bet the only time our boy gets a decent night’s rest is when he’s here with us.”

The doctor nodded, leaning against the doorjamb. “Carol soothes him.”

“She does,” Francine agreed. “They’re going to make the most beautiful babies one day.”

William spluttered, and his wife turned hurriedly to clap a hand over his mouth before he woke them. He pulled it away with a glare. “I assure you, I am too young to be a grandfather,” he hissed.

Francine snorted. “I didn’t mean today, William. But haven’t you noticed how much in love they are? They try to pretend, but I can see. A mother always knows. I just wish they weren’t so stubborn and would just admit it to one another.”

Carol snuffled in her sleep and rolled over, her cheek pressing into the space over Daryl’s heart as her arm banded about his waist, seeking him out in the pre-dawn darkness. Francine nudged her husband with an elbow. “See what I mean?”

“Don’t push, Fran,” he warned in a husky whisper as he wrapped his arm around her shoulders and led her towards the stairs. “They’ll find the courage to tell each other eventually.”

* * *

He pushed through the foliage, bypassing a bracket of thorns, the sun beating down on his sunburned skin. He winced with every step he took, his feet torn and bloody from running through the woods without his boots. How long had he been lost? Surely, more than a week. Daryl still didn’t understand how he’d gotten so turned around he couldn’t find his way home. The forest was his solace, his home. Had his mind been so addled by the beating he’d taken, he couldn’t find his way? His fingertips brushed along the green and yellow fading bruise around his left eye before his hand fell to his side and clenched into a tight fist.

Merle had been carted off to juvie for breaking into a house with some older boys. He hadn’t been there to stop Jackson from beating him bloody. But he’d shown him, hadn’t he? He was fast when he needed to be, hightailing it into the woods without a backwards glance, without a
care that he was only wearing a pair of tattered jeans and his buck knife, his boots and shirt still in
his room from where he’d been dragged.

The old bastard was probably happy he was gone. God knew he wouldn’t have searched for
his youngest son. Daryl was on his own. But even at the young age of nine, he was still smarter
than his old man. He breathed a sigh of relief as familiar landmarks led him home through the
trees. One of Merle’s arrows lodged in the big oak, a pit he and his brother had dug, thinking they’d
be able to trap a chupacabra, the Tonka truck Carol had given him for his birthday, the bed filled
with dirt. Carol …

She was the reason he had fought so hard to make it back. He knew if anyone worried over
him, it was his dearest friend. The thought of her frantic and upset, his absence from school, a
missed playdate at the park … it had spurred him back in the direction of his own personal hell. He
couldn’t allow her to wait and wonder over what had happened to him another moment. She
deserved better than that. And boy, was she going to be furious. Just the thought had his lips
quivering up into the first smile he’d had in days. He was actually looking forward to the way her
eyes flashed with fire, and the color which would flood her cheeks. She was the prettiest little thing
and he knew he’d never tire of looking at her.

When he limped through the trees at the edge of the property his daddy owned, however, he
wasn’t expecting to see her sitting on the hood of her father’s car, her knees drawn up to her chest
and tears trekking over her face while Francine did her best to soothe her. He moved closer,
needing to comfort her, and her eyes fell upon him. Her face lit up brighter than the sun, and he
was so stunned, he couldn’t move, completely enraptured by the joy shining in her eyes.

She leapt from the hood of the car and ran to him, her slender little arms wrapping tightly
around his neck. Nothing in the wide world could have kept him from hugging her back. “Daryl!”
she cried, her tears heating his bare skin. She pulled back, taking him in, a sound of distress issuing
from her throat when she saw the sorry shape he was in.

Daryl hung his head, averting his eyes to his bare feet, unable to look into her eyes and see
the heartfelt emotion wringing from her. It was his fault she was so upset. He’d caused this.
Jackson was right. He was good for nothing but causing trouble. He could hear Francine on the
phone, calling William to come back to the car, telling him to call off the search because Daryl had
finally come home.

Francine knelt before him, uncaring if her nice pants were dirtied on the muddy ground. She
tugged him into her arms, her own eyes swimming with tears. “Oh, baby, I’m so glad you’re
alright. We were all so worried.”

He blushed to the roots of his dark blonde hair. She was still fawning over him when
William strode through the trees. He shrank into himself, seeing the weariness etched in the doctor’s
features, cringing away from him when William knelt at his side and roughly yanked him into his
arms. “Daryl … son, you can’t just run off like that. I don’t think I’ve ever been so scared in my
life,” he said, holding him tightly and rubbing soothing circles over his back. “Please, promise me
you won’t run again. If anything ever happened to you …”

Daryl couldn’t stop the tears. He wrapped his arms around William’s neck and wept. He’d
never had anyone but his mama make him feel as if he were worth anything, much less important.
This was how a father should be, he realized, not how Jackson was. “I promise,” he whispered
brokenly, hoping he’d be able to hold true to his word.

Francine fetched a blanket from the trunk of the car and William wrapped it around Daryl
before scooping him up in his arms and bundling him into the car. He wasn’t about to leave him
there when the boy was in desperate need of some TLC, which his family was more than capable of providing.

Carol was silent during the short car ride back home, simply sitting next to him, her hand like a steel vice around his fingers. Daryl wondered if she’d ever let go. He couldn’t have cared less. He was happiest when she held his hand, if he were honest with himself. She was his safe haven, had been for years, and he didn’t see that changing any time soon.

Daryl blushed a deep fiery red, and could feel his ears burning as Francine marched him to the bathroom the second they got home, running a bath and ordering him to scrub himself. He knew if he didn’t, she’d barge back in and do it herself. She’d warned him on more than one occasion when he and Carol had gotten particularly dirty. His sunburn hurt like the devil in the warm water, but he scrubbed every inch of himself until he felt brand new.

Both Carol and her mother were hovering outside the bathroom door when he emerged. Francine ushered him into Carol’s room where William was waiting for him, wanting to assess him. He was covered in poison oak rashes, and his feet were a mess, but thankfully the bruising around his eye was fading. Dr. Mason bandaged his feet after slathering a healthy amount of antibiotic ointment over the cuts and left him to the women’s tender mercies.

Francine fussied over him, laying out a pair of cotton sleeping pants and a t-shirt she kept there at the house for him before hurrying off to fix him something to eat. His stomach growled, imagining the delights which would come from her warm kitchen. No one cooked like Carol’s mother.

It was then, when he was finally starting to relax, that he noticed the heat emanating from Carol’s big blue eyes. Uh-oh! He didn’t hesitate to lay face down on her bed when she pointed her finger, not expecting him to disobey her. She could be so bossy sometimes, but he didn’t mind. She’d never do anything to hurt him. He flinched when she began to smear calamine lotion over the rashes littering his back, but eventually settled.

“I cannot believe you ran away, Daryl,” she hissed quietly, her sweet voice anxious and more than a little peeved. “What were you thinking?!”

He folded his arms and rested his head on them, closing his eyes as her gentle hands soothed him. “I was thinkin’ of gettin’ away from my daddy, Carol. What else was I s’posed t’ do? Stand there an’ let him kill me?”

“No,” she huffed, unaware of the smile curling his lips as he practically melted against her soft duvet. “You weren’t at school, and I thought you were sick. Daddy brought me to your house to check on you, but you weren’t home.”

Daryl glanced sharply at her over his shoulder. “Don’t ever go back there, Carol. I mean it! What if Jackson would’ve been there?!”

“I doubt he’s stupid enough to try something with my daddy.”

“Yeah, but if y’ come sniffin’ around, who y’ think he’s gonna take it out on?” he murmured lowly.

Carol gasped. “Crud! I didn’t even think of that. I was just so worried about you.” She paid particular attention to spreading lotion over a dark red rash on his lower back, lowering her head dolefully. “I thought he might’ve killed you.”
Again, he looked over his shoulder at her, his eyes soft. “I’m ok, Carol.”

And with that he saw the return of her temper. “Don’t give me that crap, Daryl Dixon! You were gone for eight days. Eight! We searched for you in those woods every day. And when you do show up, you’re sunburned, half naked, feet all bloody, starving … and don’t deny it! I can hear your stomach rumbling from here. Mama’s gonna be shoving food at you left and right.” She paused, not noticing the contented smile gracing his mouth. She put the cap back on the lotion and set it aside, flopping down next to him on the bed. When she clapsed his hand, he dragged it over to rest beneath his cheek. “Don’t ever do this again, Daryl. You can’t run off like that. If … If you need to run, to hide from Jackson … run to me.”

His head lifted, his brow furrowing. “You’d want me t’ come here?”

“Daryl,” she sighed, brushing the hair away from his eyes with her free hand. “You’re my best friend. Why wouldn’t I want you to come here and be with me? I’d have you live with us if you’d allow it. It’s not that far … what? … two miles at most between our houses? You hike that distance all the time. Or if you’re hurt and can’t come by foot, call me and I’ll send Mom or Dad to pick you up. I just can’t stand the thought of you lost and alone again.”

“If I agree, will y’ stop yellin’ at me?” he asked, his smirk accompanied by the arching of his brow.

“Maybe,” she countered, not making any promises.

“A’right. Next time, I’ll come here. Long as it’s ok with y’ parents.”

“They love you, Daryl. They would never turn you away.”

For the first time in over a week, he felt the tension bleed from his body. He closed his eyes and let the softness of her bed and the warmth of her hand soothe him. He was home. Home with his Carol, his best friend, his savior in so many ways. He’d do anything for her.

Carol …

*.*.*

Carol’s eyes cracked open at the sound of her name so close to her ear. Her breath hitched as Daryl’s arm tightened around her waist, dragging her back against his chest, his morning whiskers scratchy against her neck. His other arm was stretched out beneath her head, and her hand was engulfed in his. It wasn’t the first time she’d used his arm as a pillow. She remained still, listening to his breathing, and feeling the tension in his body. She knew he was dreaming, and she could only pray it wasn’t a nightmare.

Her face flooded with heat as his hips pressed against her, his morning wood hard and heavy against the crack of her ass. She bit her lip, thinking of what it would be like to be able to touch him, to show him with her tentative touch just how much she loved him, how much she wanted to be with him in every way. She tried to scoot away, to put a little distance between her and his erection, but he held her fast, his arm a band of steel around her, holding her in place. He was going to be so embarrassed if he woke to find them in such a compromising position.
Daryl hummed against her throat, burrowing further into the crook of her neck, and the vibration sent a wave of molten fire barreling through her body. Her heart thundered against her ribs, threatening to bruise her with its force. She would have given anything to know what haunted his dreams. Fighting against his hold, she turned over in his embrace and laid her hand against his cheek. “Daryl … Daryl, wake up,” she whispered, selfishly allowing him to grind against her again.

His eyes flew open, gazing down at her in confusion before they widened in horror and he catapulted himself from the bed. “Carol!” he gasped, snatching up a pillow and holding it over his groin.

She giggled, dispelling the awkwardness. “You can have the shower first if you want.”

Daryl peeked at her through his fringe of bangs. “Seriously? That’s all y’ got t’ say? I was gropin’ y’ in my sleep, woman!”

Carol smirked, waggling her brows at him. “Naughty dream, Dixon? Wouldn’t be the first time I woke to find you pressed to me like a second skin.”

He gaped at her, horrified at his own actions. The last thing he wanted was to be banished from her bed.

“Daryl, c’mon. You’re a teenager. It’s not unusual to have naughty dreams or wake up with a stiffie.” She giggled again and he threw the pillow at her, shaking his head as he stormed off towards the bathroom to shower and shave.

The moment the door closed behind him, she groaned and flopped back onto the bed. God, he was going to be the death of her yet, she thought. A wicked smile formed on her lips as she raised up on her elbows. It had been her name he’d been moaning in his sleep. Perhaps he did have feelings for her after all. She wondered how far she could push the boundaries with him. It was food for thought as she rose and laid out their clothes for the day. A clean pair of jeans, black t-shirt and navy button up for him, and a pencil skirt and lightweight navy sweater for her. It was Friday, one of the days he had to work at the garage. She could wear a skirt since she’d have to take her own car and wouldn’t be riding with him on the bike.

Her laptop dinged the moment she heard the shower cut off, and she couldn’t help but wonder who would be skyping her at such an early hour. She went to her desk, lifting the screen and tapping the connect icon to see Merle’s familiar grin smiling back at her.

“Hey there, lil sister! Didn’t wake y’, did I?”

Carol shot him a warm smile. “No, I was up.” She looked at the unfamiliar surroundings behind him. “Where are you? That doesn’t look like the communications tent.”

Daryl emerged from the bathroom, wrapped in a flannel robe, and peered over her shoulder. “Merle? What th’ hell, brother?”

The elder Dixon snorted. “Why am I not surprised t’ see y’ there with yer girl?” His gaze returned to Carol. “He fall asleep on y’ again studyin’?”

She smirked. “Something like that.”

Daryl pulled her spare desk chair close to hers and sat down. “Did y’ find out when y’ gonna be home?”

“That’s why I’m callin’. Got a transport out of Bagram, an’ now we’re at Ramstein Air
Force Base in Germany. Gonna be coolin’ our heels over th’ weekend. Should be back in th’ states Wednesday,” Merle grumbled. He’d have much rathered fly home commercially, but his CO had arranged military transport.

Daryl brightened. “So, you’ll be home for my birthday?”

“’Fraid not, baby brother. Once we get in, we have to be processed out. Then we’ll catch a bus from DC an’ be back in Senoia Friday evening.”

Carol could feel Daryl’s disappointment as if it were her own, but she kept her smile in place. “But once you’re back, you’ll be here to stay. It’ll be worth the aggravation.”

“Yeah, y’ right. Gonna call Jim in a bit, see if he’s had time t’ consider my offer for th’ garage.” His eyes were intense as he stared at his brother. “We’re gonna get through this, Daryl. We’re gonna make th’ name Dixon stand for somethin’. Jus’ keep doin’ what yer doin’. ” He shot a look at Carol as Daryl nodded. “Carol, keep him on th’ right track. He listens t’ y’ at least.”

“You know I will, Merle.”

“A’right, you two, my time’s up for chit chat.”

Carol smiled warmly. “You be safe, Merle. We can’t wait to see you!”

“Take care, darlin’! Daryl …”

“I know. Me too.”

The screen went back to the home page and Carol reached over to rub at his nape, soothing away some of the tension he carried with him. “One more week, Daryl. Then he’ll be home with you, a fresh start.”

He pulled her closer, burying his face against her shoulder. “I can do this,” he whispered, and she wondered if he were trying to convince her … or himself. She had every faith in him that he could do anything he set his mind to. He was the strongest man she knew aside from her own father, and she was so proud of him for what he’d endured, to come out on the other side, stronger and more resilient without losing the love and compassion his mother had instilled in his heart.

“Kids! Breakfast is almost ready. Get a move on or you’re going to be late,” Francine called up the stairs.

Daryl let her go and moved to the bed. “Carol, these ain’t my clothes,” he said, running a hand over the name brand jeans with the tags still on them.

Carol gathered up her own clothes to carry into the bathroom with her, but she paused to glance down at the tags. “They were in your duffel, Daryl, and they’re your size.”

“Your mama’s been shoppin’ for me again,” he groaned. “Told her t’ stop doin’ that shit!”

She tossed her long auburn mane over her shoulder as she flounced off towards the shower. “You know mama … there’s no stopping her when she gets it into her head to spoil us. Just get dressed and smile. Don’t let her know you’re upset about it.”

Daryl shook his head and discarded his robe, reveling in the feel of new clothes against his skin. But Carol was right. Though he didn’t like the idea of the Masons spending money on him, he’d never hurt Francine’s feelings by rejecting her gift. He loved her too much. He headed down
the stairs, knowing Carol would scold him if he waited for her, the smell of freshly baked cinnamon rolls making his mouth water.

* * *

Daryl shoveled another bite of leftover chicken into his mouth as he scribbled furiously at the paper before him. He’d nearly snatched the job application from Maggie’s hands when she’d handed it over at lunch, but damn if he could concentrate with the traffic moving back and forth around their table. He snarled at a cluster of girls headed his way and groaned, scooting his chair closer to Carol’s. Rick sat on the other side of her, his Trigonometry book open before him.

Before the girl could open her mouth, he barked out a firm “NO!” if the scowl on his face wasn’t enough to deter her. It had been like that all morning, girls seemingly appearing out of thin air,cornering him at the water fountain, at his locker, in between classes … all to ask him to that stupid dance. Apparently, they hadn’t gotten the message that he’d be going with Carol.

Maggie giggled as the girl and her friends hurried off. “What’s wrong, Dixon? Don’t like the attention?”

Daryl finished up the application and tucked it away in his backpack. “Y’ ever know me t’ date, Mags? This is th’ stupidest dance ever held in this school. Jus’ a way for girls t’ get th’ go ahead t’ nag boys they been crushin’ on or ruin relationships they already have because they want a bigger better deal. Don’t know why they’d even want t’ bother with me.”

“You’ll just never accept it that you’re a fine lookin’ man and girls swoon every time you walk past them. And being unattached is not helping matters none,” she said, sharing her words of wisdom.

“All I wanna do is get through this year, Maggie. I want t’ be done with it all,” he lamented, finishing up his meal so he could get to the dessert Francine had packed for them.

Maggie grinned at Lori as she rose from the table and smoothed a hand over the skirt of her cheerleading uniform. Glenn groaned, seeing the look in his girlfriend’s eyes. “Maggie … please don’t do something you’ll regret five minutes from now,” he pleaded with her.

“Pfft,” she scoffed. “I am not one for regrets and you know it.”

Carol leaned into Daryl’s side and dug her fork into the rich chocolate cake they were sharing. “This doesn’t bode well.”

Rick dropped a glob of jello on his Trig book as he watched Maggie climb up to stand in the center of their table. “Th’ hell?”

The oldest Greene girl cupped her hands around her mouth for maximum volume. “Attention, please!” The cafeteria fell into dead silence, the students all gaping at her. “Or rather … attention all dateless females,” she smirked. “Daryl Dixon is going to the Sadie Hawkins dance with Carol Mason. Rick Grimes is going with Lori Phillips, and Glenn Rhee is going with … me! So back the hell off! The next girl who even thinks of coming over here … well, I’m not going to be responsible for the tapioca pudding dumped in your bra. That is all!” She waved her hands for them to resume their lunch and hopped down.
“Oh, my gawd,” Daryl groaned, banging his head on the table. “I swear, Glenn, your girlfriend needs a fuckin’ muzzle,” he said over the roar of laughter from the boys in the room and the quiet hisses from the girls.

Carol continued to eat her cake, smiling mischievously at him. “Well, at least now you won’t have to worry about them pulling a sneak attack on you in the halls anymore.”

Daryl sighed.

Chapter End Notes

A/n: That flashback was almost the death of me. Arrow straight to the feels. I really hope y’all liked this one. Please review!
Daryl secured his backpack to the back of the bike with a bungie cord before wiping his sweaty palms on his jeans. The rest of the school day had gone surprisingly well … what with Maggie’s announcement and all. It had been a relief to be able to walk down the halls with Carol at his side without the odd female jumping out to ask him to the dance. He’d even been able to concentrate on the tests they’d taken in Economics and World History, pretty sure he’d aced both of them.

Carol set her backpack on the hood of her car, and reached up to straighten the collar of his shirt. “Don’t be nervous, ok? You’ve got this, Daryl.”

He took a deep breath, focusing on her words of encouragement. “Y’ think? I mean, what’s th’ worst that could happen? He could say no, right?”

“Exactly, but Maggie was very positive. You’re perfect for the job.”

Daryl averted his gaze, staring down at his feet as her hands continued to flutter over him. He could easily stand there all day and let her soothe him with her touch, but he didn’t have much time. “Gotta get goin’.”

“I know,” Carol sighed, wishing she could go with him for moral support. “Are you coming by the house after work tonight?”

He shook his head. “Cain’t. I wanna go by the cabin and start unpacking Merle’s stuff, have it all set up for when he gets home.”

“I think he’ll like that.”

“Oh, an’ I wanted t’ thank y’ …”

Carol tilted her head to the side, a quizzical smile gracing her lips. “For what?”

“For puttin’ up with all o’ Merle’s skyping. Y’ know without wifi, it’s hard t’ get a decent connection on my phone. If it wasn’t for y’ takin’ his calls an’ getting’ messages relayed between us, we wouldn’t have gotten this far,” he explained, his cheeks tinted a dusky rose. He wondered if he’d ever get used to having her selflessly do things for him, when his own father couldn’t care less about him.

“You don’t have to thank me. I’m always glad to help.” She glanced at her watch and grimaced. “You need to get going, though. Call me tonight and let me know how your interview turns out, ok?” He tensed as she leaned up on the balls of her feet and pressed a lingering kiss to his cheek, but she just smiled. “Good luck, Daryl.”

He stood stunned for a moment before she pulled away, his cheek tingling where her lips had been. But he couldn’t linger another minute, needing to get to the clinic before four. He mounted his bike as she stepped back, leaving his heart behind with her as he raced out of the student parking lot. Hopefully, he’d have some good news for her when he called.
Carol watched him until his bike disappeared down the street and out of sight. She knew Hershel would hire him. She hadn’t just been blowing smoke when she’d said he was perfect for the job. He was gentle and nurturing, and had a soft spot for animals, having rescued more than his fair share of strays over the years. There had even been a raccoon he’d nursed back to health before releasing it back into the forest. It was one of the reasons she’d encouraged him to seek a career as a vet.

She grabbed her backpack off the hood of her civic, turning to nearly plow into Ed Peletier’s chest. Carol had been so lost in thoughts of Daryl, she hadn’t heard him approach, sure he’d probably waited for Daryl to leave before sneaking up on her. She stumbled back, glaring icy blue daggers at the boy. “Damnit, Ed, you’re such a creeper! What the hell do you want?” she hissed angrily.

“Didn’t mean no harm, Carol Ann,” he murmured smoothly, smiling down at her. She felt the hair rise on the nape of her neck. “Just wanted to talk, s’all.”

Carol arched a dubious brow. “I have nothing to say to you, Ed,” she said, moving to step around him to get into her car.

Yet, he wasn’t to be deterred. “Heard you was tutoring Glenn and Rick. Wanted to know if maybe you’d help me out too. I’ve been having a rough time with Ms. Perkins’ English class.”

She didn’t even look at him as she fiddled with her keys. “Sorry, Ed. I only accept a select few into my tutoring sessions, and frankly, you’d be the last person I’d feel inclined to help.”

He tsked at her, his smarmy smile still in place, but she couldn’t help but notice a flash of anger in his eyes. “Like Dixon? What makes him so special, Carol? Don’t think I ain’t noticed the way he sniffs after you.”

She whirled around, her eyes narrowed dangerously, her features twisted in disgust for the boy standing before her. “Daryl’s my friend, Ed. Why wouldn’t I help him? And besides … our relationship is none of your concern. It’s no one’s concern but ours.”

He laughed, and the sound made her stomach churn with bile. “Are you really that blind? What would that trash from the wrong side of the tracks want with you, little rich girl? He’s tryin’ to improve his social standing, s’all. Figures if he gets in good with you, people will ignore where he comes from.”

Carol sucked in a sharp breath, her hands balled into fists at her side. Oh, how she wanted to plant one dead center of his nose. “Which goes to show just how little you know about him. Go the fuck away, Ed. There’s nothing for you here,” she fairly growled, her teeth clenched so hard, the muscle in her jaw ticked furiously.

His hand shot out, his meaty fingers wrapping around her upper arm so tightly, she was sure she would carry the bruises for weeks to come. “And maybe I’m just not the type to give up on something I want.”

“Why? Because I can see through you, Ed. You only want me so you can say you were the first boy in this school to date me.” She tried unsuccessfully to wrench her arm away, his grip too tight. “Not if you were the last boy on earth!” Her knee shot up hard into his groin as she planted both palms on his chest and pushed with all her might.

Ed howled in agony, stumbling back against Rick – who had come to see what the hell they’d been arguing about – his hands gripping his injured balls.
Rick spun him around and slammed him into the hood of Carol’s civic. “What the hell are you doing over here, Peletier? We’ve all warned you before to stay away from Carol and the rest of our girls. What’s it gonna take to get you to listen, huh?” he snarled into the boy’s face. “Maybe I need to go to Coach Williams and report you for harassment! It’ll look great to the scouts coming to see us next weekend to find out you’re a fucking stalker.”

He shoved Ed, sending him sprawling several feet from them to the pavement. Carol stood next to him, her arms wrapped around her middle. “He’s not worth it, Rick. Just let it go.”

“Let it go? He put his hands on you, Carol!” His fingers gently brushed against the finger marks Ed had left on her arm. “He’ll be lucky if Daryl doesn’t kill him when he sees this.”

Carol waved him off. She was going to have to be the one to talk Daryl off the ledge when he saw them, but it wouldn’t be the first time she’d had to make him see reason. “Don’t worry, I’ll talk to him. But no fighting,” she insisted. “You will not be kicked off the team for brawling with another teammate, and Daryl will not endanger his chances for a scholarship over this filth,” she sneered down at Ed. “I won’t let that happen.”

“Yeah, good luck with that.”

“Thanks. I have a feeling I’ll need it.”

* * *

Daryl picked at his cuticle as Hershel looked over his application. His chest hurt, anxiety building with the care the old man was taking with perusing the information he’d jotted down at lunch. He wasn’t worried about his current job. He’d worked for Jim for two years after school and on weekends, never having been late or missing a scheduled shift. That had to count for something, right? And he was sure his boss would give a good recommendation if Hershel thought to call and check up on him. Finally, the vet set the paper aside and smiled at Daryl.

“Everything looks good, son. I just have a few standard questions for you.” Hershel chuckled as Daryl fidgeted in his seat. “No need to be so nervous.”

“Sorry. I jus’ never expected for this opportunity t’ fall into my lap, sir,” Daryl muttered softly, trying to remember to breathe evenly.

“Daryl, I’ve known you for a long time. You’ve been a great friend to Maggie, and she speaks very highly of you. She’s told me all about your dreams to eventually become a veterinarian.”

Daryl gaped at him, heat rising to his cheeks.

“I’ve witnessed firsthand how you are with the animals when you come out to the farm, and I couldn’t ask for a better assistant to help me here at the clinic, what with Patricia on bed rest for the duration of her pregnancy. But tell me, son, why do you want to be a vet?”

Daryl felt the corner of his mouth lift in a tiny smile. “I love animals, always have. They don’t judge y’, for one. In a way, I can relate to them. They need a gentle hand, love, tenderness, a soft touch. You give an animal those things, an’ they’ll be your friend for life.” He didn’t realize he needed those things himself. “I jus’ want t’ help them, especially those who’ve been neglected or
abused. I want t’ show ‘em not everyone is bad.”

Hershel nodded, hearing the very things he’d felt himself when he’d decided he wanted to become a vet. “I will need you here every weekday from four to eight p.m. Will that be a problem for you?”

Daryl’s thoughts immediately went to Carol. They never got to work with their studying earlier than eight anyway, and he’d be able to be with her every day instead of just three times a week. “No, sir … no problem at all.”

“Then it looks as if I have a new assistant,” Hershel beamed at him, extending his hand for Daryl to shake.

“Seriously?! I got th’ job?” he asked incredulously.

“You can start on Monday.”

Daryl’s face lit up into a genuine smile, joy coursing through him. He shook Hershel’s hand exuberantly. “Thank you, sir. I won’t let you down.”

He was on cloud nine as he made his way out of the clinic and mounted his bike. He still had thirty minutes until he was due at the garage, and wanted to call Carol as soon as possible. He clicked her number – set to number one on his speed dial – and waited for her to answer.

“Hello?” she asked, her voice garbled around the cookie she’d just stuffed into her mouth. “Daryl?”

“Hey,” he answered, reveling in her voice washing over him.

“How’d it go?” she asked, anxious to hear about the interview. She could barely breathe from anticipation. “You got it, didn’t you?”

“I start on Monday,” he said and he knew she could hear the excitement in his voice. He had to move the phone away from his ear when her high-pitched squeal came over the line.

“I knew it! I knew you’d be a shoe in,” she exclaimed in her happiness. “I’m so excited for you, Daryl. You so deserve this.”

He sighed, feeling the adrenaline wearing off. “Yeah, now I just have to tell Jim. Cain’t imagine him being too happy about the short notice.”

“He’ll understand. You’re doing this for your future.”

“Shit! What am I gonna tell Merle?” he groaned. “I know he was expectin’ me t’ work with him there if he was able t’ buy th’ place.”

Carol nibbled her lip, hating to hear him so worried. “It’ll be ok, Daryl. We’ll wait until he finds out for sure if he gets the place, then we can tell him the news. He’ll understand.”

Daryl sighed, hoping she was right. They’d cross that bridge if and when they came to it. “There are some perks that come with th’ job, though. I’ll be makin’ more money, an’ my schedule is for weekdays only. We can study every day … if y’ want … instead of only Tuesday through Thursday.”

“This is going to be so awesome!” she gushed.
“Yeah,” he agreed before glancing down at his watch. “Hey, I gotta get t’ work.”

“Are you sure you can’t come over tonight?” she said, a pout heavy in her voice at the thought of spending the evening alone.

“I’m sure. Wanna get this done for my brother.”

“Call me before you go to bed, then?”

Daryl shivered, imagining how her sweet voice would sound, sleepy and warm. His own tone was husky when he agreed. “I will. An’ I don’t go into work until two tomorrow if y’ wanna do something in the mornin’.”

She instantly perked up. “Sounds like a plan, Dixon. I’ll let you go now so you can get to work. Have a good night.”

He chuckled. “I’ll try.”

He slipped the phone into the pocket of his jacket when the line went dead and started the bike. Things were looking up.

*. * *. *

It was past eleven when he finally pulled up before the cabin he shared with his father. He groaned as he killed the bike, seeing Jackson’s own bike parked in the driveway. Damnit! He really wasn’t in the mood to deal with his father. He was tired, having had to rebuild the fuel injection system on the suburban Mr. Lemoine had brought in that afternoon. All he wanted was to fall into bed and call Carol before he crashed.

He sat there a moment, lighting a cigarette and taking a long drag, letting the nicotine flood his system. Carol hated it when he smoked, but he needed it before having to walk into the house to deal with Jackson. He finished his smoke and climbed off the bike, crushing the butt beneath his boot heel. His hands trembled as he raked one through his hair. Maybe he should just go to Carol’s as she’d suggested. Hell, she’d practically pleaded with him to come to her house, but he didn’t want to take advantage of her parents’ hospitality. They already did so much for him.

Daryl climbed the few steps which carried him onto the porch, cursing under his breath as he forced himself to turn the doorknob. Jackson’s head turned, looking over his shoulder at his son from his reclined position on the ratty sofa.

“’Bout time y’ got yer ass home. Jim payin’ y’ for all that overtime?” the elder Dixon asked, his gaze returning to the television.

“Nah … met up with some friends after work,” he murmured, moving into the kitchen to grab a Coke from the refrigerator. He wasn’t about to tell his father about the cabin or the work he’d been putting in there to make the place into a home.

“Friends … pfft,” Jackson scoffed. “You’re a Dixon, boy. Dixon’s don’t have friends. Y’ bring home som’thin’ t’ eat? I’m starved!”

Daryl rolled his eyes. “Didn’t know if you’d be home tonight. Want me t’ fix y’ some
“leftovers?” he asked, keeping his voice low and neutral. The last thing he wanted was to get a beating for raising his voice to his father. “Think there’s some lasagna left.”

“Where th’ hell y’ get that fancy shit?”

Daryl bit down hard on his tongue. Jackson couldn’t know Francine was sending home tupperware containers full of her home cooked goodness. “I can cook. Learned last year in Home Ec.” He couldn’t bite back a grin as he remembered the class he’d shared with Carol and the messes they’d made before finally getting the hang of basic dishes.

“Well, then by all means, Martha Stewart, whip som’thin’ up fer us,” his father slurred. “Don’t know why y’ even bother with that school when y’ could be workin’ full time for Jim. Waste o’ time if y’ ask me. Not like y’ goin’ t’ college next fall.”

He clenched his fists as he set the timer on the microwave. He would be going to college if Carol had her way. He didn’t think he’d be able to swing it, just the tuition alone sent him into a full-blown panic attack, but she was determined to fill out an application for every scholarship there was, convinced there was one out there for him.

“All those uppity friends y’ claim t’ have will be goin’ away, leavin’ yer ass behind here. Then you’ll see, boy. There ain’t no future for y’ except at th’ garage. You’ll be a mechanic just like y’ was meant t’ be.”

Daryl grabbed a fresh beer from the fridge to go with the leftovers, making sure he put a fork in the container for his old man. He was so tempted to pretend to trip and dump every last bit of it in Jackson’s lap. But he restrained himself. He didn’t want to pick Carol up in the morning sporting a black eye. She would not be pleased.

Jackson sneered at him as he took the food, sitting back and digging in with relish. Daryl left him there, stalking out of the living room and down the hall to his room, shutting the door behind him with a soft click. He flopped over on the bed and pulled the phone from his pocket, not even bothering to remove his boots. His father might be in a better mood than usual, but it didn’t guarantee he wouldn’t fly into a rage at some imagined slight and try to take it out on his youngest son. Daryl wouldn’t let himself get caught unawares again. He stared at the screen of his iPhone, a gift from Carol’s parent last Christmas. He couldn’t call her, not wanting Jackson to hear him talking. He’d have to settle for texting.

He already had several. One from Rick asking him to call when he could, another from Francine, asking what type of cake he wanted her to make for his birthday. He texted Rick first, promising to get in touch first thing in the morning. He probably wanted to give him highlights from the game. Next, he replied to Francine … *y’ ain’t gotta make me nothing, but if y’ insist, I’d love a Butterfinger cake :)*

Daryl saved the best for last … the one from his girl. *I’m so bored. I was thinking of coming down to the shop to keep you company, but I didn’t want to distract you. Call me later. C.*

He typed out a quick response. *Had a new order come in. Could have used a distraction ;) Can’t call. Jackson’s home tonight. Don’t want him t’ hear me talking.*

She must’ve been waiting for his call, because she answered immediately. *Come over. I don’t want you to stay there with him.*

Daryl sighed, hating to make her worry. *I’m fine, Carol. Want t’ come out t’ th’ cabin in th’ mornin’? We could maybe go huntin’ out on th’ back o’ th’ property. If we get a rabbit, I’ll build y’
Sounds perfect. Too bad I'm not going to get a wink of sleep thinking of what he might do to you in the middle of the night!

Carol …

I’m coming over.

He sat bolt upright in bed, the breath freezing in his lungs. No!

Why not? I’m not scared of him.

I don’t want y’ ass nowhere near him, that’s why!

Daryl …

No! I … Carol, please. Don’t do this t’ me, he pleaded, feeling the panic rise behind his breastbone.

Fine!

He could imagine the tight set of her jaw and the fire flashing in her eyes. I’ll be over first thing in th’ morning … promise. Try t’ sleep.

:(

Don’t give me that shit, Carol.

Be safe?

Promise. I’ll see y’ tomorrow.

I miss you.

Daryl stared down at the phone, his heart fluttering. She’d never texted that before, and he didn’t know how to respond. ‘Night, Carol.

G’night, Daryl.

He tucked his phone back into his pocket. If he had to run, he wasn’t going to leave it where Jackson could find it. He already felt like shit. He couldn’t stand to know how his girl was suffering. His sweet Carol didn’t deserve the anxiety he put her through. But it wouldn’t be for much longer. He closed his eyes, weariness dragging them down. He couldn’t afford to fall asleep, not before he knew for sure if Jackson had succumbed to his usual drunken stupor.

But his exhaustion wasn’t giving him much of a choice. Daryl knew it was going to be a bad night when he felt his mind slip into memories of the past, morphing into a nightmare from which there was no escape.

Jackson’s lip curled as he sneered at his youngest son. Merle was off god only knew where, unable to face his family, taking off on his bike from the gravesite where they’d just laid what remained of Emma Dixon to rest. He blamed her for the run-down shithole he’d barely managed to buy, their old trailer burnt down to ash. He’d watched the Masons fawn over Daryl, giving him
comfort, their daughter never leaving Daryl’s side, her hand clasped tightly in his.

The boy had followed his father into the room, sitting down on the sofa, his eyes red-rimmed from crying. “Suck that shit up, boy. She’s gone. Ain’t no amount o’ tears gonna bring her back,” he growled.

Daryl peered up at his father through his fringe of blond bangs. He trembled, wishing he could have gone home with Carol and her parents. Merle had left him, and he couldn’t remember ever feeling so alone. What was he going to do without his sweet mama?

He jumped as Jackson reached out and slammed his hand on the coffee table, garnering his attention. His wide frightened blue eyes meeting his father’s malevolent gaze, forcing him to flinch back. “What were y’ doin’ with th’ doctor an’ his wife? Bad enough yer mama was always hangin’ out at that bakery with her. Y’ think y’ mean som’thin’ t’ those people? What are y’ … stupid?”

“C-Carol’s mom an’ dad are nice t’ me,” he said, his voice barely a whisper.

Jackson snorted. “S’that right? They ain’t bein’ nice, boy. That’s pity.”

“It’s not! Carol wants me t’ come live with her now.”

Jackson’s hand shot out, a backhand slap which knocked Daryl to the floor. “Course they do! If th’ state takes y’ away, they’ll pay them t’ take y’ in. Well, lemme tell y’ boy. That shit ain’t happenin’!”

“Why?!” Daryl cried, his chin raised in a rare show of defiance. “Y’ don’t want me. Y’ never wanted me! Why not let me –“

Jackson cut him off, slapping him again. Daryl curled back against the sofa, raising his arms to cover his head, fighting back tears of hopelessness. His tears would only make it worse. “Fuckin’ useless. You’re worthless, boy! Y’ think I’ma let the state welfare come in here an’ take what’s mine, give y’ t’ them uppity rich folk an’ let y’ think you’re more than what y’ are? Over my dead body!”

Daryl cowered back further, pushing his thin little body tightly against the sofa, praying his daddy would just leave him be, praying for Merle to come home and take him away, praying for his head to stop spinning so he could somehow crawl to the relative safety of his room.

Jackson crouched down in front of his son and sneered again, but this time, Daryl could see the mad gleam lighting his eyes. “Better think long an’ hard ‘bout what’s more important, boy. Be a shame t’ see that doctor man meet with an accident. It’d be all yer fault if that little girl had t’ grow up without her daddy.”

Daryl paled, the image of Carol weeping over her daddy’s grave – much as he’d done only hours ago over his mother’s – sent panic spiraling through him. Carol had a good daddy … the best daddy ever. He couldn’t be responsible for her losing him. No matter how much he wanted to be sent to live with her family. No … his friend was more important than his selfish need to be free of his father.

“Please … please don’t hurt him,” he pleaded, feeling the tears slip over his lashes. “I promise I’ll be good. Just … please don’t take Carol’s daddy from her.”

“All depends on you, boy. Don’t give me a reason.”
Daryl’s eyes shot open, panting breaths the only sound in the silence of his room. Fuck! He hated that dream … that memory … more than any other. He raked a hand through his messy hair and tried to bring his breathing back under his control. Five more days. Five more days and he’d be free. Free of the hell he’d lived for eighteen years. Free of the monster. Free of his tormentor.

Chapter End Notes

A/n: Why do I put myself through this? Gawd! Please review and tell me what you thought. *hugs*
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Daryl cracked the door of the bathroom, and peered out, his ears perked for any sound. He could have gone to the cabin and taken a shower there, but the hot water heater was gas-powered, and he was still waiting on the technician to come out and turn the gas on. He hadn’t relished the thought of a cold shower to start his day. He’d pulled on a clean pair of olive green cargos and a black t-shirt, it still being warm for late September.

The timer on the coffee pot was responsible for the heady aroma of one hundred percent Columbian, and he perked up, imagining the caffeine flooding through his system. His boots were nearly silent on the bare wood floors as he made his way to the kitchen. The television was dark and the sofa lay abandoned, his father having turned it off sometime in the night to stumble his way to his bedroom. If he was lucky, he could have his coffee and slip from the house before Jackson awoke.

But when had Daryl ever had anything but bad luck? He bit back a groan as he entered the kitchen to see his father sitting at the stained formica-topped table, holding his head in one hand and sipping a mug of rich black coffee. Fuckkkkk! He averted his gaze, his head dipping towards his chest as he silently padded to the coffee maker and poured his own cup. Dealing with Jackson nursing a hangover was nearly as bad as dealing with Jackson high or drunk. Almost.

“Whatcha doin’ up so early, boy? Garage don’t open ‘til nine,” his father growled, holding out his mug for Daryl to refill.

Daryl ignored the tremors in his hands as he poured more of the brew into Jackson’s mug. “Got some stuff t’ do before work,” he said evasively.

Jackson snorted. “Yeah, well y’ can put a hold on yer ‘stuff’,” he sneered. “Y’ need t’ get yer ass down t’ the supermarket an’ get some groceries. Ain’t a goddamn thing t’ eat in this house.”

Daryl leaned back against the kitchen counter and bit back a curse. This was going to throw off his plans with Carol and nothing could have pissed him off more. “Fine … gimme the food stamp card and I’ll take care o’ that first. Anythin’ particular y’ want me t’ buy?” He was trying to keep his tone level, hiding away the anger burning hotly through his veins.

“There ain’t no money left on th’ card. Traded it for some cash,” Jackson growled, not a bit of remorse evident in his tone.

Daryl lost his shit. “What?! How y’ expect me t’ buy food without it? Damnit! That was s’posed t’ last us through th’ end o’ th’ month!”

Jackson shot up from the table, backhanding his youngest son and sending him back into the counter. “Don’cha get lippy with me, boy! Y’ forget who th’ hell y’ talkin’ to? Y’ got a job. Ain’t like y’ ain’t got some money stashed away.”

Daryl ignored the blinding pain in his cheek as his tongue swiped over his split lip. He eyed his father, wondering if he could make it around him to the door before Jackson could lay hands on him again.
But apparently, his father felt he’d gotten his point across. “I’ll be gone most o’ th’ day, meetin’ some o’ th’ boys. But there’d better be food in that refrigerator when I get home, boy. If there ain’t, we’re gonna have a problem.”

Daryl nodded and backed away from Jackson, edging his way to the front door and grabbing the keys to his truck from the side table. If he hadn’t been pissed before, he was now. He’d have to take the truck instead of the bike. He wouldn’t have the pleasure of having Carol molded to his back when they rode out to the cabin. He cursed a blue streak all the way out to the front yard where his ancient pickup was parked. It had a few holes in the bed where rust had waged war on it, and four bald tires, but the engine purred like a goddess when he fired it up.

He’d made it halfway to Carol’s when he remembered he needed to call Rick. He sure as hell wasn’t going to the market without her. He wasn’t going to lose a moment of his time with her because of Jackson’s bullshit. Rick answered on the third ring, his voice sleepy and muffled. Daryl snorted, imagining his friend’s face buried in his pillow. Rick never had been a morning person … especially on a Saturday.

“Don’t tell me y’ still in the damn bed,” he barked, feeling some of his anger ebbing away. “It’s already past seven!”

“What the hell, Dixon?! It’s the weekend. There is something so wrong about being up this early,” Rick groaned.

Daryl hid a chuckle, shaking his head. “Y’ asked me t’ call, remember? What’s up?”

“How’d the interview go?” he asked, and Daryl could hear the opening of the refrigerator and the pop top of a soda. He grimaced, wondering – not for the first time – how anyone could guzzle soda first thing in the morning.

“I got the job. Start on Monday,” he replied, unable to keep the pride from seeping into his tone.

“Man, that’s awesome! Congratulations!”

Daryl turned onto Main Street and slowed to the posted speed limit. “I know y’ didn’t want me t’ call just so y’ could ask about th’ interview. What’s goin’ on, Grimes?”

Rick sighed. “Y’ talk to Carol? She tell you what happened after you left for the clinic?”

He slammed his foot on the brake to avoid running a red light, his heart thundering in his chest. “NO! What th’ hell y’ talkin’ about? She ain’t said shit t’ me.”

There was a further pause which didn’t help his anxiety one bit. “Maybe I shouldn’t say anything until you’ve talked to her.”

Daryl pounded the steering wheel with his fist. “RICK! Don’t make me drive t’ your house an’ beat your ass. I got plans today.”

“Alright, alright,” Rick said defensively. “Ed cornered her by her car as she was getting ready to leave. They were arguing, and by the time I got over there to see what was up, he had his hand wrapped around her arm. He put his hands on her, Dixon!”

“Is she ok?!” Daryl asked, feeling the air freeze in his lungs. He pulled the truck to the curb in front of the pharmacy, afraid if he didn’t calm down he was going to wreck.
“Yeah, I was just in time to see her knee the bastard in the balls. I warned him again to stay away from our girls, but the bastard ain’t the listening type. Carol said she’d talk to you about it, but she don’t want any of us fighting. She’s scared I’m going to get kicked off the team, and she don’t want anything to mar your perfect record and screw up your chances of getting a scholarship.”

Daryl ran a hand over his face, trying to get himself under control. “Fuck me sideways! I’m gonna kill that son of a bitch!”

Rick chuckled at Daryl’s choice of expletives. “You go after Peletier, you call me. You ain’t doing this alone, Daryl. Me and Glenn have your back. Though, frankly, I’m more worried about what Maggie might do when she finds out.”

Daryl gnashed his teeth, his anger building. Rick was good in a fight, but he didn’t know what the hell he thought Glenn would be able to do. Glenn was the most level-headed out of the three. Though he could be quite fierce if he thought one of the girls was being threatened. “I’ll let y’ know.”

It was another ten minutes before he felt as if he’d be able to drive again, pulling away from the curb and making his way to the sprawling house on Edgecombe where the Masons lived. He parked on the street, not wanting to block the driveway, and stormed towards the front door. His hand was lifted to knock when the door opened and Francine took a step back.

“Daryl, sweetheart!” She pulled him into the house and enveloped him in a warm hug. She pulled back, the smile dropping from her face as she took in the bruise on his cheek and his busted lip. “Oh, honey, what happened?”

He thought quickly. “Sleep walkin’,” he mumbled. “Walked into a door. Carol up yet?”

She didn’t believe his excuse, storm clouds building behind her azure eyes, but she didn’t call him on it. “Yes, she’s out on the patio drinking her coffee. I have to run out to the bakery, but there’s breakfast in the kitchen if you’re hungry, and William is in his man-cave if you need to talk to him.”

Daryl mumbled a thank you, and she closed the door behind her as she left, promising to be back in a few hours. He stalked past William’s study and out the open french doors to find Carol reclined on one of the chaise lounge chairs next to the covered pool.

He stopped next to her, and grimaced. “Y’ look like shit, woman!”

Carol’s eyes flew open, wide and startled before they narrowed on him. “Good morning to you too, Daryl. What the hell happened to your face?!” She shot up out of her chair, coffee cup forgotten on the small table as she gently gripped his chin, turning his face from side to side for her inspection.

Daryl jerked his head out of her hand and glowered at her. “Ain’t nothin’. Had an argument this mornin’ about groceries. Th’ fucker traded our food stamps for cash … no doubt so he could score meth or some shit. He expects me t’ go grocery shopping this mornin’ which totally screws up our plans for th’ day,” he growled, pacing back and forth in his upset. “An’ then it jus’ got worse. Talked t’ Rick on th’ way here, an’ he told me y’ had a fight with Ed th’ second my back was turned!”

Carol paled. “I was going to tell you.”

“When?!” ‘Cause y’ didn’t say shit t’ me yesterday when I called.” He pushed her light
cardigan off her shoulders, feeling rage explode in his head as he viewed the finger marks Peletier had left on her ivory skin. “I’ll fuckin’ gut th’ bastard for layin’ hands on y’. An’ I know th’ perfect place t’ hide th’ body.”

She took advantage of his distraction and leaned in, wrapping her arms around his waist and burrowing into his chest. “Stop!” she said, her voice muffled against his shirt. “I’m not going to allow you to do anything to ruin your future, Daryl. I handled it, just like you taught me.”

His arms rose, crushing her slender body against him, burying his face in her fragrant curls. “I ain’t gonna let him hurt you, Carol.”

Carol shrugged. “It’s not as if he’s able to catch me alone very often. I’m either with you or one of our friends. I’ll be extra careful, but you have to promise me you won’t do anything.”

“Carol …”

“I mean it, Daryl. Promise me.”

“No!” He had no fucks to give about his own well-being, but he’d be damned if he let his girl come to harm. “He’s going t’ pay for leavin’ marks on y’.”

Carol sighed, her arms tightening around him. She knew there was no talking him out of his anger. He would need to be distracted. “So … we’re going shopping this morning instead of hunting?”

He raked a hand through his messy hair as she pulled out of his embrace. “Yeah. I’m tryin’ t’ keep things calm. I only got five more days ‘til I’m free. I’m so pissed though. Cain’t believe he squandered our food money.”

Her lip curled at the thought of his father. “Well, it’s not like this is the first time he’s done this. Don’t worry, we’ll hit the Kroger and get this done. Shouldn’t take more than an hour. Just give me a minute to get dressed.”

Daryl watched her go, finding his way to the kitchen for another cup of coffee. A covered plate sat on the stove with a post it note stuck to the foil, his name in neat block letters. Of course, Francine had known he’d be coming by to pick up Carol and had set it aside for him. He chucked the foil and grinned, inhaling deeply the aroma of bacon, eggs and two fluffy cinnamon rolls, maple icing dripping down the sides. *Fuck you, Jackson,* he thought maliciously as he dug into the food his surrogate mother had made for him.

He had just stuffed the last bite of gooey sweetness into his mouth when Carol breezed into the kitchen, freshly showered. Her auburn curls were drawn back into a ponytail, and the black cashmere sweater and jeans she’d chosen hugged her curves. She sat down on a stool at the island next to him to pull on her boots. He felt himself tense at the playful gleam in her eyes.

Carol reached out, her thumb brushing over his lower lip to swipe up a drop of icing he’d missed. But instead of taking the napkin he offered her, she popped her thumb into her mouth, sucking at the sweetness. *Dear god, she was going to be the death of him,* he thought, biting back a groan as heat surged south to his groin. *What the hell was she thinking?*

“Ready to go?” she purred, her pearly teeth sinking into her lower lip.

“Um …”

She didn’t wait, prancing off into the hall to grab her purse. He shook his head and adjusted
his pants. “Fuck! It’s gonna be a long damn day.” Especially when she had him befuddled with her behavior.

“Daryl! C’mon!”

* * *

“Seriously? You bypassed the fruits and vegetables and the meat counter in favor of frozen foods? I know you can cook, Daryl,” she chided him gently, sipping at her coffee and following him as he pushed the cart down the aisle. He was thankful there was a small coffee shop near the entrance of the supermarket so he hadn’t had to stop on the way for her caffeine fix.

“I don’t give a rat’s ass if Jackson has a well-balanced diet. Hope he fuckin’ chokes on this shit,” he growled, loading the cart with a variety of TV dinners, microwave meals and toaster waffles. He was in a hurry now, still needing to run by his house to drop off what he’d bought.

Carol linked her arm through his, resting her head on his shoulder as they made their way towards the checkout. He didn’t miss her wide yawn. “Did y’ sleep at all last night? Y’ look dead on your feet.”

“Maybe an hour or two,” she said, moving away to help him stack the groceries on the conveyor belt so the cashier could begin ringing them up. “Not my fault I sleep better when you spend the night.” She sighed. “There’s just something about knowing you’re safe which makes me have the sweetest dreams.”

“S’pose I’ll have to come over after work tonight t’ make sure your ass gets some rest, huh?”

Her face lit up in the brightest smile, and he felt his belly somersault. “Really? I told mom I’d pull a shift at the bakery this afternoon, so I’ll bring home something sweet to show my thanks.”

“Y’ ain’t got t’ bribe me, Carol.”

She leaned over, her lips close to his ear. “I know, Daryl, but there’s nothing saying I can’t show my … appreciation.”

Fuckin’ hellfire!

He paid the bill, grimacing at the chunk of change leaving his wallet. He comforted himself, knowing by the end of next week, he’d be buying his own groceries and Jackson could go straight to hell. With Merle pitching in and the extra money he’d be making at the vet clinic, it would go a long way towards their fresh start. Carol pitched her to-go cup in the trash on the way out of the store, and he followed her out to the truck, his eyes admiring as they settled on her heart-shaped ass showcased in her tight jeans. The whimper which escaped his throat rapidly morphed into a cough as she arched a brow in his direction.

“Are we still going out to the cabin?” she asked, rounding the truck to get in on the passenger side.

Daryl nodded. “Yeah, we still got time.”

It didn’t take them long to reach his house, and he breathed a sigh of relief to see Jackson’s
bike missing from the yard. He never would have brought Carol out there with him if he’d thought his father would be there. Still, he rushed her through unloading everything into the freezer. When they were done, he yanked on her hand, dragging her quickly towards the front door, anxious to be gone.

She stopped him on the front porch, cradling his face in her hands and pressing her brow to his. “Breathe, Daryl. Take a deep breath for me,” she cooed, her voice a velvet caress. The creeping darkness at the edge of his vision receding as he obeyed. His girl understood all too well how much he feared her ever coming in contact with his father, and she was the only person in existence able to soothe him. Her fingers kneaded at his nape, and he slowly felt the tension bleed off his body.

*.*.*

Carol stretched, arching her back as they pulled up before Daryl’s new home. Her head rolled across the back of the seat as she met his gaze. He was relaxed now, his eyes a light cerulean blue, the usual storm clouds which usually churned behind the irises absent for once. But best of all was the proud smile he wore as he looked through the windshield at the cabin. He was happy. “So what y’ wanna do today since we ain’t got time t’ go huntin’?”

She tilted her head to the side and pursed her lips. “I think first, we need to change your bandage because I’m sure you didn’t do it last night when you got home. Then I want to explore the cabin since I didn’t really get a chance last time you brought me out here.”

He ducked his head sheepishly, giving confirmation to her suspicions. “’Aright,” he nodded, getting out and reaching back in to haul her out through his open door. “But don’t expect too much. There’s still stuff I need t’ get. Merle said I could use his debit card, but I’m holdin’ off ‘til I can find th’ right price for appliances and shit.”

Carol started off towards the cabin, stopping to lean over and smell one particularly lovely rose next to the steps. “It doesn’t matter, Daryl. This is a Jackson free zone,” she announced sagely, “which makes it perfect already.”

She made quick work of changing his bandage, pleased his wound seemed to show no signs of infection. And this time, she watched him closely, watching him nibble his lip, his eyes darkening as her hands lingered longer on his skin. She couldn’t miss the hunger in his gaze, and her heartrate picked up to see her suspicions confirmed. He did want her after all. But did he love her as she loved him? She didn’t think it would be about sex with him. Not her Daryl. Now she just had to pick her moment.

He seemed relieved when she was done and he could show her around. He would have been appalled at the mental list she was compiling as he led her from room to room, saving his bedroom for last. The gas stove had seen better days, as had the refrigerator. It made a god-awful noise, the motor clearly just biding its time before it decided to groan its last. Merle’s room was the only one which looked homey, though he’d promised it wouldn’t look that way five minutes after his brother took up residence. The living room furniture looked as if it had been rescued from the side of the road, but she could see how much effort Daryl had afforded to clean it up. She absolutely adored the stone hearth against the back wall, but he would have likely swallowed his tongue if he could be privy to her thoughts. They were in no way PG as she imagined seducing him before a roaring fire.
Daryl groaned when he opened his bedroom door and her face fell. “I usually sleep on th’ couch when I spend th’ night here. I’m kinda scared t’ try an’ get my bed jus’ yet. Don’t want Jackson t’ know what I’m plannin’ yet.” He brightened though, when her gaze stared admiringly at the antique dresser in the corner next to the closet, a large beveled glass mirror at its center. “I found that piece at a garage sale last weekend. It was a mess, but a little stain fixed her right up.”

“It’s beautiful,” she murmured. “And at least now I know what we’ll be doing today?”

He stared at her, a puzzled frown dragging his lips down. “Yeah?”

Carol nodded, one auburn brow arched as she grinned. “Yep. We’re going bed shopping.”

Daryl shook his head, crossing his arms stubbornly over his chest. “Ain’t got money for a new bed when th’ one I got is still good.”

She snorted, grabbing his hand and dragging him out of the room. “Please,” she scoffed. “How many times have I had to rub the stiffness out of your back because you complained about that lumpy mattress? Besides, this way you won’t have to worry about Jackson finding out anything before you’re ready. How much do you have saved up?”

“I dunno … ‘bout five hundred, I guess. Not enough for a good bed,” he argued.

She mock gasped, clasping her hands beneath her chin as her eyes sparkled with mischief. “Then aren’t you in luck, Mr. Dixon. I happen to know a furniture store in Peachtree City with very affordable prices.”

“Carol …”

“Oh, I just love shopping for furniture!” she cried happily, bounding down the steps and towards his truck, nearly bouncing on the balls of her feet as she waited for him.

And who was he to deny her?

* * *

“Who’re you textin’?” he asked curiously as they turned on the highway which would take them the few miles out of town. She’d barely said two words to him since they’d left the cabin and he was more than a little annoyed.

“Mmm … uh … Daddy. Won’t be much longer,” Carol promised. “Eyes on the road please!” He’d swerved, catching the ripple strip as he tried to peer at her phone.

Daryl grumbled under his breath and focused on his driving.

_Daddy … I need a favor._

_What is it, Carol Ann?_

_It’s not for me._
What does Daryl need? Is he alright?

She loved her father even more for the simple fact that his mind immediately shifted from her to Daryl. Fine, Daddy. But we’re heading to Peachtree City to shop for a bed.

What’s wrong with the one he has?

He can’t move it without Jackson getting suspicious. See the problem?

I do. What do you want me to do?

Could you possibly call your friend who works at Mattress World and see what you can do about pricing? You know he won’t accept my help. I want it to look like he’s doing it all on his own.

If he finds out, he’s going to be furious.

Then let’s hope he doesn’t find out.

Carol, you’re a sneaky little minx just like your mother.

But you love me anyway :)

I’ll make the call. Ask for Dwayne.

Thanks, Daddy! I love you.

I love you too ... be safe.

Carol sneaked a glance over at Daryl as they stopped at the light on Carraway Blvd. “I asked Daddy to call ahead and let them know we’d be coming in. He said to ask for Dwayne.”

Daryl frowned. “What are y’ plottin’?”

Her eyes were wide and innocent as she looked at him. “Nothing. Dwayne is a family friend and he’ll cut you the best deal.”

He eyed her skeptically, but for once couldn’t tell if she was fibbing. “A’right.”

Carol pranced through the door he held open for her, his eyes searching out the price tags on the beds which were on display. It was going to be an epic disaster due to his lack of funds. Then Carol was going to want to chip in, and his already prickly pride was pinging viciously. He didn’t want her help, damnit. He needed to do this on his own. What if his girl wanted to stay the night with him at the cabin? He couldn’t expect her to sleep on the lumpy couch or – god forbid – on the floor. He wanted her to be as comfortable in his home as he was in hers.

“Welcome to Mattress World,” a petite blonde chirped happily, her eyes wandering lasciviously over Daryl. Carol pursed her lips in displeasure at the attention.

“Thanks,” he drawled, averting his gaze from her. “Is Dwayne available?”

Her smile faltered as she pointed towards the desk at the back of the store, seeing her potential sale – not to mention her opportunity to flirt – fly right out the window.
Carol smiled smugly and linked her fingers with his, pulling him in the direction the girl had pointed. Dwayne Pierce smiled broadly as they reached the desk, drawing her into a one-armed hug. “Carol Ann, so good to see you, darlin’. How’s that sweet mama of yours?”

“She’s very well. Dwayne, I’d like you to meet my friend, Daryl Dixon. He’s in desperate need of a bed for his new place.” Her lips formed into a sulky pout. “Do you think you could help him out?”

Daryl wanted to roll his eyes at the drama unfolding before him. Dwayne’s hand shot out and he was forced to shake, much to his disgust. He hated to be touched and Carol knew it. He’d have to find some way to get back at her. She hated to be tickled, so that was always an option. He’d never do anything to cause her harm.

“Mr. Dixon, you’ve come to the right place. What were you looking to spend?” Dwayne asked, not really caring since the difference would be charged to Dr. Mason’s platinum Visa.

Daryl shrugged. “Uh … bout three hundred. Don’t need nothing fancy, jus’ a frame, box spring and mattress.”

Dwayne led them over to the far wall and pointed to a long line of beds, each with a different mattress. “I think any of these will fit your budget. Test them out, get a feel for which one is right for you, and then let me know so I can draw up the paperwork and get you scheduled for delivery.”

Carol squealed and pounced onto the nearest bed. 

Holy shit!

His thumb found its way into his mouth, his teeth ravaging the cuticle as he watched Carol squirm into a more comfortable position. His eyes were glued to his little sex kitten. How was he ever going to get through the next half hour if she had to lay on each bed arching her back like a fuckin’ porn star?!

Her big blue eyes shot up to his. “Daryl, lie down. You need to see if this one is going to work well on your back.”

Oh, hell no! “I don’t like it.”

“How do you know if you don’t try it?” she asked, arching a brow.

“I just know.” He left her there and moved to the next bed, lying down on his back … and bolted right off like a frightened rabbit when she settled next to him.

“Daryl, what the hell is wrong with you? You got ants in your pants?” She pulled the neckline of her sweater up over her nose and sniffed. “Do I smell or something?”

“Course not! I just wanna get this done before it’s time for me to go to work,” he muttered defensively, moving to the next bed. He frowned. This one looked way too fancy with its pillow top. It was similar to the one Carol had in her room.

Daryl laid down on his back, on the same side he slept on at Carol’s and moaned, closing his eyes. It even felt like Carol’s bed. She climbed over him to the other side and laid down, scooting close to him. He forced himself to remain still, but it wasn’t easy. She reached over him and grabbed his right hand. “Roll towards me and lay on your left side. You need to see if you’ll be comfortable in your normal sleeping position.”

Carol dragged his arm over her waist and scooted back until her back was flush with his chest. The breath caught in his throat, nearly choking him as he realized they were in the same
position they’d woken in two mornings ago. His body tightened with longing, and it took a great strength of will not to moan and bury his face against her neck. It was worse when she rolled over in his embrace and trailed her fingertips over the stubble on his jaw.

“Oh, I really like this one,” she whispered, heat rushing through his body as her warm breath fanned over his lips. “Daryl? What do you think?” Her hand ghosted over his jaw, lower to cup the side of his neck.

“We’ll take this one!” he nearly yelled, pulling away from her as her lips brushed lightly against his beauty mark. What. The. Fuck?!?!?!

He was breathing hard as the salesman waved them over. He had to get a grip. He looked over at Carol, but she was just as calm and collected as ever, a wicked smile perched on her lips. She was definitely up to something. He just had to figure out what.

Chapter End Notes

A/n: Longest chapter yet. I think I may have gotten carried away … just a little bit. Oh, is he furious about the Ed incident. We’ll revisit that later ;D And Carol’s getting good at testing the waters, yeah? Wonder how much longer he’s going to be able to resist. Poor baby, it’d be helpful if he actually knew what she was doing. He hasn’t got a clue yet. Can’t wait to hear what you think about these new developments. Please review!!
“What’s wrong?” Carol asked, eyeing Daryl as he rested his head against the steering wheel. The store associates had just finished loading the bed into the back of Daryl’s pickup, but he still hadn’t made a move to start the truck and see them on their way. She scooted to the middle of the bench seat, running her hand over his back to soothe whatever was ailing him. “Daryl …”

He sighed, knowing if he didn’t answer, she’d persist until he confided in her. “I can’t believe I spent three hundred dollars on a bed. Mama found th’ one I have at a garage sale, an’ it’s th’ only one I’ve known for sixteen years. Makes no sense t’ buy something like that when there’s nothin’ wrong with th’ one I got.”

“Then I’d say you were long overdue for a new one.” Her fingers slipped under his shaggy hair to caress his nape as she propped her chin on his shoulder. “Is this really about the money? You still have two hundred left, and Jim will be giving you your last paycheck tomorrow. What with your commission and hourly wage, it should be more than enough to tide you over until Hershel pays you. And you know if you run low, I’ll loan you some money.”

He grumbled under his breath, turning his head to look at her. “Ain’t lettin’ y’ loan me money, Carol. Your family already does more than enough for me. I’ll never be able t’ pay ‘em back.”

“As if they’d let you,” she smiled.

Daryl glanced up in the rear-view mirror at the bed tied down in the back of the pickup. “I still don’t know how I managed t’ get that beauty for only three hundred. When y’ said this place was affordable, y’ wasn’t lying.”

Carol averted her eyes, looking out the window so he wouldn’t see the guilt lurking behind them. “You heard Dwayne. It’s an older model and it was on sale.”

“Still … a Serta, king sized pillowtop for three hundred? They’re practically givin’ it away.”

She returned her gaze to him, her smile a bit too bright. “Hey … do we have time to hit Bed, Bath & More? I want to get some bedding.”

Daryl groaned.

“Oh, stop,” she chastised. “Think of it as a house warming gift.”

“Cain’t we go t’ Walmart instead? Bed, Bath & More is outrageous, an’ I don’t want y’ spending too much on me, Carol,” he argued, knowing once her mind was set on something, there’d be no changing it.

Carol shook her head, her pearly teeth nibbling lightly at her lower lip. His eyes were drawn to her mouth, and he felt his breath hitch, wanting to bite it for her. “Daryl,” she purred, “you know I don’t like Walmart. I want to buy you something nice.” She leaned closer and he could feel her warm breath ghost over his sweat-slicked skin. He shivered, and he hoped she hadn’t noticed.
“Besides, I’m sure there will be a night here and there when I sleep over. Don’t you want us to be nice and comfy?” She arched a brow. “Or were you planning on making me sleep on the sofa?”

His gaze flicked up to meet hers, all the while imagining her stretched out in his new bed, much as they’d been earlier while testing it out, and he coughed, his back slamming into the seat as he pulled away. His musings were drifting into dangerous territory. All he needed was for her to see just how much the idea of having her in his arms again was affecting him. “Hell no, I ain’t makin’ y’ sleep on th’ couch!” he growled, looking away as he tried to rein in his filthy mind.

“Awesome! So, we can head over to Bed, Bath & More and still get back to unload the bed before you have to go to work.”

Daryl gnawed at his lip as he started the truck and backed out of the parking space. How did she get him into these situations? *Because you let her, dumbass!*

* * *

Carol tilted her head to the side, her arms crossed over her chest as she stared at the bed where they’d set it up in Daryl’s room. “Does it look centered to you?” she asked, one lone finger rising to tap her chin.

Daryl was flopped down across the bare mattress, breathing hard from wrestling the heavy thing into his room, his face pressed against it so she couldn’t hear his groan. “Are y’ kidding me, woman?! We ain’t movin’ it again,” he argued. He shot her a bemused look as he climbed to his feet and retrieved a work shirt from the closet. “What time y’ gotta be at th’ bakery? I can drop y’ off if y’ want.”

Carol glanced down at the bags of bedding he’d dropped in the corner and shook her head. “No, I already texted Mom, asking if she’d pick me up. I don’t have to go in until three and she’s been dying to see your new place.” She raised her brows in askance as she turned to see him buttoning his uniform shirt over his t-shirt. “You don’t mind if I stay a little longer and show Mom around, do you?”

“Carol,” he said softly, his fingers pausing in their buttoning, “y’ know y’ can stay as long as y’ want. You’re always welcome here … wherever I am.” His head ducked sheepishly, his cheeks tinting a dusky rose as he added the last.

Her eyes softened as she met his gaze. She wanted to wrap her arms around him and never let go, but she didn’t want to send him into a panic and have him running from her. He looked so happy. Carol and her family had always welcomed him, loved him, and tried to make his life just a little better. It had to be a great source of pride for him to provide her the same, to offer a special place for her in his new home.

Daryl’s blush deepened as he moved to his dresser and rummaged through the little glass dish set at its center. She waited patiently, once keeping her own counsel. He didn’t keep her waiting, though, moving to her side and taking her hand. He pressed something cold into her palm, and she looked down with a gasp. “Daryl?”

“Y’ need your own key.” He shrugged. “What if I’m late or out huntin’ or somethin’ when y’ come over? This way y’ can let yourself in.”
It might’ve been a simple explanation, but to her it meant the world. She reached up and gently brushed the hair away from his eyes, her other hand wrapping around his waist. “Go … before you’re late.”

He smiled, hugging her briefly. “Ain’t gonna be late. Y’ worry too much, Carol.”

Carol didn’t want to let go. She didn’t want him to see the tears threatening to spill over her lashes. “Thank you, Daryl. It means so much to me that you trust me with a key to your place.”

“Don’t trust nobody like I do you.” He let her go and patted his pockets, making sure he had his wallet. “Lock up when y’ leave, ok?”

“I will. See you at eight-thirty?” He nodded. “And don’t eat that trash at the diner. Mom’s making roasted pork tenderloin with those little baby potatoes you love.”

Daryl chuckled, heading towards the door. “A’right … but don’t pick th’ movie ‘til I get there.”

“Fine!” she huffed, watching him go. She wished they could have spent the rest of the afternoon together, but she knew how important it was for Daryl to do well at his job. She’d have him all to herself that night anyway, and she planned to make the most of it.

Carol smiled as she dug through the bags and pulled out the sheets. Twelve hundred thread count Egyptian cotton in a lovely shade of navy blue. She almost moaned when she disposed of the shrink wrap and ran her hand over them. She could just imagine lying on them, completely bare with Daryl at her side. She fitted them to the bed and tucked in the end of the top sheet, giggling at the memory of his reaction when they had been testing out the beds. He’d been so skittish, but aroused at the same time. At least she wasn’t suffering alone.

It didn’t take her long to spread the ivory fleece blanket atop the sheets and cover it with the navy plaid duvet. She knew she had excellent taste, but she hoped Daryl liked it. He’d seemed pleased enough when he’d seen it in the store, but actually seeing it on the bed would be the true test. He was probably going to pitch a minor fit, however, about the number of pillows she’d bought. Six, spa-quality king sized pillows to be exact. Two with shams to match the duvet and four more with standard pillowcases. In her opinion, one could never have too many pillows. It was the highlight of the room. She thought it was sad he had only one large duffel bag and two lonely boxes containing all his worldly possessions. She could only hope there was more he hadn’t packed at the house he shared with Jackson. Merle’s room looked far more inviting – at least before they’d bought the bed – because Daryl had removed everything from the storage locker and brought it to the cabin.

Carol wondered if Merle would appreciate all the hard work Daryl had already put into their new home. He could be downright surly on a bad day and cantankerous at best on a good one. Perhaps the Army had changed him for the better. It had helped him resolve his issues with drugs and alcohol, so maybe he would have changed in other areas of his life. She certainly hoped so, for Daryl’s sake.

Her head whipped around as a knock sounded at the front door. Had Daryl locked it behind him when he’d left? Her heart stuttered, a shiver of fear creeping up her spine. The cabin had belonged to Jackson’s father, but surely, he’d have no reason to come out there. It belonged to Merle now, and the elder Dixon rarely even acknowledged he had another son.

“Carol, dear, are you here?”
She released the breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding as she heard her mother call out to her. “Hi, Mom,” Carol said, trying not to let the woman see how shaken she’d been a moment ago. She beckoned her towards Daryl’s bedroom and grinned broadly. “Check it out,” she gushed, pointing to the new bed. “Isn’t it just fab?”

Francine smiled, admiring the duvet. “It’s wonderful, Carol Ann. Your father told me about your latest scheming.”

Carol cleared her throat and swallowed guiltily. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Oh of course not, dearest,” her mother deadpanned. “Carol, you know I will do anything I can to help Daryl. All I’ve ever wanted was for our boy to be happy. I think it’s admirable you wanted to aid in this venture.”

She cringed. “Even if I may have been less than honest with him?”

“Indeed. He would have been furious. Men and their pride and all that,” Francine sighed, waving a dismissive hand. “Alright, let’s see the rest of his new home. From what I’ve seen, there is a lack of basic necessities.” Her tone was disapproving. It was wonderful he and Merle had their own place, but she didn’t like the idea of them doing without a little comfort.

Carol led Francine through the cabin, beginning the tour in the kitchen. “It’s really not that bad, Mom. Merle will be coming home soon, and Daryl will be making more money working with Hershel even though it’s part time. He’s already worked so hard on the repairs.” She ran her hands over the new wooden support posts. “He took out the wall here and added these columns. It opens up the room, creating a flow between the kitchen and living room. He plans on remodeling in here later and building a wraparound bar to provide extra counter and cabinet space.”

“It’s good he decided to take those carpentry classes his sophomore and junior years.”

Carol nodded. It was the only classes they hadn’t shared. And not only had he excelled at the craft, his creativity didn’t fail to shine through in his work. He was so talented, and she had no doubt he could do whatever he set his mind to. If only he had faith in himself. It had done his self-esteem no good living with his father all these years, not when Jackson constantly spewed his bile and belittled him.

She pushed her maudlin sights aside, and turned to her mother, groaning when saw Francine’s phone clutched in her hand. “Mom, what are you doing?”

“Um … what’s that?” Francine asked, trying to shift the focus away from herself and back to the tour.

Carol chuckled. “It’s a camp stove. Really, Mom, you and Daddy should come camping with us. Your knowledge is sadly lacking when it comes to such things.”

Francine wrinkled her nose. “You mean he actually cooks on that thing?” She lifted it and looked at the pitiful looking gas stove upon which it sat. “What’s wrong with the range?”

Carol rolled her eyes. “Those idiots at the gas company said they can’t get out here until Monday after next. So, in the meantime, Daryl will be using the camp stove and taking cold showers,” she huffed, more than a little miffed with his circumstances.

Her mother arched a brow, her azure eyes hardening. “We’ll just see about that, dear.”

The refrigerator chose that moment to groan and rumble, startling them both. “Yeahhhh, just
ignore that, Mom. I think the fridge is on its last leg.”

Francine added more notes to the app she had open on her phone. It was even worse than she’d thought. Carol led her from the kitchen and into the sparsely furnished living room. A sofa which had her skin crawling, despite its recent scrubbing, a table bearing a lone lamp. She wouldn’t be surprised if it was the same one Daryl had made in shop class. The room was spacious, and with a little work, it could be very comfortable. The stone hearth was a work of art. She cringed at the bathroom, hard water stains around the faucet and drain, and scratches in the porcelain. Carol jiggled the handle on the toilet, blushing as she stopped the constant run. The sink and counter, where it set, looked new, however.

Carol saved Merle’s room for last, having already shown her Daryl’s bedroom. It seemed to be the only room her mother hadn’t cringed over. “Well, I see where he’s spent most of his time,” Francine remarked.

She chanced a glance over at Francine’s phone, paling as she quickly read over the notes. “Mom! You can’t be thinking –“

“What?” Francine asked innocently. “I have every right to spoil our boy for his birthday. You’re only eighteen once, after all.”

“You just scolded me for plotting with Daddy! And here you are planning the same thing!”

“That’s different,” her mother said defensively. “This will be his birthday present.”

Carol’s mouth fell open in horror. “Mom, he’s going to be livid. Have you ever seen a Dixon in full fury? If you’re plotting what I think you are … oh, Mom, seriously, this will hurt his pride. Merle, I’m sure would appreciate it, but this will hurt Daryl. He will think you don’t believe in him, that you think he’s not capable of providing for himself. Please, don’t do that to him.”

Francine smiled softly, brushing a curl behind her daughter’s ear. “You love him, don’t you?” she whispered gently.

Carol blushed, looking away from her mother’s scrutinizing gaze. “You know I do. I always have. He’s my best –“

Francine pressed a finger to Carol’s lips. “No, dear … you love him.”

She closed herself off like a vault. “We should get going. I don’t want to be late for my shift.”

Her mother watched Carol snatch up her purse and storm towards the door, waiting for Francine on the porch so she could lock up behind them. She really hadn’t meant to push, but the opportunity had been too good to pass up. Stubborn child, just like her daddy. She’d work out the rest of what she wanted to do for the boys … in her own way.

*, *, *

Carol stretched out on her stomach, lying crosswise on her bed. She didn’t mind pulling a couple of shifts a week at the bakery to earn some extra cash and help her mother out. It was a nice
distraction for those same days Daryl worked and she couldn’t spend time with him. Maggie had come by this afternoon to keep her company. *Sweet Dreams* closed at five, and they’d spent the rest of the day doing prep work for Monday morning. The bakery wasn’t open on Sundays, but she and Francine would go in tomorrow afternoon to fill a few special orders.

She’d tried to focus on Maggie’s light-hearted conversation about Glenn, the game Friday past and when they’d be studying again, but she couldn’t manage to get Daryl out of her mind. She couldn’t help thinking about her mother’s softly uttered words … *You love him.* Was she really that obvious? And if Francine could see it, how many others could as well? What really bothered her, was her own doubts about her feelings. What if she took a chance on him and his heart wasn’t engaged? Yes, she knew he wanted her, but was that the extent of his feelings for her? She didn’t want things to change between them, didn’t want to lose the easy banter, nor the closeness they shared. Carol didn’t want her heart to be broken, but she was more worried about how it would affect Daryl. She couldn’t stand the thought of him being hurt if things didn’t work out.

Carol groaned and pulled the magazine Maggie had given her out from under pillow. She’d eaten and showered when she’d gotten home, and still had a good twenty minutes before Daryl would be there. Her friend had been adamant she take the quiz. Maggie was a sucker for the weekly quiz, but Carol had always found them a waste of time. However, she couldn’t ignore the topic of the week. *Should Your Best Friend Be Your Boyfriend?* Crud! Did she have to worry about her friends being suspicious now too? She tossed the magazine aside and went to her laptop to check her messages on Tumblr and Facebook, but quickly lost interest, the quiz seemingly calling out to her.

*Fine!* she hissed silently, flopping down on her bed again as she grabbed a pen.

*When you see him, he runs over to you and starts talking immediately.* True or False? Carol tapped the pen against her lips. True. Their usual morning chatter consisted of what they’d done during the time they’d spent apart. Where he was closed off with everyone else, he never hesitated to talk to her.

*When you tell him stories about your day, he smiles and actually listens.* True or False? Sometimes, he listened too well. She always had his complete attention when they were together. She marked that one as True too.

*When you guys talk online or on the phone, you talk for at least half an hour usually.* True or False? Carol arched a brow and considered her answer. True, though it was more like an hour than half. The quiz was beginning to irk her, hitting way too close to home.

*He likes to spend time with you.* True or False? Of course, he did! He was her best friend. They’d been raised together. Why wouldn’t he want to spend time with her? They even went so far as to plan their schedules around one another.

*When you talk to him, he watches your eyes instead of waving to his friends,* humming a melody he
Carol didn’t waste any time marking that one as True. When he was with her, Rick and Glenn were lucky if they could garner his attention.

**You guys have something you always do when you see each other (high fives, handshake, hug …). True or False?** True. He always hugged her back when he picked her up for school or other social events – though those were few and far between – and that was only when he didn’t initiate it first.

**You guys are constantly laughing when you see each other. True or False?** Oh, that one was definitely True. It was only her he shared his laugh with, choosing to remain aloof with others. She thought it was because he was sure she would laugh with him instead of at him.

**He has hung out with you many times instead of talking with his friends. True or False?** This one really didn’t apply, did it, she wondered. He rarely hung out with their other friends, choosing to be with her only. She marked it as True, her OCD refusing to allow her to leave it blank.

**If you asked him to hug you, or if you had, he would hug you straight away. You guys are close! You do things like that! True or False?** Carol sighed, thinking of their embrace before he’d left for work. Butterflies took wing in her belly and her heart fluttered happily. Oh, yeah! Totally True.

**Your ‘girlfriends’ are sick of you constantly talking about what you did with him the other day. True or False?** Carol sat up, staring at the magazine as if it were a product of pure evil. Had she been overly zealous talking about him to Lori and Maggie? They hadn’t said anything. She groaned.

**You have his phone number, or he has yours. True or False?** Well, duh! Did these people read over these quizzes before they were published? One of the previous questions had already asked how long they stayed on the phone with one another.

**He would be there for you if something tragic happened in your family. True or False?** Tears sprang to her eyes as she bit her lip to stifle a sob. Nothing tragic had happened to her family, but she couldn’t say the same about his. His entire life had seemed like one tragedy after another, and she’d been by his side for every one of them. He would do the same for her. True.

**You go to bed thinking about him, and when you go to school, you wonder about what you and he are going to do that day. True or False?** Carol sighed as she put a little check mark next to True. It seemed he was all she could think about lately. He consumed her.

**You think he is hot! True or False?** Carol scowled down at the magazine. Who was writing this
crap? A twelve-year-old? Nevertheless, she marked True.

**You guys have hung out a few times away from school. True or False?** Her scowl morphed into a smile. When weren’t they hanging out together?

**You think he would put you before himself sometimes. True or False?** Daryl always put her first, just as she did with him. He was so selfless with her, and one of the things she treasured about his personality.

**If he had a girlfriend, and they broke up, you would secretly be ecstatic. True or False?** Carol snorted. Daryl had never shown any interest in dating. But what if he had? She felt something akin to jealousy flare in her chest. She wanted to beat the imagined female into a bloody pulp!

It took her a moment to get her anger in check before she could move on to the next question.

**You feel happier when he’s around. True or False?** A soft smile curled her lips. Carol was always happiest when she was with him. His soft smiles, blushes, and the warmth in his eyes when she would catch him staring at her … if fed a special part of her soul … a part which belonged solely to him. **True.**

**If you guys aren’t talking with each other, you are secretly glancing at each other from across the classroom, hallways, cafeteria, etc. True or False?** She knew she did, and wasn’t afraid to admit it, but did he? **Hmm … True.**

**You are in love with him. True or False?** Carol felt the pen shake in her hand as it hovered over the page. Maggie was never getting this magazine back, she vowed. No one would ever see her answers other than herself. She could be honest with herself, couldn’t she? **True.**

Carol stared at the page, her heart rate increasing as well as her breathing. She knew if she looked in the mirror, she’d see herself flushed and trembling. All she had to do was check her results. She looked back at her answers and paled. She’d answered true to every one of the twenty questions. Quickly, she turned the page and scanned through the results, biting her lip as she read.

**Ask him out immediately! He loves you!**

Carol flopped back against the bed and crushed the magazine against her face with a groan.
Oh, god, now she had her mother and a magazine telling her she was in love with her best friend. It wasn’t news to her. Now she just needed to figure out if she should tell him or not.

“What’s wrong, Car … your favorite celebrity couple break up or somethin’?”

She gasped, tossing the magazine aside as her gaze found him leaning against the doorjamb of her room, grinning unrepentantly. She pushed her hair out of her face, and returned his smile, her insecurities forgotten in the light of his presence. There would be time to worry about it later. Right now, she had an entire evening with him to look forward to.

Chapter End Notes

A/n: I remember when I was Carol’s age. Nothing beat the weekly quiz :) She’s really struggling with her feelings, much like Daryl. Oh, and Francine is just as bad as Carol and her dad, wanting to spoil Daryl. I really hope you enjoyed the chapter. Please review! Sorry I couldn’t update yesterday. RL can be such a pain sometimes.

The quiz in this chapter can be found at allthetests.com.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Carol sat up and smiled nervously, hoping he didn’t pick up on it. “No, nothing like that. Maggie loaned me her copy of Teen Beat and I was just killing time until you got here. How was work? Did you talk to Jim about your new job?”

Daryl licked his lips, his tongue slowly dragging over his bottom lip as he took in the low-slung sleeping pants and tiny sliver of skin revealed by her tank top. She was going to think he was a pervert, ogling her as he was. His gaze flickered up to her eyes as he shrugged. “It was ok, I guess. Jim wasn’t too happy about me leavin’. He thinks me quittin’ is a ploy t’ get him t’ accept Merle’s offer t’ buy th’ place. It’s gonna put a lotta pressure on him now until he can find another mechanic.” He moved over to sit next to her on the bed, shucking his boots and setting them by the nightstand. “He seemed t’ be more understandin’ when I explained about th’ new job with Hershel, an’ my dreams of becomin’ a vet one day.”

Carol rolled over onto her back and looked up at him. “Well, after you explained, I hope he didn’t take it too personally.” She grinned, feeling more at ease now that they’d fallen into their usual banter. “Is it selfish of me to hope this does pressure him into selling to Merle?”

“Nah … not unless I can be selfish too,” he grinned sheepishly. “I’ve been hopin’ the same thing.” He groaned and rubbed at the back of his neck. “Think I’ma take a shower before I go down t’ supper. If that’s ok?”

“Of course, it is, Daryl. Make yourself at home,” Carol murmured softly. She could already feel the heat creeping up into her cheeks.

Daryl frowned. “Y’ ok?” he asked, watching her duck her head to hide her blush as she bit anxiously at her lip. “Y’ actin’ funny.”

Francine stuck her head through the door, her hair still damp from her shower, her fluffy robe belted tightly around her waist. “Oh, Daryl, I thought I heard you up here,” she said, her smile warm and welcoming. “Did you eat yet?”

Daryl frowned. “Y’ ok?” he asked, watching her duck her head to hide her blush. “Y’ actin’ funny.”

Carol shook her head, peering up at him through her lashes. “N-No … I’m fine.”

Francine stuck her head through the door, her hair still damp from her shower, her fluffy robe belted tightly around her waist. “Oh, Daryl, I thought I heard you up here,” she said, her smile warm and welcoming. “Did you eat yet?”

“No, Mrs. Mason,” he demurred, watching her enter the room balancing her laptop under her arm. “Thank you for savin’ me a plate.”

She reached out to him, cupping his chin in her hand so he’d meet her gaze. “How many times do I have to ask you to call me Francine? I’d ask you to call me Mom, but I don’t want to take away from what your sweet mother meant to you.”

Daryl’s smoky blue gaze clouded, moisture building there at the vague memory of his mama. “Just once more, I reckon.” He offered her a smile, tamping down on his melancholy.

“You’re such a sweet boy, Daryl … such wonderful manners.” She dropped a kiss to his brow and then one to Carol’s. “Well, don’t delay with dinner. I know the two of you want to watch a movie before bed. I don’t want you staying up too late; you have school tomorrow.”
Daryl moved to the closet to fetch his sleepwear from his duffel before disappearing into the bathroom to shower. “I’m going to go heat your food in the microwave,” Carol called after him. “Come down when you’re ready, Daryl.”

He nodded at her before the door closed, and Carol walked arm and arm down the stairs with her mother. “What’s up with the laptop, Mom?”

Francine smirked, tilting her head in the direction of her bedroom. “You father has to scrub in for that bypass in the morning, so he’ll be leaving before four. He needs his rest, so I thought I’d just slip into the den and do a little research.”

Carol groaned. “What kind of research?”

Her mother’s eyes sparkled. “Nothing for you to worry about.”

“Mom …”

“I promise you’ll like it.”

Carol crossed her arms over her chest and glared. “Yeah … but will Daryl?”

Francine chuckled and opened the door to the den. “You worry too much, dear.”

“Mother!” she hissed at the closed door. She was going to have to warn him, otherwise, he’d believe she had a hand in her mother’s scheming and it would be one big mess. She would not jeopardize her relationship with him over a stupid misunderstanding.

Carol stalked angrily into the kitchen and removed the plastic wrap on the plate before popping it into the microwave. He joined her, grabbing a Coke from the refrigerator just as the microwave dinged. He slipped up behind her as she placed his plate on the island in his usual spot. She’d expected him to sit down and begin eating, but he followed her back to the microwave where she tossed a bag of popcorn. Oh, god! She could smell him, and it was already causing heat to burn low in her belly. She made sure to keep a bottle of shower gel in her bathroom, just for him, one where he didn’t smell like fruit or flowers. It was a heavenly scent when mixed with his own manly musk and never failed to make her breathe deeply, nostrils flaring, the need to crawl on his lap and bury her nose against his throat nigh unbearable.

Her eyes were sloe-lidded as she watched a trickle of water slide down from his barely towedelosed hair to settle in the hollow of his throat. She wondered what he’d do if she leaned forward and freed those droplets from his skin with her tongue. Her gaze flickered up to his as he stared curiously at her. His lips quirked in amusement as his arm slid around her … Carol forgot to breathe as his chest pressed against her breasts, and she’d never been more aware that she wasn’t wearing a bra. She was so close, the possibility of her fantasy becoming reality not seeming so farfetched. And then he was pulling away, having retrieved the fork from the drawer behind her. NO!!! She wanted to cry.

Daryl tossed the fork onto the island beside his dinner and let his hands rub at her upper arms, his work-roughened hands slowly warming her. “Hey … what’s wrong?” he asked, his graveled voice making her weak. “Y’ know y’ can talk to me, Carol … about anythin’.”

The microwave dinged, the popcorn ready, breaking the spell, and she whimpered.

“Is it bad? That why y’ won’t tell me?”

She sighed, realizing she was causing him unneeded stress. As if he weren’t dealing with
enough at the moment, waiting for his birthday to roll around. Carol patted his chest and pulled out of his arms, retrieving a bowl from the cabinet for their popcorn. “It’s nothing,” she said quietly, pouring their snack into the bowl before adding popcorn oil and a handful of plain M&M’s. Sweet and salty snackage for movie night.

“Carol …”

She grabbed a few more snacks from the pantry … his favorite honey roasted cashews, and a box of Jujubes. By the time she grabbed a few water bottles from the fridge, she knew she couldn’t put it off any longer. She sat next to him at the island, their loot ready to carry upstairs. “Mom is planning to buy you something for your birthday, but I haven’t been able to figure out what it is. I just know it’s going to be big.”

His fork paused halfway to his mouth as he blinked at her. “Whatcha mean … big?”

Carol shrugged guiltily. “I don’t know, Daryl. I was showing her the cabin today, and she got this look. You know the look I’m referring to. It means she’s going to absolutely love whatever she’s planning, and you’re going to smile at her when you really hate it.”

Daryl set his fork down and took a long pull from his Coke. “Carol, I never hate what your parents give me. It’s jus’ too much. They’ve always done too much for me,” he said, looking down at the food which remained on his plate, having lost his appetite. “They’re always makin’ me stay for dinner or sendin’ leftovers home with me, they let me stay here with you when I hate th’ thought of goin’ home, they’ve been there for me every time I’ve ever needed them. They don’t need t’ be buyin’ me stuff.”

“They love you.”

Daryl sighed, his voice barely a whisper. “I love them too. S’why I don’t want t’ lose them. One day, they’re gonna get tired of havin’ t’ help me so much. I don’t know what I’d do if they never let me see y’ again, Carol.”

“You know them better than that. Don’t let Jackson get in your head, Daryl.” She took his plate and scraped the leftovers into the garbage disposal before putting it in the dishwasher and turning it on. “No matter what your daddy says, you will always be a part of this family.”

He didn’t push her away as she came to stand between his parted knees to wrap her arms around his broad shoulders. Quite the opposite. His arms banded around her waist and pulled her closer, burying his face in the crook of her neck. “Can we talk about somethin’ else?” he asked, relishing the feel of her in his arms.

“Like what?” she chucked, carding her fingers through his shaggy hair.

“Um … like which movie are we gonna watch tonight.”

*.*.*

Daryl’s oily fingers dipped into the bowl sitting between them and shoveled another handful of popcorn and M&M’s into his mouth, reveling in the gooey melted chocolate as the hard candy shells broke apart under his teeth. “I still can’t believe we’re watchin’ this again. How many times that make now?”
“Hush it. Fright Night is a classic,” she replied tartly.

He snorted. “What’s wrong with th’ remake?”

Carol’s eyes narrowed as her gaze swung to him, glittering dangerously. “The remake is a travesty against mankind. Colin Farrell is no Jerry Dandridge, and the plot was lacking in passion. It fell flat and the film reels should be burned to prevent poor naïve souls from venturing onto it and having to sit through and hour and forty-six minutes of mediocre drivel.”

The lights were out in her room, the movie the only illumination as they sat on the floor at the end of the bed watching what had to be her all-time favorite horror movie … ever. He knew how much she hated the remake, but couldn’t help goading her into one of her tirades. He loved to watch her cheeks flush and her eyes flash fire. He bit back a chuckle and flicked a piece of popcorn at her. It bounced off her pert little nose and she shoved him. His laughter echoed throughout the room, unable to quell it for several moments.

Carol huffed and turned back to the movie, her gaze riveted to the screen. It was one of the parts she liked best, where Charlie and Amy were being chased into the night club. He had to give it to old Jerry … he was one smooth character. Frankly, he was surprised Carol hadn’t fallen asleep yet as tired as she was. It wouldn’t be the first time she’d fallen asleep on him and he’d had to carry her to bed and tuck her in. He hoped it wouldn’t be the last either.

He rolled his eyes at the TV as Jerry lured Amy onto the dance floor. The girl was clearly under his thrall. Who would want a girl if he had to hypnotize her? Instead of watching any more of that scene, he dug through the dregs of popcorn kernels to rescue the last few M&M’s.

Carol leaned in closer serval moments later when Evil Ed – she should start calling Peletier that – showed up to do away with Peter Vincent. “Ed didn’t make an unattractive vampire at first, y’know? But I suppose the effects department decided they needed at least one of the characters to have that gross-out factor.” She frowned down into the empty popcorn bowl and shrugged.

“Maybe if his so-called friend hadn’t been such a douche, he wouldn’t have been so quick to accept Dandridge’s offer.”

Her brows rose to hear him make such an observation. He rarely commented on the movies they watched. It made her wonder if he were thinking about their own friendship to compare with the one shared by the characters. It made her sad, so she opted to change the subject. “Oh, I brought you something from the bakery.”

Daryl instantly perked up. “Yeah?”

She abandoned her spot beside him and walked on her knees over to her desk to get his surprise. She knee-walked it back and flopped down beside him once again, setting the bakery box on his lap. A giggle passed her lips as she watched his face light up with pleasure. “I know Mom is making you a cake for your birthday, but I wanted to make you something too.”

It was an oversized chocolate cupcake with heaps of Butterfinger icing and a little lone Happy Birthday decoration with a little girl blowing kisses. “Carol … y’ didn’t have t’.” He pulled her into a one-armed hug and pressed a lingering kiss to her cheek, his lips tingling from the contact, from having his lips so close – yet so far away – to her own. “Thank you.” He wanted so badly to tell her just what she meant to him, to tell her she made his struggles worthwhile because every day he got to see her smile, hear her laugh, but his tongue was stuck to the roof of his mouth.

“You’re welcome,” she whispered, her fingers caressing the place where his lips had been.
“But you don’t get your present until Wednesday after school.” She pressed a finger to his lips when he began to protest. “No arguments!”

Daryl knew it would be pointless to voice his protests, so he ate his cupcake and let his gaze return to the movie. It was the part where Evil Ed was forced to die a long lingering death. The effects weren’t bad, but he knew Carol never liked to watch it, preferring to hide her face against his shoulder. Which was why he was so surprised when she turned her back on the TV and wiped a finger through the frosting on his treat.

He couldn’t take his eyes off of her as she brought that finger to her mouth and slid it past her lips, her eyes closing in bliss. Gawd!!! Desire shot through him, liquid heat settling in his groin as he watched her, his pupils blowing wide as his lips parted on a silent gasp. It was literally painful to watch her play the temptress and not be able to touch her. He didn’t even think to stop her as she sucked the digit clean and made another long swipe through the frosting. Only this time, she brought it to his lips.

“Not quite as good as Mom’s, but I think it’ll do,” she whispered, her voice breathy and stilted as he caught her wrist in his strong hand, pulling it closer. Her heart thundered against her ribs as she watched his tongue dart out to taste her offering. She moaned softly, her gaze jerking up to meet his, consumed by the fire burning hotly behind his eyes.

“Best I ever had,” he murmured, the sweetness of the frosting and the saltiness of her skin a heady combination. And he wanted more. He sucked hard, drawing her finger in up to the second digit, the tip of his tongue swirling around the tip. He was treading water and approaching a rip tide. No good could come from this when he suspected she was only flirting to see if she could wrench a response from him. He returned her hand to her lap, his thumb grazing her palm as he nodded to the TV. “Favorite part’s comin’ up. Don’t want t’ miss it do y’?”

Carol scooted closer to Daryl, fitting herself perfectly into his side as the cheesy music began. For once, she couldn’t have cared less about the movie. Her innocent flirting to test his reaction had gotten her in trouble, and now her body was aflame with no hope of putting out the fire.

Daryl snorted as Dandridge did his best to seduce Amy. “He’s so full o’ shit,” he said around the last bite of cupcake as he set the bakery box inside the popcorn bowl.

“What makes you say that?”

He waved his hand at the screen. “Jus’ look at him, all puppy dog eyes pleadin’ with her t’ want him. He finally has t’ use his vampy mojo on her t’ get her t’ take off her clothes. An’ when he kisses her … that ain’t a kiss. He’s maulin’ her; way too rough.”

Carol arched a brow at him, shocked he was dissecting her favorite scene with such insight. She’d always thought the actor was sexy as all hell, but she had to agree with Daryl. The kiss could have been more. She grabbed the remote and paused the movie just as Jerry was poised to sink his fangs into Amy’s neck. Carol turned to him, kneeling much like the girl in the movie. “Oh, yeah? And how would you have done it?” she challenged.

Daryl swallowed, the adam’s apple bobbing in his throat. “C’mon, Carol, don’t get your drawers in a twist. It’s just a movie,” he backtracked, realizing he’d fucked up.

“No … I really want to know,” she insisted. “How would you have portrayed his part, given the chance?”

Shit! “We really doin’ this? Car –“
Carol trembled with excitement and longing. She knew she was pushing their boundaries. Hell, she was pole vaulting across that line drawn in the sand, but she had to see just how far he would go. Would he let his desire for her lead them into new territory or would he let his insecurities surface and take a giant leap back? This could backfire on so many levels.

She leaned forward, her palms sweaty against the knees of her sleeping pants, her nerves ratcheting up to the point where she was ready to forget everything and run. Yet, her love for him, her willingness to take a risk, held her in place. “Show me, Daryl,” she whispered, her voice a husky purr, laden with desire for the boy she loved to the depths of her soul.

His smirk was teasing, wanting to give her one more out. If he did this, would he be able to stop with one kiss? How would her sweet lips feel against his? How would she taste when he sucked on her tongue? What if she didn’t like it and things changed between them? The thought of losing her made the food he’d eaten earlier churn violently within his stomach. But, then … how could he ever deny her something she clearly wanted? “We don’t have t’ do it t’ th’ cheesy music, do we?”

Carol huffed a short laugh. “No, just show me how you think this scene could’ve been better.”

Daryl leaned onto his left hip before her, bracing himself on his hand as he averted his gaze. His heart beat so fast, he was sure he was going to stroke out before he could even touch her. His gaze found the vampire on the screen and he mentally flipped him off. He could do this … wanted to do this.

His girl trembled, her eyes wide with fear as his fingers brushed gently at her temple, tucking an errant curl behind her ear. He studied her, his scrutinizing gaze taking in every nuance of her features, but he couldn’t tell if she was acting, or if … “Carol,” he whispered, “you’re not afraid of me, are y’?”

“Never,” she replied, her features softening. “I’m trying to get into character.”

He closed his eyes for a moment, drawing in a deep breath before letting it out slowly. When he opened them, his Carol was gone, replaced with the role she wished to portray. He needed to make this so much better than what he’d just disdained of the on-screen actors, and this was his chance – possibly his only chance – to kiss her. His gaze was feral as it met her wide frightened eyes, his need for her evident. He was digging deeply into that part of him, the part only she could touch.

Daryl trailed his fingers slowly over the line of her jaw before letting his palm cup around the smooth curve, her warmth seeping into his skin. He held her stare, eyes locked with hers, his thumb ghosting over her perfect bottom lip. His gaze drifted down to where his thumb traced her lip, wishing fervently it was his tongue. Overwhelmed with wanting, he let his fingers trail over her silken flesh, pausing briefly at the rapid beating of her pulse just beneath her jaw. He smiled, seeing the affect his touch had on her.

His fingers danced over the left side of her throat, gathering her curls in his hand and pushing them back over her shoulder. So wrapped up in the reality of her in his arms, he was having trouble focusing on what he was supposed to be doing. He’d never claimed to be an actor, for fuck’s sake. And he was quickly losing sight of his purpose. Heat burned through his veins, his good sense leaking out of his ear as his blood rushed south. God, how he wanted her. Carol’s hands mapped a path over his belly, and it was his turn to moan, her heat seeping through the thin t-shirt covering his chest.
Daryl’s kiss pressed ever so softly against her pulse, relishing the flutter against his lips. He was gentle, tenderness in his every touch as he ventured lower over her throat, his tongue darting out to taste her carotid, tracing the length of it from just below her ear to the crook of her neck. She gasped, her hands fisting in his shirt as she dragged him closer to her. It seemed she was enjoying herself enough to break character. Her back arched as his teeth scraped over the skin bared by the thin strap of her top, much as the actress had done in the movie, and he reared back to catch her eyes. Now if he could only kiss her without completely losing himself. He certainly didn’t want to scare her with the wealth of feelings rioting within him. He caught her gaze, inching closer … so near he could feel her panting breaths against his lips.

A plate of chocolate chip cookies hitting the floor, followed by a gasp, had them springing apart. “Oh my god! I’m so sorry!” Francine apologized, her hands fluttering before her face. “This was your first kiss and I totally ruined it, didn’t I?”

Carol buried her face against his shoulder, trying not to laugh. She didn’t think she’d ever seen her Daryl blush quite that color. Puce, maybe? “Mom,” she groaned, her voice muffled against his neck, “it’s not what you think.”

“So … it wasn’t your first kiss?” Francine dropped down beside them on the floor, the mess quickly forgotten. “You’ve kissed before? Are you –”

Daryl wanted the floor to open up and swallow him whole. “No! We were jus’ …” He waved a hand frantically towards the TV. “It’s that damn movie Carol loves so much!”

“We were acting, Mom. Daryl said the vampire was way too rough with his woman, and I challenged him to show me … a better way.” Carol cringed, hearing how ridiculous it sounded.

Francine’s face fell. “Oh. Well, it’s nothing to be embarrassed about.”

Daryl’s brows disappeared near his hairline. “Y’ not mad at us?”

“You sound disappointed, Mom,” Carol deadpanned at the same time.

Francine smiled sheepishly. “Is it so wrong for me to want my kids to be happy?”

“God, Mom, do you have to make this more awkward than it has to be?” Carol hissed.

Her mother shrugged and moved to clean up the mess she’d made. “Sorry about the cookies, sweetheart,” she said to Daryl. She dumped everything into the discarded popcorn bowl and slowly backed towards the open door. “By the way, it’s after eleven. You two can finish your movie, or your roleplaying or whatever … later. Get some sleep. I don’t want a bunch of zombies trudging through my kitchen in the morning.”

Carol giggled as Daryl glared at her, rising to her feet and offering him a hand up. “Well, that was fun. It can go on my list of most embarrassing moments.”

“You can bet your ass it’s right at the top of mine,” he growled, climbing into the bed and burying his head beneath his pillow.

Carol shut the TV off and settled on her side of the bed, reaching for his hand as she always did and linking their fingers. “Mom ships us … how cute.” She squeezed his hand reassuringly. “Daryl, it’s ok. We were just playing around.”

His voice was muffled, but she could still make out the unease in his voice. “Carol … are we ok?”
“Of course. We’ll always be ok, no matter what,” she answered softly, her eyes already heavy with slumber. “Good night, Daryl.”

Daryl wrapped his other hand around their clasped hands, completely enveloping them. “Night, Carol.”

Chapter End Notes

A/n: Yes, I’m evil!! I had so much fun writing this chapter. They’re getting closer, and I do so love my UST :) Sorry this chapter is late today. It’s been just a little slice of hell with RL today. I really hope you all enjoyed the chapter. Please share the love and review!!

Their movie viewing enjoyment came from the 1985 movie “Fright Night” starring Chris Sarandon and Amanda Bearse to name a few. There were also mentions of the 2011 remake starring Colin Farrell. Disclaimer: I own rights to neither of those movies. Just borrowing for the sake of fic. Here is the link to the scene they were roleplaying. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=68igl3sbzFI
Daryl felt light as air as he moved through the trees with Carol. Her face was alight with happiness, her head tilted back so the sun could kiss her, eyes closed, her lips smiling and warm. The breeze teased the skirt of her lilac sundress, making it sway to and fro around her knees. She’d never been more beautiful. The comforting weight of his bow on his back was absent, but he pushed away his unease. Carol was at his side, her hand clasped tightly in his own as they walked through the forest near the cabin. Little else mattered to him aside from his girl.

The wind picked up as storm clouds from the west began to roll angrily across the sky. A worried furrow appeared between his brows as he stared at the approaching storm. He needed to get his girl inside, before the bottom fell out. His hand tightened on hers, urging her to hurry, but all he met was resistance. He fought to cling to her, his need to protect her driving a stake of determination directly into his heart. They were nearly there, the cabin within sight. Why was she fighting him?

He felt panic wedge behind his breastbone as her hand slipped from his. The air was forced from his lungs as he spun on his heel, expecting to find her just behind him, a smile of mischief upon her lips, but she was nowhere to be found. She couldn’t have gotten far. His eyes widened in fear as his father stepped from between two tall pine trees, his beefy arm wrapped around Carol’s throat as he held her back against his chest.

“Lost som’thin’, boy?” Jackson’s knuckles dragged over the side of Carol’s face, and he could see the stark terror in her eyes. “Y’ should be more careful where y’ leave yer playthings.”

Daryl roared with rage, his worst fears becoming reality. He didn’t hesitate, running after them as Jackson and his hostage disappeared into the foliage. No! He couldn’t lose her. He couldn’t allow Jackson Dixon to destroy her as he’d tried to do to him. Carol was all that was good and right with the world, his solace from the pain, his light in the darkness. He had to … he would … find her.

He ran for miles, the light fading as the rain pounded relentlessly against him, soaking his clothes and leaving his hair dripping into his eyes. His legs burned as he pushed himself, catching a glimpse of them ahead through the trees ever so often. He could almost taste her fear as he hunted them, determined to save her. Heart thundering, he pushed himself. Day bled into night, leaving him in such pitch blackness it was reminiscent of a lunar eclipse. His own fear seized him in a vise like grip and he faltered. His knees gave out, and he collapsed to the drenched loam, tears racing over his ashen cheeks. He’d failed her.

Daryl howled his pain into the wind, deep heaving sobs wrenching from his chest. And then, at the end of himself, he felt a touch of cool hands brush sopping strands of his hair away from his brow and he could breathe again. “Carol … you’re ok.”

Her tone was like ice as she crossed her arms over her breasts and sneered down at him. “No thanks to you, Dixon. You simply let him take me.”

“N-No! No, I searched,” he protested, reaching out to her, his voice pleading with her to
understand, to know he’d never abandon her.

Jackson’s cruel laughter echoed through the silent forest, taunting him. “Cain’t save her, boy. Jus’ like y’ couldn’t save yer mama. As if she could ever want you.”

Carol’s laughter joined his father’s. “Is that what you thought, Daryl? That I could love you?” Her lip curled in derision as she shook her head at him where he knelt before her. “You’re pathetic! No woman in her right mind would ever want you.” Ed stepped out of the trees and wrapped his arms around Carol’s waist, hauling her back into his chest. “I need a real man, Daryl … and you just don’t cut it.”

“NO! Carol, please,” he begged, reaching out to her.

She slapped his hand away, turning to wrap her arms around Ed. “Goodbye, Daryl.”

Jackson unbuckled his belt, pulling it through the loops on his jeans and giving it an ominous snap before wrapping the thick leather around his fist. “Tried t’ warn y’, boy. She was usin’ y’, though I cain’t imagine what she’d want from you. Fuckin’ useless little shit!”

Daryl didn’t move. His heart was broken, his love lost to him. Whatever his father would mete out would be nothing compared to the loss tearing a hole in his chest. For once, he would revel in the pain, hoping this time his old man finished the job.

Carol woke, her eyes flying open in alarm as Daryl thrashed beneath her, dislodging her from where she was sprawled across his chest. It didn’t take but a moment to know he was caught in the throes of a nightmare. His despair was a physical pain which made her chest ache, the tears streaming from his closed lids, a knife to her heart.

“No! Carol …” his agonized cry receding into a whimper.

She inched closer, her fingers carding through his hair as her lips pressed to his throat, feeling his pulse thunder beneath her lips. She peppered his skin with tiny soothing kisses, her lips coming to rest against the shell of his ear. “Daryl … Daryl, wake up. Please … it’s just a nightmare.” Her own tears escaped over her lashes. “Shh, baby, I’m here. I won’t let anyone hurt you. Please … just wake up.”

He stilled, his lids fluttering open, eyes trying to adjust to the darkness. “Carol …”

She tried to smile through her tears as he cradled her face in his warm palm, his thumb brushing tenderly over her cheekbone. “I’m here … you’re safe,” she whispered, her fingertips drying his tears. “It was just a nightmare.”

Carol pressed her lips to the corner of his mouth, over his beauty mark, relishing the feel of his arms banding tightly around her. He rolled into her, hiding his face in the crook of her neck. “I hate it when y’ have t’ see me like this,” he said, his voice a ragged whisper.

She snaked her hand into the collar of his shirt, kneading the tension from his nape. “I’d prefer seeing you like this rather than you having to suffer alone.” Carol pressed a kiss to his damp brow and hugged him tightly. “You want to talk about it?”

He burrowed more deeply into her embrace, wishing he could hide away from the world. But he couldn’t hide from her. Never from her. “We were in th’ woods, by the cabin,” he said, voice raspy. “We were happy, Car, jus’ walkin together in th’ sun.” He took a breath, dragging the
words out of his throat despite the pain burning in his chest. “Storm came up, an’ I jus’ wanted t’ get y’ back t’ th’ cabin. Wanted t’ make sure y’ were safe.”

Her nails scratched at his scalp as her fingers slipped into his hair, and he shivered with pleasure. She smiled, feeling him relax against her. “I’m always safe with you.”

“Not this time. Jackson was there … he took y’ from me.” He trembled as he relived the terror. “No matter how fast or how far I ran, I couldn’t save y’. When I couldn’t make it another step, that’s when y’ came t’ me, but it wasn’t really you.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, her hands stilling as she frowned.

Daryl drew back, his tortured blue eyes meeting hers. His tongue threatened to stick to the roof of his mouth. How much should he tell her? He drew in a deep shuddering breath, not in the habit of lying to her … even by omission. She’d always demanded complete honesty from him, and he wouldn’t go back on his word even now. “Y’ laughed at me. Asked me how I could ever think you’d want t’ be with me … called me pathetic.”

“How absurd!” she scoffed angrily. “You should have known you were dreaming right away. I’d never say such things to you, Daryl.” One look at his red-rimmed eyes and she knew it had been worse than he’d let on. “There’s more, isn’t there?”

He nodded, averting his gaze. “Y’ said y’ needed a real man, an’ let Ed take y’ away. Then it was jus’ me an’ Jackson. Don’t think I need t’ say any more about that, do I?”

Carol gnashed her teeth. “I wouldn’t go with Ed if he were the last boy on earth! Ugh! Your subconscious is a piece of work.” Her finger curled beneath his chin as she lifted his head to meet her gaze. “You are so precious to me. I’ll always be here to remind you of that, too. Put that nightmare out of your mind, and remember who you really are, Daryl Dixon.”

“That says it all, Carol … I’m a Dixon,” he said morosely.

But she just smiled. “That’s right. You and Merle are the new generation of Dixons. The two of you are going to banish the stigma of your name and make it into something good. In ten years, the name Dixon will be respected.”

“Why?” he asked, arching a skeptical brow. “Because y’ say so?”

“Can you think of a better reason?” she replied in a haughty tone.

He snorted, his lips quirking ever so slightly into a tiny smile.

Carol nestled into his side, her fingers tracing intricate patterns across his chest. “That’s my Daryl. Now try to sleep. I don’t want you to be tired in the morning,” she said around a huge yawn.

Daryl turned onto his left side, one arm tight around her waist, the other around her shoulders. He knew he wouldn’t be able to go back to sleep, but he could watch over her as she slumbered. He buried his nose against her soft curls, letting the sound of her breathing soothe him.

* * *
Three-thirty a.m. had come early for William, the scheduled by-pass requiring him to be scrubbed and ready in the OR at five. Which was why he needed his morning coffee in the worst way. He hated having to get up even before the butt crack of dawn, but he’d accepted it long ago as one of the downsides of being a surgeon. However, his need for caffeine was forgotten as he froze in the doorway to the kitchen, his eyes narrowing as they fell upon his disheveled wife.

The scent of caramel hung heavy in the air as she brushed a layer of the melted confection over a perfect rectangle of dough rolled out onto the counter. He arched a brow, wondering what she’d done this time. She was guilt baking at – he glanced at his watch – three forty-five in the morning? It must be bad. And considering she hated working with caramel, it must be doubly bad. She usually only made caramel sticky buns on special occasions.

William moved into the kitchen and turned on the Keurig, choosing a pod of French Roast and fetching his to-go cup, the one which read ‘My awesome daddy is a surgeon’. Carol had given it to him three years ago on Father’s Day and he cherished the little novelty piece. While his coffee brewed, he leaned back against the counter, arms crossed over his chest as he watched his wife give him a side-eyed stare. He bit back a chuckle. “Good morning, dearest. Sleep well?”

Francine huffed, dislodging a lock of auburn hair which had fallen over her brow. “You know very well I haven’t slept a wink.”

Judging from the myriad treats littering the counter, he was inclined to believe her. The Keurig sputtered, signaling his coffee had finished brewing. He stirred in a moderate amount of cream and sugar, preferring to stay away from the fancy creamers Carol preferred, and sat down at the island. “What’d you do this time, Fran?”

Francine’s gaze slid away guiltily, and spread more caramel onto the dough. “What makes you think I’ve done something?”

William snorted. “Twenty years of marriage, and you think I don’t know you’re guilt baking? Come on, love … spill.”

She still wouldn’t look at him, carefully rolling the dough and cutting it into individual buns, setting them on the prepared tray. “Um … I may have said something … er … oh, hell!” She looked up at her husband, a grimace lining her lovely face. “I went up to check on the kids last night. The TV was paused and they were … Oh, my god, William, they were so close. I thought Daryl was going to kiss her. I was so overwhelmed, I dropped an entire plate of cookies – you know how our boy loves my chocolate chip cookies – on the floor!”

Her husband frowned in confusion. “So, you’re feeling guilty for dropping some cookies you made for him?”

Francine swatted him with a dish towel. “No, silly. I’m feeling guilty for what I said afterwards.”

“Am I going to have to pull each and every detail out of you this morning?” he asked, exasperated. “It couldn’t have been that bad.”

Francine cringed. “I got excited, ok! I asked them if this was their first kiss.”

William groaned. “Dear lord, Franny, don’t tell me you were already planning the wedding in your head.”

“Pfft … I started working on that years ago. Beside. The. Point!” She turned and put the
tray of buns in the oven, remembering to set the timer. “Poor Daryl … he was so embarrassed. He explained that he and Carol were roleplaying over that campy vampire movie she loves so much.”

“And you believed him? You remember he’s a teenage boy, right?”

“William Mason, I don’t like your tone. When have you ever known either of our kids to lie to us?” she fumed, her flour covered hands leaving prints on her robe as she planted them on her hips to glare at him.

He held his hands up in surrender. “I wasn’t insinuating –“

She cut him off. “William, they didn’t seem to be roleplaying. It might have started out that way, but you didn’t see the looks on their faces. If I hadn’t walked in, they might have kissed for real. What if my intrusion prevented them from admitting their feelings for one another? I’m such a shit,” she whined, brushing her hair back and leaving a streak of flour across her forehead.

Francine never cursed, which proved to him the state of her upset. William took up the towel and cleaned her hands – not wanting flour all over his suit – before pulling her into his arms. She buried her face against his chest, seeking comfort. “Sweetheart, what did I tell you? They will admit their feelings when they’re ready. And stop meddling. I can hear the gears in your head spinning out of control trying to think of a way to make it up to them.”

“You didn’t see him, Will. He was so mortified. I’ll be lucky if he ever speaks to me again.”

“Is that why you’re making sticky buns?”

She nodded dolefully. “They’re his favorite. He likes the cinnamon, but he loves the caramel.”

“Stop worrying. He loves you. He’s not going to avoid you.” He gave her a lingering kiss before picking up his to-go cup and grabbing his suit jacket. “I have to go, but I’ll call you after I get out of surgery. Please try to behave, dearest.”

Francine stuck her tongue out of him as he slipped out the door.

He stuck his head back through the doorway, grinning devilishly. “Oh, and, Franny … please tell me you’re not going to write fic about them.”

“It was one time I wrote a story about my OTP on that zombie show, and you just won’t let it go!” she huffed. His laughter echoed through the kitchen as she tossed the dish towel at him, this time hearing the front door close behind him.

* * *

Daryl eased himself from Carol’s embrace and stood next to the bed, watching to make sure she settled against the pillows without waking. It didn’t escape his notice they’d been clinging to one another more and more over the past few months, and waking in more compromising positions than he cared to contemplate. Hearing her snuffle softly, he rubbed at his tired eyes and padded to the bathroom to relieve himself. He’d never fallen back to sleep after his nightmare, despite the comfort from his girl. Instead, he’d held her tightly, still feeling the sting of her rejection from his dream, but at four-thirty, he’d found he just couldn’t lie in bed any longer. Why not get an early start on his
He decided to start with coffee, his bare feet silent on the plush carpet as he made his way out of the room and down the stairs. His stomach rumbled, the sweet aroma of chocolate and caramel permeating the air and making his mouth water. He sprang to full alertness as he walked into the kitchen and took in the variety of baked goods piled onto the counter.

Francine paused mid-yawn and smiled sheepishly. “Good morning, sweetheart. Did you sleep well?”

Daryl ducked his head and swiftly moved to the coffee pot, choosing a cinnamon cruller pod to pop into the Keurig. “Had a nightmare,” he admitted softly, his voice still laden with pain.

Her lips formed a thin line of disdain as her eyes flashed hotly. “Are you hungry?”

Despite the array of goodies on the island, he didn’t think he’d be able to eat. “Nah. I’ll wait for Carol and eat with her.”

Francine moved to his side and wrapped her arms around his broad shoulders, hugging him tightly. “Come on. Let’s go into the living room and have a nice chat.”

Daryl winced, but he knew there was no escape. She was like a dog with a bone sometimes when she thought one of her kids was suffering. He followed her into the family room, and sat down on the window seat, drawing his knees up to his chest as he sipped his coffee.

Francine’s azure gaze was worried as she watched him close himself off, his defensive position clear to her. She waited patiently, knowing he’d talk when he was ready. Most of all, she just wanted to be there for him.

It took several minutes, but finally he drained his cup and set it aside, reaching across the gap between them and taking her hand. “I’m ok. Was jus’ a nightmare.”

“It’s never just a nightmare with you, sweetheart.” She squeezed his hand reassuringly. “Did you at least talk to Carol about it? It’s not good to bottle it up inside, Daryl. It’ll only make it worse.”

He nodded, his chestnut hair falling over his eyes to shield them from her. “Yeah. Y’know it ain’t easy t’ hide anything from my girl.” His head shot up, his wide eyes meeting her amused gaze as he realized what he’d said.

Francine was seconds away from squealing and clapping her hands in delight, but somehow restrained herself. “Your girl, huh? So, I wasn’t mistaken by what I saw last night. Have you told her?”

Daryl let his head fall back against the window, gnawing anxiously at his lip, his face flaming. How could he have been so careless? He chose to blame his lack of sleep. “No. She don’t know. I keep tryin’ t’ tell her, but I got this voice in th’ back o’ my head tellin’ me not to. She’s got the rest o’ th’ school year t’ get through, college applications, worryin’ about me gettin’ away from Jackson … she don’t need nothin’ else on her plate. ‘Sides … she deserves better than me,” he said dejectedly.

“Oh, sweetheart, please don’t do that.” Francine brushed his hair away from his brow and cupped his cheek in her warm palm. “Don’t you realize how special you are? My daughter lives and breathes Daryl Dixon. Haven’t you wondered why she’s shown no interest in any of the other boys at that school?”
He shook his head. Of course, he’d wondered, but he’d secretly been glad she hadn’t found someone to date.

“Carol is the only one who can tell you how she feels, but I know you have her heart. Just as she has yours.” She didn’t mistake the way his eyes flared, a tiny spark of hope lighting his irises. “Tell her.”

Daryl dropped his head against his knees. “But what if she don’t feel th’ same way?”

Francine scooted closer to him, wrapping an arm around his shoulders and pulling his head to rest against her. “Let me tell you a story,” she said, carding her fingers through his hair. “Carol was such a brilliant little girl. She was far ahead of other children, learning to read and burying her nose in a book whenever we entertained friends with kids her age. She wasn’t afraid of them, simply … bored.”

He smiled, imagining a tiny version of Carol staring at the other children with disdain.

“William was extremely worried about her, going so far as making her see a behavioral therapist, but the tests were inconclusive. It wasn’t until she met you that she came out of her shell. She talked more, animated and happy as she would tell us what the two of you had done at school. There’s always been a special connection between you.”

Daryl frowned in confusion. “But why? Why did she choose me?”

Francine chuckled. “Sweetheart, she sees you. She’s an excellent judge of character. She can see how precious you are. Her biggest fear is losing you. I knew long ago, watching the two of you grow up together, seeing the deep love and commitment upon which your friendship was based … I knew one day it would blossom into more.”

He pulled away, sitting straight as she brushed his tears away. “Y’ really support this? Y’ want me t’ be with her?”

She smiled tenderly. “Of course, I do. William does do. He’s ordered me not to push, to let you come to your own decisions without our influence, but I couldn’t let your little confession pass without offering a little advice.”

“T’ tell her.”

“Yes. Don’t shut her out, Daryl. Let her in and see what happens.”

“MOM! MOM!” Carol cried from the kitchen, her voice carrying throughout the lower level of the house. “I can’t find Daryl.”

Francine rushed into the hall. “Carol –“

But her daughter was overwrought. She collapsed against her mother, tears leaking rapidly from the corners of her eyes. “I woke u-up and he was gone. I checked upstairs and then the kitchen and the patio! Wh-Where is he? Why would he leave?!“ she sobbed against Francine’s shoulder.

Daryl raked a hand through his hair and stepped up behind them. Gawd, he needed a smoke. “Carol …“

Her head popped up off her mother’s shoulder, abandoning Francine to throw herself into Daryl’s arms. “Where were you!? I was freaking out! You’re always there when I wake up.”
Francine ran her hand over Carol’s mussed curls, but her words were for him. “Take care of her, and I’ll go fix her a coffee.”

Daryl nodded, and pulled her into the foyer to fetch his cigarettes and lighter from the pocket of his jacket where it hung on the coat rack. After the nightmare, and then his chat with Francine, he really needed one. Carol was so upset, she didn’t even think to scold him. When she refused to let go of him, he scooped her up in his arms and carried her out to the patio, setting her in his lap as he lit his cigarette and inhaled deeply.

He was nearly finished by the time she’d cried herself out. “Didn’t mean t’ make y’ cry,” he whispered, pressing a kiss to her brow. “Y’ have a nightmare too or somethin’?”

Carol burrowed deeper into the crook of his neck, her hand fisted in his shirt. “No … it’s stupid.”

“Ain’t nothin’ ‘bout y’ ever stupid. Tell me what scared y’,” he commanded gently.

“No! I don’t want you to think I’m stupid.”

“Carol Ann,” he growled warningly as he stubbed out his cigarette in the ashtray on the table near them.

“I don’t know,” she huffed, taking an angry swipe at the tears she’d shed. “I thought you’d gone to the bathroom, but when you didn’t come back I started thinking about your nightmare. It’s bad enough the part about your father, but my rejection … “ She cursed under her breath as more tears fell. “I started wondering if you’d taken it to heart and didn’t want to be with me anymore. I thought you might’ve left to go to the cabin. It was a nightmare, Daryl. No matter what Jackson – real or imagined – says about me, I would never abandon you!”

Daryl sighed, wrapping his warm hand around the back of her neck and encouraging her to avail herself of his warmth. “I know that, Carol. Fuck! Now th’ old man is gettin’ t’ both of us.”

“What a pair we make, huh?” she whispered tearfully. “We can’t let him beat us, Daryl.”

“We won’t. We’ve come too far,” he said, his determination stronger than ever. “And I’ll never let him hurt you, Carol. Never.”

She shook her head. “I’m not worried about me, Daryl. I’m afraid of what he can do when you let him inside your head. He knows just how to push your buttons.”

“And I worry about th’ day y’ figure out he’s been right all along an’ y’ can find a better friend than me. One day, you’ll realize bein’ involved with a Dixon ain’t doin’ y’ no favors.”

Carol could see the dream was still plaguing him. It was going to take time to get him back into the right frame of mind, but she was up for the challenge. Her fingers traced his jaw, his stubble making them tingle pleasantly as she lifted his chin. Her eyes were soft with love, her lips parted slightly in a smile. “And when are you going to realize those things don’t matter to me? You’re stuck with me, Dixon,” she teased playfully. Her other hand found his, twining just their pinkies. “Best friends forever.”
A/n: This was very emotional for me to write. Sorry about the late update. Really hope y’all liked this one, despite the heavy content. I want to take a moment and thank all my darling readers for your lovely reviews. Someone told me not too long ago … Authors get paid while fanfic writers do not. We write for the love of the characters and the desire to tell a wonderful story. Reviews are our payment and love and support. Every single word of encouragement or even constructive criticism mean the world to me. Thank you from the bottom of my heart! *hugs and love* I hope to get another chapter to y’all tomorrow.
Daryl stood absolutely still in the center of Carol’s bedroom as she worked the line of buttons on the long sleeved slate blue shirt he’d pulled from his duffel bag. Of course, it was brand new, tags still attached. Francine really needed to stop buying him clothes. He made enough money to clothe himself properly. And naturally, he couldn’t not wear it. She’d left a little post-it on the package. *Good luck, sweetheart. I know you’ll do great on your first day at the clinic. Love you!* He’d be a world class asshole if he shoved it back in the bag and picked one of his sleeveless frayed flannels.

Carol patted his chest when she was done, and he tilted his head to the side, wondering over her odd little smile. “What?” he asked, glancing down at himself. “Not my color?”

Her smile quirked up more on the left as she raised her darkened eyes to meet his and sighed. “Positively swoon-worthy, Dixon. If you’re not careful, all those girls will be ambushing you in the halls again,” she teased.

“Gawd! Don’t even think it!!” He never wanted to have to go through that ordeal again. “But it’s ok for my first day at the vet clinic?” he asked, anxiety creeping into his tone.

Carol’s voice dipped from teasing to loving as she stood back to admire him. “Perfect. I like this color. It’s lighter than what you usually wear and brings out your eyes. You look more put together than when you worked at the garage.”

Daryl nodded and sat down on the bed to pull on his boots. Carol disappeared into her walk-in closet and found a pair of hip-hugger jeans which she paired with a baby blue sweater, the scooped neckline revealing just a bit of cleavage and highlighting the long curve of her neck. It was several shades lighter than his own shirt. She didn’t want him to catch hell from their friends, which was usually the case when they dressed to match. It was all in good fun. They enjoyed seeing the shy side of Daryl when they teased him, just as much as she did.

Carol emerged from the closet carrying her boots and a purple leather jacket, just as her mother called up the stairs, warning them to get a move on before they were late for the first bell. “Go on, Daryl, and get your coffee,” she said, fastening the buckles on her knee-high boots, peeking at him from beneath her lashes as he yawned again.

“I can wait for y’,” he protested.

“It’s ok; I’m almost done. And let’s hope Ms. Johnson has a new novel to read so you can catch a nap in study hall.”

Carol grabbed her backpack and messenger bag, reaching for her laptop when it chirped, signaling a skype call. She flipped it open and pressed the connect tab, Merle’s smiling face greeting her. “Merle!” she cried happily, carrying the open computer downstairs with her to the kitchen.

“Mornin’ there, darlin’. What’re yer plans for t’day?” he asked by way of greeting. “Y’ talk t’ that brother o’ mine yet?”
She smiled. “He stayed with us last night. I just sent him down to breakfast.”

“Good. Good. I was hopin’ y’all would be together so I could share m’ news.” He chuckled as she set the laptop on the island and he got a good look at Daryl stuffing his face with caramel sticky bun. “Hey, baby brother. Damn, but don’tcha look downright pretty this mornin’!”

Daryl glared at his brother – looked over his shoulder to make sure Carol’s mom was nowhere near – and flipped Merle the finger.

Carol shot him a look, warning him to behave, and reached for her own bun, moaning in bliss as the caramel melted against her tongue. “So, what’s your news, Merle?”

He chuckled at her impatience. “We’re back in th’ states. Got t’ DC a few hours ago, but didn’t want t’ call too early. Darylina needs his beauty sleep.”

Daryl shoved another bite of the sweet confection into his mouth and gulped his coffee before responding. “Y’ still on schedule t’ be back on Friday?”

“That I am, lil’ brother, that I am. Should only take a few days t’ process out. Damn paperwork.” He leaned forward, his image growing bigger on the screen. “And we’re a go on the shop. Jim sent an email last night, ready t’ sell.”

Daryl’s eyes shuttered. “Yeah?”

“Som’thin’ about losing his best mechanic. Tried t’ accuse me of makin’ y’ quit t’ pressure him into acceptin’ m’ offer.”

“I was gonna tell y’ ‘bout that.”

“How ‘bout y’ tell me now?” Merle growled. He didn’t like to be kept in the dark on his brother’s well-being. He was an expert on just what a bastard their father could be, and he knew Daryl needed his job to be able to care for himself. “Daryl, y’ need that job.”

Carol held her tongue, leaving the matter between the brothers, not knowing if Daryl would appreciate her interference.

Daryl drained his coffee cup and leveled his loaded stare at his older brother. “I got a better job. Hershel needed an assistant at th’ vet clinic. I start this afternoon. I’ll be workin’ four t’ eight, half a day on Saturday and off Sunday. And I’ll be makin’ more at th’ clinic than I did at th’ garage,” he explained.

“He’ll also be learning a lot from Hershel, and gaining experience. This opportunity is going to look great on his college applications,” Carol added.

Daryl knew this had to be a blow to his brother. He’d thought they’d be working together when he took over the garage. But instead of throwing a Dixon tantrum, Merle smiled proudly. “Y’ still lookin’ t’ become a vet?”

He ducked his head and fidgeted with the cuticle on his thumb. “Always been my dream. Ain’t given up on it yet.”

Merle’s tone was rough with emotion as he studied his brother. “Proud of y’, brother. Y’ want t’ become a vet, we’ll just make sure y’ go t’ that fancy college an’ get yer degree.”

Daryl grinned sheepishly, never having heard Merle so determined. “I’m savin’ up, an’
Carol’s researchin’ grants an’ scholarships an’ stuff I might be eligible for.”

“Y’ keep yer focus, Daryl. We’re gonna make this happen.”

Carol bit back her tears, hearing the encouragement in the elder brother’s voice. Daryl needed Merle to support him, building him up instead of tearing him down. She blew him a kiss, which he pretended to catch, saying goodbye and grabbing her to-go cup of coffee and their lunch bag from the refrigerator.

Daryl said goodbye, excited his brother would finally be coming home before the weekend. They were so close to their fresh start, he could practically taste it. He closed the laptop and stored it away in her messenger bag, just as a harried-looking Francine breezed into the room.

“Oh, good! I was hoping you hadn’t left yet,” she huffed, helping Carol into her jacket. “Carol, dear, I need you to work a shift this afternoon. Amy texted me, saying she couldn’t come in due to some thing wrong with her sister. And if Andrea is down with some kind of bug, I’d rather Amy not work and breathe all over the pastries.”

Carol groaned. “Mom, I told Rick I’d tutor him tonight.”

“So, just have him come to the bakery and you can tutor between filling orders. It’s a short shift … four to seven. I’d do it myself, but I have a project I’m working on,” she added, refusing to meet her daughter’s eyes.

Carol crossed her arms over her chest and narrowed her eyes. “Does this have to do with a certain someone’s birthday present?”

Francine quickly kissed them both on the cheek and hurried out into the hall. “Have a good day, dears! Daryl, good luck with your job. See you tonight!”

Daryl watched her leave with raised brows before he shot a look at Carol. “Should we be worried?” he asked.

Carol felt a warm glow settle in her chest at his choice of words. We … not I. It shouldn’t have left her breathless with happiness since he always included her without a thought, but she could feel a change in the air. One which was quickly morphing into a strong gust. “I don’t … know,” she replied carefully, “but I intend to find out.”

Daryl grabbed up his backpack and their lunch bag as she gathered her own things and led the way to the door. He retrieved their helmets from the saddlebags on the bike, replacing them with her messenger bag and lunch. He strapped their backpacks to the bar on the back and he shivered, knowing it wouldn’t give her much room and she’d be forced to nestle more closely to his back. He was deliberately seeking her touch, and he couldn’t find it in himself to feel the first bit of remorse.

Carol had chosen to wear her hair down, and he didn’t hesitate to twist her curls around his nimble fingers to pile it atop her head. She pulled the half-helmet down on her head and secured the strap under her chin before she put on her sunglasses. Daryl did the same and threw his leg over the bike, lifting the kickstand. Once the Triumph was balanced beneath him, he held out his hand to his girl and steadied her while she mounted behind him.

“Ready?” he asked, his voice gravelled and thick with longing as she scooted as closely as possible against his back. He could feel the heat of her body through his leather jacket, his abdominal muscles clenching as her hands slowly slid around him to settle just above the waistband of his jeans. *Fuckkkkk!* She felt so good.
Carol smiled as she pressed her face against the nape of his neck, feeling him shiver. “Let’s go!” She loved these new reactions to her touch, his walls crumbling one by one. Her face was flushed from more than just the cool late September air by the time they arrived at school and parked next to Rick’s 1971 Plymouth Hemi Cuda convertible. It had taken the better part of two years to restore it, and Rick had been adamant that only Daryl would touch the engine. Walter Grimes had helped with the restoration as much as possible, wanting to spend time with the boys, and Carol and Lori had enjoyed watching their antics. She could see the pride on Rick’s face as he leaned back against the hood and greeted them with a small wave.

She hid a smile against Daryl’s shoulder as Rick held his closed hand up for a fist bump with Daryl. They’d never seemed to outgrow their little quirks, but she didn’t mind. In fact, she thought it was rather cute.

Rick held out his hand to steady Carol as she climbed off the bike. “Y’all cutting it kinda close today. Five minutes to first bell.”

Daryl handed Carol her bags and stored their helmets back in the saddle bags before retrieving his own. “Yeah. Not th’ greatest morning. Couldn’t sleep last night an’ everything seems t’ jus’ be piling up on us.”

“I can relate,” Rick nodded seriously. “I keep having nightmares I’m going to fail Trig and get kicked off the team.”

Carol snorted. “You’re not going to flunk Trig. By the way, I need you to come to the bakery after practice. Mom needs me to work a shift.”

“I can do that,” he agreed. He smirked and batted his eyes at her. “If I do well, do I get my pick of treats?” Daryl wasn’t the only one who had a sweet tooth.

She hummed, arching a brow and giving him a stern look. “Depends on how well you do. I doubt Coach Williams will be too pleased if you packed on the pounds.”

Rick chuckled as the bell rang. “Gotta go. Don’t want to be late for P.E. The cheerleading squad is going to be practicing their gymnastics routine inside today.” He waggled his brows and ran across the quad towards the gym, leaving Daryl shaking his head.

“He better hope Lori don’t catch him ogling her teammates.”

Carol preceded him through the open doors and stopped at their lockers. “What was it Merle said? He can look all he wants at the menu … he just can’t order.”

Daryl shook his head, chuckling softly where only she could hear, and grabbed what he would need for first period. He really needed to finish his English essay. He’d have ample time in Study Hall, if he could keep his eyes open. He was desperate for a good night’s sleep. It could have been worse. After his nightmare, he could have woken in his own room in Jackson’s house instead of safely nestled against his girl.

* * *

At precisely nine a.m., Francine waited in line at the receiving desk, tapping her nails impatiently against the counter of Senoia Water & Gas. The petite brunette stared at her in irritation
over the top rim of her glasses and then down at Francine’s tapping lacquered nails.

“I’ll be with you in just a moment. If you’d like to have a seat over there.”

Francine arched a brow and hummed, her lips pressed in a thin line of disdain. “Actually, dear, I’d rather not.” She reached over the counter and picked up the telephone receiver, waving it at the now alarmed woman. “Call back to Frank Monroe’s office and tell him I wish to see him immediately.”

“Ma’am, you can’t just barge in here and make demands. Mr. Monroe is a busy man,” the receptionist hissed. “Oh, and you’d be surprised at what I’m capable of. Now, dear.”

Her fingers pounded the keys on the desktop telephone, entering the extension for the general manager, her eyes glaring daggers at the woman before her. A loud squawk could be heard through the receiver. “Yes, sir … I’m sorry, sir … I know you asked not to be disturbed, but there’s a woman here to see you and she’s very … insistent,” she stammered.

“Tell whoever it is I’m unavailable.”

Francine gnashed her teeth, straightened the strap on her purse and ignored the receptionist’s calls as she stalked down the hall to his office. She was good friends with his wife, Marian, but she never had been able to tolerate Frank. Smarmy little asshole! She passed through his outer office and threw the door open, her azure eyes glacial as she stared at the man … and the curvy blonde perched on his lap wearing nothing but her bra.

“Mrs. Mason!” he practically shouted.

Francine slammed the door in the receptionist’s face – who had followed her down the hall in a huff – before she could see anything. “Hello, Frank. Unavailable, huh?”

“Well, I – I – I –“

“Stow it.” She leaned over the chair placed in front of the desk and picked up her secretary’s skirt between two fingers, tossing it to her. “Do get dressed, dear. Frank and I have a matter to discuss.”

Francine impatiently tapped her foot as she waited for the woman to compose herself and quietly leave the room.

Frank swallowed audibly, staring at his wife’s closest friend. He’d known Francine a long time, and knew the damage she could bring down on his balding head. “It’s not what it looks like.”

She paced before his desk, her temper rising to dangerous levels. “Really?” She tapped her chin with a lone finger, her defiant stare daring him to argue with her. “Your nearly naked secretary was perched on your lap, Frank,” she sneered. “Is she even of legal age? Consorting with a minor, sexual harassment, sexual fraternization with your staff … Oh, I’m sure your superiors would be delighted with this news.”

“She’s eighteen!”

“And you’re forty-seven, you toad!” Her hands planted on her hips as she glowered in righteous indignation. “It doesn’t excuse the fact you were about to fuck her on your desk!”
“Did Marian put you up to this? Did she send you here to spy on me?” he huffed.

“No, Frank. She’s still blissfully unaware of your infidelities despite how many times I’ve tried to get her to see sense,” Francine bristled. “I’m here for an entirely different matter.”

“Anything! I’d do anything for you to shut up,” he groaned, knowing she had him between a rock and a hard place.

“Last week, Daryl Dixon contacted this office, paid a deposit on new service and is now being forced to wait a ridiculous amount of time to have that service set up. I want to know why, Frank.” Her piercing gaze made him shift uncomfortably. “Is it because he’s Jackson’s son? Because he bears the last name Dixon?” she asked, her voice rising to match her barely restrained temper. Her suspicions were confirmed when he looked away guiltily. “I knew it!”

“Franny –“

She cut him off with a hot look. Oh, if looks could kill. “You’re a pig, Frank. You’re going to hold a grudge against that sweet boy all because of his father? Well, if you don’t want me to go to your boss and tell him what’s really going on, you’ll get a crew out there … TODAY! And don’t think I won’t enjoy seeing you with your balls in a vice. Then after I inform them of your little tryst in your office, I’m going to tell Marian, hire her a lawyer and encourage her to divorce you. Your name won’t mean squat in this town when I’m done with you.”

“That’s blackmail!” he roared.

“A little louder … I don’t think they quite heard you across the tracks,” she snarked.

Monroe’s face was an unhealthy shade of red as he reached for the phone, bypassing the receptionist and dialing directly. “Daniel … I’m clearing your schedule this afternoon.” He glared at Francine. “What time?”

“Two o’clock will do.”

“Daniel, pull Daryl Dixon’s file for his personal information. I need you to get out there for two p.m. and install his service … I don’t care, I want it done today, and don’t be late.”

Frank ground his teeth in vexation as he witnessed Francine Mason’s smug smirk. “Make sure your technician texts my boy so he can make arrangements for his last period at school.”

“I see to it personally.”

Francine stood to her full five-foot five-inch height and smiled. “See that you do, Frank.” She paused as she pulled the door open. “Oh, and Frank … remember, I’ll be keeping my eye on you.”

She stopped in the outer office, right before his secretary’s desk, and smiled softly at the girl who peered at her warily from beneath her long lashes. Francine gentled her tone as she addressed her. “What’s your name, sweetheart?”

“Brandy,” the girl replied.

Francine’s heart wept for her, pain and perhaps a little desperation evident in her luminous brown eyes. “Has he threatened you, Brandy? Your job?”

The little blonde burst into tears and hurried from the office, ducking into the ladies room
across the hall. Francine cursed under her breath and followed. Brandy was bent over the lavatory, splashing cool water on her face. The older woman tore several paper towels from the dispenser and handed them to her. “I really need this job,” Brandy whispered, a tremor in her voice. “Am I in trouble?”

“There are other jobs out there … jobs where you don’t have to deal with sexual harassment.” Francine pulled a business card from her purse. “I’m tied up through Wednesday, but you come by the bakery Thursday morning at ten. I’m always looking for reliable help.”

Brandy shook her head, averting her eyes. “I need this salary to help support my parents.”

“We’ll talk about that when you come in. I pay over minimum wage, and the hours are good.” Francine reached out and squeezed the girl’s hand. “Let me help you, dear.”

“Ok.”

* * *

The call came just after lunch, when Daryl and Carol were walking to Biology II. Daryl reached into his back pocket and opened the message, ignoring his girl’s curious glance. “Who would be calling? Everyone we know is here,” she grumbled.

He clicked the accept button and pulled her to lean against the wall outside of their classroom. “Hello.”

“Mr. Dixon?” the voice asked.

“Er … yeah?”

The voice sounded a bit strained, and Daryl frowned.

“This is Mr. Monroe from Senoia Water & Gas. It seems there was a scheduling mix-up. Your service call should have been put on the books for today … not next Monday. Would you be available to let the technician onto your property at two p.m. today?”

Daryl’s face lit up in a wide smile, surprising Carol. “Yes, sir, I’ll be there. Thank you, sir!”

“Again, Mr. Dixon, I apologize for the mix-up.”

Carol was nearly bouncing on her feet. “Well … who was it? What’d they want?”

“It was Mr. Monroe from th’ gas company. He said he could have a tech out t’ th’ cabin at two,” he beamed, relieved they’d have hot water and a decent stove to cook on. “I gotta go. I ain’t gonna be able t’ go t’ our last two classes.”

His girl was crazy serious about their attendance, the thought of blowing off two classes not to be considered, which was why his mouth gaped open when she grinned. “Ok, grab our stuff from our lockers while I talk to our teachers about our assignments. Meet me in front of the office?”

His graveled voice growled lowly as he leaned forward to glare at her, eyes narrowed. “A’right, who are y’ an’ what’ve y’ done with my Carol?”
“Stahp!” she giggled. “This is important.” She flounced off into the classroom wearing her manipulate-the-teacher-into-doing-my-bidding smile. He wondered if he should be worried.

Ten minutes later, he was growing anxious as they stood in the office trying to check out for the rest of the day. Mrs. Prescott – the secretary – was proving difficult. No amount of Carol’s cajoling was going to get them out of there. He was sure they’d have to sneak out.

“Call Mom. She’s our emergency contact and will give her permission when we tell her why we need to leave,” Carol insisted.

Daryl propped his chin on his hand as he leaned on the counter. The woman looked like she was continuously sucking lemons, but nevertheless dialed Mrs. Mason’s number and put it on speaker.

The secretary jumped in before either of the kids could say anything. “Mrs. Mason, this is Lorraine Prescott from Senoia High School.”

Francine sounded frantic when she answered. “Are my kids ok? Are they hurt?”

“No, they’re just fine. They’re in the office trying to check out, and the rules state I can’t allow them to leave without a parent or guardian’s permission.”

“Put my daughter on the phone,” she demanded, irritated not just from her encounter with Frank Monroe, but also the prissy school secretary. She did not have time for this! The only thing saving the woman from a tongue lashing was the fact that these people at the school didn’t know her kids like she did. They wouldn’t be trying to check out without a good reason.

“I’m here, Mom. Daryl just got a call from the gas company; they’re going to be at his new place at two to hook up the gas. I want to go with him so he can drop me off at Sweet Dreams before he goes to the clinic. May I? I already got our assignments so we won’t miss anything.”

Francine’s lips curled into a devilish smirk. “Of course, darling. Mrs. Prescott, release my kids so they can tend to their business.”

“Thanks, Mom,” Carol said at the same time Daryl mumbled his own thanks.

Daryl grumbled all the way out to the bike. “I swear that woman is a dragon. She needs t’ loosen up.”

“She needs to get laid!” Carol snarled. Though it quickly morphed into a teasing grin as Daryl’s cheeks turned cherry red.

He ducked his head sheepishly, and secured their bags before handing over her helmet. “Hope this don’t take long. If we’re lucky, we might get in a nap before we have t’ be at work.”

Chapter End Notes

A/n: Did this seem like filler? It kinda felt like filler to me. IDK. Regardless, I hope y’all
enjoyed it. Please review and share the love :) Promise there will be more plot development next chapter.
Daryl left Carol to her own devices as he followed the SW&G technician to the rear of the cabin to show him where the meter was. She lugged her backpack and messenger bag into his bedroom, wanting to take advantage of the new bed, and climbed on to boot up her computer. She hadn’t been impressed with the assignments given for their last two classes, but they should be done easily without leaving them feeling exhausted when they were done. Besides, she really wanted to give her English essay one more read-through before she printed and turned it in Wednesday morning.

He groaned as he came into the bedroom – wearily rubbing the back of his neck – and saw her books spread over the foot of the bed. “Gawd, woman! I thought we were gonna take a nap.”

Carol smiled indulgently as he flopped face first onto the mattress and burrowed into his pillow. “You are going to nap, but I am going to get this done so I don’t have to do it later. I still have to work that shift at Sweet Dreams and tutor Rick.”

“When did shit get so complicated? Just yesterday we were sittin’ in th’ fam’ly room at your house after school, watchin’ cartoons and eatin’ cookies,” he mumbled, his eyes already closed.

“We grew up, Daryl,” she murmured softly, her fingers carding through his hair at his temple. “Now, rest. You can do your homework after your shift at the clinic.” She doubted he had even heard her. She knew he would doze at the most, uncomfortable having a stranger in his home, but she could handle signing off on the service order.

Carol shook her head at the worksheets spread before her, deciding to tackle them now that she’d finished the final edit on her essay. Sometimes, she wondered if her teachers ever grew tired of teaching. The assignments weren’t the least bit challenging, a single sheet on cell division for Biology II and their usual Monday vocabulary list and essay questions on the material they’d be covering that week for English IV. The worksheets took her no more than twenty minutes even with comparing her answers for Biology against her text book. She’d just finished packing away her books when a rap came at the open front door.

“Excuse me, Mr. Dixon?” the technician – Daniel – called as he stepped inside, looking for Daryl.

Carol set her bags on the sofa as she came into the living room, smiling at the man. “He’s napping. Is there something I can help you with?” she asked pleasantly.

Daniel nodded, returning her smile. “Yes, ma’am. I just need to check the connections to your stove, and hot water heater, fire up the pilot lights, and you’ll be all set.”

“Oh, of course, just follow me.” She led him first to the kitchen and watched him get to work, his muscles straining as he pulled the heavy stove forward so he could get behind it. Carol wracked her brain, trying to remember if Daryl had shown her where the hot water heater was kept. She glanced at her watch, time slipping away from them. Daryl couldn’t be late for his first day at the clinic. A relieved sigh escaped her as the tech finished and moved the stove back into place.
Light streamed in through the bathroom window, but she could clearly see the slender door in the far corner where the appliance was surely kept. She preceded Daniel into the room, her hand reaching for the little knob, and as the door opened, something furry raced over her feet, heading towards the open door and out into the living room. Carol let out a shriek which could probably be heard in three counties. She nearly knocked the technician down in her haste to bolt from the bathroom, calling Daryl’s name as she ran towards his bedroom.

Carol’s piercing scream jolted up Daryl’s spine, his eyes flying open and his heart thundering as he bounded from the bed, his bare feet pounding the wooden floor as he heard her crying his name. They collided as he ran into the living room, his arms lifting to wrap around her, but she wouldn’t stand still long enough for him to touch her. Still babbling hysterically, she climbed up his back like a spider monkey, one knee hooking over his shoulder, the other wrapping fiercely about his waist, both arms wrapped around his head where he couldn’t see what might have scared her. That technician had better not have accosted her. He’d hate to have to beat him senseless.

Her arms around his head were becoming painful, and he knew he’d have to find some way of calming her down. But she screamed again and pointed to a darkened corner. “Rat! Huge rat!! Kill it, Daryl!”

“An’ how am I s’posed t’ do that when you’re wrapped around me like a vine?” he asked in his softest tone as he reached up to tenderly stroke her arm.

“It ran out of the closet where the hot water heater is … and … and … Oh, my god! It ran over my feet when I opened the door!” She shifted her arms from around his head and planted one hand on either side of his face, turning him so she could meet his gaze, her own eyes wide with fear and panic. “It touched me, Daryl!! Do something!”

Daniel was doing his best not to laugh at her. Instead, he turned to the corner where he’d gleaned movement and pulled a large wrench from his toolbelt, inching forward cautiously. He hated to see the girl in such a panic. It reminded him of his sister’s fear of snakes. He changed direction and skirted around the sofa, disappearing into the kitchen as Dixon’s girlfriend whimpered. Taking the trashcan and removing the bag, he tiptoed towards the corner and trapped the animal.

“Did he get it?” Carol asked, her voice muffled from where she’d buried her face against Daryl’s neck.

“I think so. Might want t’ stop chokin’ me now, Car,” Daryl said, somewhat amused. She still hadn’t released him. He was beginning to wonder if she ever would.

Daniel flipped the trashcan over, the little beastie falling to the bottom as he stared over the rim … and promptly burst out laughing. “Um … ma’am … it’s not a rat.”

That got Daryl’s attention as he felt Carol slide off his back, though she still remained behind him, her hands fist ed in his shirt. “Yeah? What is it then?”

The tech brought the trashcan closer and let Daryl see for himself. “Raccoon. I think when she opened the door, she frightened the little guy. His nature, of course, drove him to escape the threat.”

Carol groaned, pressing her blushing face between Daryl’s shoulder blades. “I feel so stupid.”

Daniel handed Daryl the trashcan and moved back towards the bathroom to finish his job. “Don’t be so hard on yourself, ma’am. The lighting wasn’t the best, and without a good look at it, I
could see how you might have gotten … er … confused.”

Carol straightened her shoulders, trying not to look as idiotic as she felt and disappeared into the bedroom, shutting the door behind her. It only took another ten minutes before Daniel’s work was done while Daryl went outside to set the raccoon loose at the edge of the woods.

Coming back inside, Daryl signed his name to the service order and smiled sheepishly. “Thanks for comin’ out today. It’s gonna be nice t’ have a hot shower.” He handed the clipboard back. “Do I owe y’ anythin’ for th’ pest removal?”

Daniel waved him off. “Naw … not that often I get to go on a service call this entertaining. Do you think your girlfriend is going to be alright?”

A lovely shade of red stained his neck as it rose into his face and settled into his ears. He rubbed a hand over his nape and quickly glanced towards his bedroom, hoping Carol hadn’t heard the man. “Uh … Yeah I think so,” he said, not contradicting the man. Actually, it felt really good to have someone call her that. “She’s tough … normally. Never thought I’d see her freak out over a rodent.”

Daniel shook Daryl’s hand and told him to call the office if there were any problems before taking his leave. He knew one thing … he was going to inspect that closet to find out where the animal had gotten in. He wouldn’t have something like this happen again to scare his girl. Yes, he wanted to have her in his arms, but not because of fear.

*. *.*.*

Daryl pulled the Triumph up next to the curb and killed the engine. A faint smile still lingered on his lips as he pulled his helmet off and rested it on the gas tank. Carol wasn’t dealing well with what had happened at the cabin. Hell, she would barely look at him, her cheeks tinted with a permanent blush. She was adorable. He held out his hand to steady her as she dismounted, her face still rosy, but her eyes were hidden behind her dark glasses. He swung his leg over the bike and unstrapped her helmet, tucking her glasses inside before storing them in one of the saddlebags. She continued to avoid his gaze as he handed over her backpack and messenger bag.

“Carol … y’ ok? Y’ ain’t said two words t’ me since we left th’ cabin,” he fretted. “So, y’ got scared. It ain’t no reason not t’ talk t’ me.”

Carol wanted to kick herself. She’d been fishing with Daryl and her dad a few times, not once squealing or shying away from the live bait they used or the fish itself. And how many times had she been hunting with Daryl, gutting and cleaning her own kills as he’d taught her? How could she have been such a wuss because of what she’d thought was a rat? She’d made a complete and utter fool of herself in front of the technician who’d been so helpful, but worst of all, she’d looked stupid and entirely too girly in front of Daryl.

She looked down, her gaze focused on her fidgeting hands as she stood there before him. He came closer, resting his hands over her to still them, calming her with his gentle concern. “I’m sorry, Daryl. I didn’t mean to embarrass you … especially in front of a stranger,” she blurted out, trying to make things better between them.

“Y’ didn’t do nothin’ wrong, Carol,” he insisted. “It was a natural reaction t’ bein’ scared.”
Carol blanched, watching Rick pull around the corner with Lori next to him and Maggie and Glenn in the backseat. Her eyes narrowed, seeing the amusement behind Daryl’s smoky blue gaze. She raised one lone index finger, poking him in the center of his chest. “Don’t even think about it, Dixon. We will never speak of the … incident … again.” Her tone gentled as he nodded in agreement, trusting him to keep his word. Relieved, she twisted her hand until she could twine her fingers with his. “Come on, and let me treat you to a cupcake and a soda before work. Get you all hyped up on sugar,” she grinned.

“Cain’t say no t’ that,” he agreed, following her through the front door of Sweet Dreams. She stopped to greet several of their regular customers as he moved off to sit at their table in the back-right corner of the shop. She tried to keep her comments to a minimum, knowing she didn’t have much time before he’d have to leave for work. Hurrying behind the counter, she spoke a few words to Angela and Samantha – two of Francine’s most responsible and hard-working employees - he couldn’t hear before heading his way with a fountain Coke and an Almond Dream cupcake. He couldn’t help but lick his lips in anticipation.

The cupcake consisted of white almond cake, topped with almond buttercream and garnished with crushed almonds. It was heavenly, and easily one of his favorites. Rick and his carpool piled through the door, stopping at the counter for their own drinks and treats before joining the pair in the back. Daryl was instantly wary of excited gleam in Maggie’s clear green eyes. Something was clearly up and she was fit to burst with the need to tell her friends.

“Where were y’all sixth period? When everything went down, we looked for y’all, and couldn’t find you anywhere,” she gushed, looking a bit put out.

“They finally came out t’ th’ cabin t’ hook up th’ gas,” Daryl provided, more interested in why they were freaking out.

Lori giggled madly as she dug into her red velvet cupcake with the tiny plastic pastry fork and fed it to Rick. “Oh, Carol, you’re going to love this!”

Carol’s eyes narrowed on Rick where he sat across from her. “I thought you had practice this afternoon.”

“Cancelled,” he mumbled, taking a huge bite of his orange delight cupcake. The six of them would spend every afternoon at the bakery, chomping down on Francine’s delicacies if they didn’t know they’d gain a hundred pounds.

Daryl noticed Carol hadn’t gotten one for herself and pushed the confection between them, offering her a bite. His piercing gaze landed on Maggie, clearly suspicious. “C’mon, Mags, spill.”

She cackled evilly and caught the straw of her Diet Coke between her teeth. “Ed Peletier and Philip Blake were expelled this afternoon.”

Daryl noticed Carol hadn’t gotten one for herself and pushed the confection between them, offering her a bite. His piercing gaze landed on Maggie, clearly suspicious. “C’mon, Mags, spill.”

She cackled evilly and caught the straw of her Diet Coke between her teeth. “Ed Peletier and Philip Blake were expelled this afternoon.”

Carol’s eyes widened exponentially, the cupcake forgotten. “Expelled?” she gasped. “Mr. Hovarth isn’t one to rush forward with expulsion. It must’ve been really serious.” She looked at them each in turn. Maggie and Lori seemed to be giddy with glee over this turn of events, but Rick, Glenn and especially Daryl looked as if they were ready to commit murder. Peletier was not well liked – even by his friends – and he’d pissed them all of at one time or another as Ed had made a pass at their girls. They’d be thrilled to see the boy kicked out of school.

Lori took a sip of her drink and leaned forward, resting her elbows on the table. “Fifth period, is when there are no P.E. classes. You know the dance team takes advantage of the empty gym on Monday and Friday.”
Maggie leaned in too, her voice just as discreet. “There’s a plumbing access corridor behind the showers, both in the girl’s and boy’s locker room … right behind the showers.”

Daryl’s hands trembled with rage where they sat upon the table, his face blood red as he listened to the girls’ explanation. Carol reached over and laid her hand over his and shook her head, seeing how badly he needed to calm down.

Rick’s voice was a low growl. “Apparently, they’ve been spying on the girls showering for a while now.”

“How’d they get found out?” Daryl asked, curious.

Glenn steepled his hands in front of his face and huffed in exasperation. “One of the showers went down, and the janitor was showing the plumber where he could have access to it. They were caught red-handed and dragged off to Mr. Hovarth’s office.”

Carol crossed her arms over her chest and sat back in her chair. “And how did the four of you get wind of this?”

Lori smirked. “I just happened to be working in the office with Mrs. Prescott, helping with some filing sixth period. I heard everything!” she confided. “Especially when their fathers showed up. God, Carol it was epic! And they weren’t even worried about being overheard. Mr. Blake lost his shit and told Philip they were going to pack up and move to their summer home in Maine. Supposedly, he has some influence there and can sweep his son’s actions under the rug.”

“What about Ed?” Carol asked, trying not to let Daryl’s thumb, brushing against the back of her hand, distract her.

Maggie sat back in her chair, laughing so hard she was holding her sides. “Classic! I hope he packs his snow shoes,” she cackled.

Lori held back her own amusement to fill them in on Ed’s fate. “Mr. Peletier was furious. Boy, does that man have a mouth on him to make a sailor blush. Called Ed a perverted SOB and then said when they got home he was going to call his friend – who is a base commander – and ship Ed off to an Alaskan military school!”

Carol tilted her head to the side and closed her eyes, grinning like the cat who’d got the cream. “The school year has barely begun, and now we’ll be rid of those two for good. We might be able to enjoy our Senior year now.”

“Hell, yeah!” Daryl whooped, leaning over for a fist bump with both Glenn and Rick.

Maggie finished off her half of the treat she was sharing with Glenn, her eyes widening as she caught sight of the clock on the wall. “Damn! Daryl can I catch a ride with you to the clinic? I’m relieving Shawn this afternoon.”

“Sure,” he replied.

“I need to get to work too. Thankfully, I won’t be working the counter today.”

Rick seemed surprised as he looked at Carol. “You’re working in the kitchen? You changed your mind about tutoring me?” he asked, slightly panicked.

“Of course not. You can study just as easily at my worktable as you can out here.” She winked at Glenn. “You’re welcome to join us if you like, Glenn.”
“Thanks, Carol. I could use some extra help,” he grinned.

Lori kissed her boyfriend’s cheek and hurried off, meeting her mother at the bank – where she worked as a teller – to catch a ride home.

Carol caught Daryl’s wrist as they got up from the table. “Call me if you get a break?”

He nodded. “If I can. If not, I’ll call y’ before I crash.”

Her face fell. “You’re going home to Jackson tonight, aren’t you?”

“I have t’. Need t’ find out what his schedule is for th’ week.” He twisted his hand and tickled her fingers. “Makes it easier to avoid him.”

He shivered as she leaned forward, her lips brushing lightly against his ear. “Please be careful … and try to have a good day.”

“I will, Car. Don’t worry.”

*.*.*

Hershel Greene usually left the clinic at five p.m., but he’d had a lot to go over with his new assistant. The boy had impressed him, which didn’t happen often. Now as Daryl sat on the Triumph, waving to the vet and his daughter as they locked up and headed home, he couldn’t help but feel proud of himself. Before he could even light up a cigarette, Carol’s picture was flashing on his phone, signaling her call.

“Hey …”

“How was it?” she asked, nearly breathless.

Daryl chuckled, blowing a thin stream of smoke from his nose. “Told y’ earlier, it was goin’ fine. Y’ call your dad t’ pick y’ up from your shift?” he asked, unable to see her home because her shift ended an hour before his.

Carol huffed at his change of subject. “No, I caught a ride home with Rick. He’s doing much better, and I don’t think he’s going to have trouble passing our Trig test this week. As long as he maintains a C average, he won’t get kicked off the team.” She sighed, and the rustling noises in the background made him imagine her stretching out on her bed. “Now, stop avoiding my question. I want to know all about your first day at work.”

“You’re a bossy lil’ thing, y’ know that?”

“Daryl!” she whined.

“A’right … it was fine, Carol. Hershel gave me th’ full tour, explained all my duties an’ such. An’ we had two clients come in today. Mrs. Kravitz with her cat an’ Mr. Dillon with Bruiser, his boxer.”

“What was wrong with them?” she asked, and he could hear the worry in her tone. His girl
had a soft spot for animals too.

Daryl took a last drag from his cigarette and stubbed it beneath his boot. “Peaches, she jus’ had a hairball stuck in her throat, but Mrs. Kravitz swore up an’ down her baby had pneumonia. I jus’ had t’ hold her while Hershel got it out. Her owner was kinda surprised … said her cat don’t let nobody hold her.”

Carol’s tone softened lovingly. “I’m not surprised, Daryl. You have a soft touch, and animals are drawn to you. What was wrong with Bruiser?”

Daryl winced. “Y’ know old Mr. Dillon lives out there on Saw Mill Road with acres of woods at the back o’ his property. Seems th’ little guy had a run in with a porcupine.” His brow furrowed at her little sound of distress. “Don’t worry, Carol, he’s fine. Hershel removed th’ quills an’ gave him a light sedative to help th’ pain. I felt kinda helpless, jus’ holdin’ him in my lap, tryin’ t’ keep him calm, but Hershel seemed pleased.”

“Of course,” she said confidently. “He has no idea just how lucky he is to have you.”

Daryl sighed. Now she was getting downright sentimental. “A’right, I need t’ get home an’ see if I can’t get some o’ this homework done. I’m try t’ get the rough draft of my essay finished. Y’ mind if I use your laptop tomorrow in study hall t’ finish it up?”

She hesitated, and he could imagine her nibbling on her bottom lip. He knew what was coming. “Why don’t you come over and we can work on it together?”

“Carol … we’ve discussed this already,” he said, rubbing at his temple to rid it of the tension headache which was building. “I gotta make an appearance at home. I ain’t got no choice.”

“Fine,” she replied in a petulant tone. “I’ll bring the laptop tomorrow. Text me before you go to bed?”

“Course. Don’t I always?”

“Mhmm.”

“Stop your worryin’, Carol Ann,” he admonished.

“In your dreams, Dixon.”

* * *

Daryl yawned, his eyes drooping and stinging with exhaustion. It hadn’t taken him long to get the worksheets done, but his essay had taken more than an hour. He still wasn’t entirely sure he was happy with it, but he knew Carol would look it over before he wrote the final draft. He’d never claim to be as smart as Carol, but he was close … because of her. She pushed him to be the very best he could be, and he was determined not to let her down.

He packed up his books and papers, sliding them into his backpack before he stood up and stretched. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d been so tired. At least, his new job was as
challenging as it was rewarding. Rummaging through the refrigerator, he found a can of Coke
behind the case of beer Jackson had put in there. Gawd forbid the man buy some food. Thankfully,
there had been enough to fix himself a sandwich when he’d gotten home.

Daryl glanced up at the clock on the wall and yawned. It was already after eleven, and
Jackson hadn’t come home yet. He was probably shacked up with some floozy he’d met down at
the bar. He finished his Coke and tossed the can in the bin before he slid his phone into his
backpack and slung it over his shoulder. He wasn’t going to stay up waiting on the fucker, that was
for damn sure! All he wanted to do was call Carol and catch a few hours of sleep.

He’d barely stepped into the living room when the front door was thrown open, the heavy
barrier knocking him onto his ass. At least it wouldn’t be a lie this time when he had to explain to his
girl where he’d gotten the knot now forming on his forehead. He’d had no warning, and he could
only imagine why he hadn’t heard the Harley pull up into the yard.

“Th’ fuck y’ doin’ lurkin’ behind th’ front door, boy?” Jackson sneered, looking down at
Daryl.

Daryl peered up at him warily from beneath his lashes as he slowly climbed to his feet. It
was never good to make any sudden movements where Jackson was concerned. “Wasn’t lurkin’,”
he said defensively. “I was on my way t’ bed. Somethin’ wrong with th’ Harley? I didn’t hear y’
pull in.”

“Fuckin’ Fred – do-gooder asshole – wouldn’t let me drive home. Caught a ride with him.”
Jackson stumbled into him, knocking Daryl back and making his way into the kitchen to pop a
frozen dinner into the microwave. “Gonna need y’ t’ go pick it up tomorrow an’ bring it home.”

Daryl ducked his head so his old man couldn’t see the derisive roll of his eyes. Yet, before
he could respond, Jackson began yelling. *Oh, shit, please not tonight!*

“What th’ hell y’ wearing, boy?!”

Daryl cringed, wide eyes rising to his father’s. He’d completely forgotten about the scrubs he
was wearing. “I … uh … I started my new job today,” he answered lamely. “Jim’s sellin’ the
garage … and … and I thought it would be better t’ find another one before I got laid off.”

Jackson sneered. “What kinda job has y’ wearin’ that pussy shit?”

Daryl’s heart pounded in his chest, the blood threatening to freeze in his veins as he
anticipated a blow, but his old man hadn’t moved from his spot leaning against the counter. “I’m
workin’ over at Green’s Animal Clinic as a vet assistant,” he answered dully, his voice raspy with
fear.

His father’s lip curled further as he glared at Daryl. “For all that fancy schoolin’ y’ insist on,
yer about as dumb as a box o’ rocks,” he scoffed. “Y’ ain’t gonna make no money playin’ around
with a bunch o’ animals, boy!” Daryl forced himself to stand his ground as Jackson took a staggered
step towards him. “When th’ new owner takes over the garage, y’ best look like gettin’ down there
and beggin’ for your job back.”

To avoid the fight his old man so desperately wanted, Daryl just nodded in agreement.
Seemingly satisfied, Jackson took his food from the microwave and slumped down at the table. “Are
y’ gonna need me t’ bring y’ t’ work in th’ mornin’?”

Jackson shook his head. “Nah … I called Sam on th’ way home an’ told him my bike was
down. He said he’d come out here t’ pick me up.” He pointed his fork at his son. “An’ don’t be thinkin’ about pullin’ no stupid stunts while I’m gone this week,” he growled in warning.

“Gone?” Daryl asked, his heartbeat picking up again, but this time with excitement.

“Yeah, we got th’ contract over in Griffin. Got th’ word t’day. We’ll be startin’ on that new strip mall, so I won’t be home prob’ly ‘til Tuesday next week.”

“A’right. Y’ need me t’ help y’ pack?” he asked, not knowing what else to say. He felt like doing cartwheels down the hall. A whole week without Jackson? Hell yeah! By the time his old man got back, he’d be eighteen – a legal adult – and safely ensconced in the cabin. And Merle would be home!

“Pfft,” Jackson scoffed, “as if I’d want y’ riflin’ through my stuff. Carry y’ ass t’ bed. Tired o’ lookin’ at y.”

Daryl didn’t argue, though he had to make himself tread slowly from the room. He couldn’t allow his father to see just how happy he was. He couldn’t wait to tell Carol.

* * *

William stopped in the doorway of his daughter’s room and frowned as he watched her pace anxiously back and forth, her phone clutched to her bosom, the other raking through her mussed auburn curls. “Sweetheart, what’s wrong?” he asked, concern heavy in his voice.

Carol shook her head. “Nothing, Daddy, just waiting for Daryl to call.”

He moved slowly into the room and pulled her into his arms. “I’m sure he’s fine, Carol Ann. It’s nearly midnight. Maybe he fell asleep studying.”

She burrowed further into his embrace, seeking comfort. “I know, but I’m not going to be able to sleep until I hear his voice.” She fought back a sob as her father ran a hand over her hair. “It’s just another day and he’ll be free. I’m so worried something is going to happen and … and … Daddy, I can’t lose him!”

William took her shoulders in a firm grip and forced her to meet his eyes. “Carol, he’s going to be fine. He’s strong and clever and so brave, and he has friends to support him. He’s going to do everything in his power to stay safe. Believe in him, sweetheart. Don’t let your fears overwhelm you.”

Carol shrieked excitedly when the phone rang, her hands fumbling with the phone until she feared dropping it. “Daryl?!?”

“Hey.”

William could see the tension bleed from her, and he pointed her towards the bed, pulling the blanket up around her, then turning off her lamp. She would be fine now. He pulled her door closed and sought out his own room, wanting nothing more than to fall into bed with his wife for some cuddling and sleep.

“Are you alright?” Carol asked, breathless now that the adrenaline was no longer coursing
through her veins. “I’ve been so worried.”

“I’m fine.”

“Then why are you whispering?”

Daryl sighed. “So th’ old bastard can’t hear me, that’s why! But don’t worry, other than gettin’ taken by surprise an’ hit by th’ front door, I’m ok.”

“What if you have a concussion!?”

“I don’t,” he hissed in exasperation. “Y’ hover entirely too much, Car. I hate t’ ask, but I need a favor.”

Carol perked up. “Anything, you know that.”

He stretched out on his back and got comfortable, relieved he’d managed to shift the focus of their conversation off of himself. “I have t’ go pick up Jackson’s bike from th’ bar because he was too wasted t’ ride it home himself. Think y’ can bring me t’ get it before school?”

She rolled over and immediately set her alarm clock to get up an hour earlier. “Of course, I will.”

Carol could hear the grin in his voice when he answered, “Got some good news.”

“Yeah?”

“Yep. His boss got th’ contract t’ build that new strip mall over in Griffin. He’s gonna be gone for a week! I’ll be long gone by th’ time he gets back, an’ Merle will be home by then too. He won’t be able t’ touch me.”

“That’s the best news!” she squealed in delight. “Daryl, this is just perfect!”

“Can I ask y’ for one more favor?” he asked, his voice no longer a whisper, but the deep graved roughness she loved. “Think y’ might want t’ come over after work an’ help me pack th’ rest o’ my stuff … maybe spend th’ night at th’ cabin?”

Carol shivered, a wide smile perched on her lips. “I finally get to spend the night in your bed?” she purred. “How could I say no?”

Daryl chuckled. “Go t’ sleep, Carol Ann.”

“Mhmm,” she hummed, her mind racing with possibilities. “Night, Daryl.”

She hugged her phone close to her chest as the line disconnected and fell asleep with a contented smile on her lips.

Chapter End Notes
A/n: OMG I am SO sorry for the delay. I’ve been having some health issues which just shut me down for the last few days. It was a struggle to get this done. I’m going to have another chapter as soon as possible, but I won’t give you a set day to look for it. Thank you so much for your patience.
Daryl guzzled his third cup of coffee as if it were water. He had no idea what his stupid father had done with the creamer he’d bought, but he was sure it would have hindered the caffeine rush he needed this morning anyway. He paced back towards the front room window as he stepped out of the kitchen, wondering where the hell Jackson’s ride was. His stomach roiled viciously as he thought of Carol possibly showing up before his old man left for work. That same thought had the air freezing in his lungs, forcing him to lean against the arch between the living room and kitchen, his heart thundering as he leaned over and placed a hand on his knee. He barely had the presence of mind to reach over and set his cup down on the counter before he spilled it and got a beating for his clumsiness.

Jackson staggered into the living room and tossed his bag onto the couch before heading towards the coffee pot. He eyed his son, his lip curling in disgust. “Th’ fuck’s wrong with y’, boy? Y’ sick? Take that shit outside!” he roared. When Daryl remained frozen in place, the eldest Dixon grabbed the collar of his jacket and hauled his ass out onto the rickety front porch.

Even after Jackson stomped back inside and slammed the door, Daryl couldn’t seem to catch his breath. As much as he didn’t want to see his girl show up right now, he wouldn’t lie to himself … he needed her! He knew he was in the throes of a panic attack. He was showing weakness, which his old man would surely pounce on if he thought he was flaking out instead of really being sick. Daryl had always kept Carol away when he knew there was a chance she might run into Jackson. That was to be avoided at all costs! There was no telling what would happen should she smart off to his father, and knowing his girl, it was a forgone conclusion she would. She wouldn’t be able to help herself, having bottled up her rage and hate for the man for so long. He groaned and leaned over the railing, emptying his stomach.

Purging himself didn’t help. Now his hands were shaking, his knees were weak and his breath smelled like he’d had three-day old road kill for breakfast. Gawd, I’m pathetic! Daryl hurried around the side of the house and settled onto his haunches, turning the spigot and cupping his hands for the cool water to rinse his mouth out.

He rose unsteadily and leaned back against the side of the house, closing his eyes. I’m worryin’ for nothin’. Carol always sleeps ‘til six thirty, and it’s only six twenty-five. She’ll need t’ grab a shower … oh, hell no, don’t even go there, Dixon! Breakfast an’ grabbin’ her stuff would take another fifteen minutes. She shouldn’t be here until after seven.

Which is why he felt as if he was going to have a heart attack when he saw her car coming down the long drive through the trailer park and connected to their property?! He stood in awe, watching as she parked and got out of the civic. She was still … would always be … the most beautiful girl he’d ever seen, and he couldn’t help but admire her. Her curves were encased in a pair of ebony leather pants … Down, boy! … topped with a white cashmere sweater which hugged her svelte curves, and her purple leather jacket. She’s tryin’ t’ kill me, for fuck’s sake! The sun shone on her hair where it was piled into a messy bun, tendrils framing her face and drawing attention to the curve of her neck. He glanced down at her feet, hoping for a respite to pull himself together, but of course that was too much to ask. He groaned. Gawd! She’s wearin’ th’ fuck me boots!
Daryl was snapped out of his trance, unable to block out the sound of Jackson stomping through the house. *Hellfire! He prob’ly thinks that’s his ride. No! No, no, no, no, no!* He sprinted across the yard, Carol’s eyes widening as she caught sight of him.

She braced her hands against his chest as he collided with her. Carol wrapped her arms loosely around his neck and smiled. “Well, good morning to you to, Mr. Dixon,” she purred, not understanding why he looked so panicked. This was their usual morning greeting. “Are you alright? What’s wrong?”

“Jackson’s ride ain’t showed up yet. Fucker’s still here! Y’ gotta go, Carol. Y’ cain’t be around him …”

Carol’s eyes flashed hotly as she took in the panic overwhelming him, evident in more than his eyes. His hands shook violently against her hips, and his breathing was coming so fast he was almost to the point of hyperventilation. She wasn’t worried about Jackson Dixon, just the boy in her arms. *Her* Daryl. Her hand ran through the hair at his nape and grasped it roughly, pulling his head down to rest his brow to hers. That touch of skin on skin was imperative to the magic she could weave between them. Even the school counselors had been stunned the first time they’d witnessed one of his anxiety attacks. “Breathe for me, baby. You’re safe. Do you really think I’d allow anything to hurt you? Hmm?” she purred softly in a tone meant only for his ears.

“C-Cain’t let h-him see m-me like this, Car … p-please,” he begged, humbling himself before her. He was trying so hard to calm his breathing, but even her soothing touch didn’t seem to be working. “Carol …”

She pulled him closer, her cheek pressing against his so he’d be able to hear her better. “Trust me, baby … just follow my lead. He’ll just think you can’t keep your hands off me. He’ll never suspect you’re having an attack. It’s ok.”

“I trust you,” he rasped, his voice no more than a broken whisper. He whimpered at her touch, her hand rubbing against his breastbone.

Carol bit her lips, plumping them up to look as if they were swollen from his kisses as he pulled her closer, his breathing slower, but still nothing near better. She discreetly peeked over his shoulder, ignoring the press of his body flush with hers. “The bastard is standing on the porch … staring at us … like a damn pervert,” she growled. When Daryl tensed, she determined to give the elder Dixon a show he wouldn’t soon forget.

She brought her hands up to his face, drawing back only inches to see his lovely eyes. They were calmer at least. “Please … please don’t freak out,” she said, caressing the strong line of his jaw, a second before she claimed his lips.

This was *not* how she’d wanted their first kiss to go, but right now, she’d have to suck up her anger at Jackson and go with it. She had to make sure Daryl was ok before she let him face his father. Carol nibbled softly, not wanting to scare him when he was just now starting to relax. “It’s ok, baby,” she again whispered against his soft lips, and finally felt him respond tentatively.

He was wondering what the hell she was doing, but he trusted her implicitly. And he wasn’t about to give up the chance to kiss his girl. She’d no doubt regret it later, but in that moment, he had the opportunity to taste heaven.

Daryl had never kissed a girl before, always too devoted to the love he felt for Carol. Hell, he thought, he’d never let one get close enough to try. He hoped he wasn’t fucking it up and she’d never want to do it again. His arms banded tightly around her waist, dragging her closer, his lips
leaving no part of hers unexplored.

Carol felt her ass collide with the hood of the civic as he tried to move even closer, could feel herself surrendering to him as he bent her slightly backwards, stunned by his passion. She’d woken a side of him she’d always wanted to know. She no longer thought of getting back at his father standing a few feet away, consumed by Daryl’s passion, his teeth nipping at her lips before taking one between his own and nipping gently. *Dear Lord, where did he learn to kiss like this?!?!*

They were so wrapped up in one another, they didn’t even notice when a pickup pulled in next to them. But Jackson’s raucous laughter mere steps behind Daryl was like a bucket of ice water, instantly killing the mood. Before Daryl could pull away from her, she gripped his right hand hard and shot him a warning look before turning to look at his father.

She summoned a blush and pasted a coy smile of her lips. “Good morning, Mr. Dixon, I …” She ducked her head shyly. “I didn’t see you standing there. Do forgive me.”

Daryl valiantly tried not to choke on his tongue at her outrageous ruse.

“An’ jus’ who might you be, lil’ miss?” he asked, arching a dubious brow in her direction.

“Oh!” she demurred. “Carol … Carol Ann Mason. I’m Daryl’s girlfriend.” Well, it wasn’t a lie. She was a girl and she was his friend … his best friend. But the darkening of Jackson’s eyes did not hold promise.

“Are y’ now?” His glittering eyes shot to his son. “Come help me with m’ bags, boy,” he said, waving at Samuels to stay in the truck.

Before they could reach the porch, Jackson grabbed Daryl’s shoulder and spun him around. “Th’ fuck y’ playin’ at, sniffin’ around that girl? Y’ ain’t meant fer a girl like that. She’s high class an’ you ain’t nothin’ but trash.”

Daryl bristled, knowing the old man wouldn’t hit him in front of witnesses. “Carol ain’t like that!”

Jackson’s eyes narrowed on him. “Don’t get lippy with me, boy. I won’t hesitate t’ knock y’ on yer ass!” he hissed. “What’s she even doin’ here?”

“She’s gonna gimme a ride down t’ th’ bar t’ pick up your bike.”

“Y’ jus’ better not knock ‘er up! Don’t want no babies t’ have t’ raise. Now go grab my bags.”

He was relieved his father was already seated in the truck when he came back with the bags and tossed them into the back of the truck. He cringed when his old man’s hand reached out the open window and grabbed his arm. “Well, leastways I know y’ ain’t no faggot.”

Carol waved as the truck pulled out of the drive. Daryl thought he was going to be sick. The second they were out of sight, she rushed to his side, tilting his head up so she could gauge his reaction. She wasn’t surprised to see anger clouding his smoky blue gaze.

“Get in th’ car, Carol,” he growled in a steely tone, daring her to object.

“But –“

“Now! We’ll talk on th’ way.”
Daryl’s face was still an unhealthy shade of red as they drove towards the bar. Not to mention he was speeding and slamming his hand on the steering wheel every once in a while. Carol’s hadn’t said a word, though she didn’t hesitate to shoot querying looks at him from beneath her lashes. “What?!” he finally snapped, refusing to take his eyes off the road. He had no doubt she was either smirking or frowning, her usual reaction to his anger.

Which she chose to ignore, it seemed. “Are you alright, Daryl? Is your chest still hurting?”

He groaned inwardly at the concern in her sweet voice. “I’m fine,” he gritted out through clenched teeth. His hands tightened on the wheel until his knuckles were white. How could Daryl admit to her he was embarrassed. He’d wanted to protect her, and instead … he’d had a fucking anxiety attack!

“Daryl, please,” she whispered, “please, don’t shut me out.”

Daryl pulled the car to the side of the road onto the shoulder and slammed the gear shift into park. He could feel her reaching for him, taking his hand, her fingers stroking softly, and he ducked his head, letting his hair hide him from her. He certainly didn’t give a damn if they were late to school. “Really not tryin’ t’ shut y’ out, Carol,” he said, the words bitter on his tongue. “I jus’ … I cain’t even protect y’ without fallin’ apart! What th’ fuck kinda man am I gonna be if I have a panic attack every time I cain’t handle somethin’?”

Carol leaned over the small console and rested her head against his shoulder. “You’re being too hard on yourself. That man has left scars on your soul, Daryl … far worse than those he’s left on your body.” He didn’t even flinch. His girl had tended every single mark marring his skin, and had never looked at him with pity or scorn. Don’t hide them, Daryl. They show your pain. They show how brave and strong you are. They show you’re a survivor, she’d told him, daring him to argue. “I know you like to keep everything buried, but you really should consider talking to someone.”

“I ain’t seein’ no shrink, Carol Ann,” he scoffed. “I don’t need my head shrunk.”

She turned those mesmerizing blues on him, and he had to force himself not to agree to everything she suggested. “I’m just want you to consider it. They might be able to prescribe something for your anxiety problem.” When he remained resolute, she sighed. “Then again, once Jackson is no longer an issue, the problem might correct itself.”

Daryl huffed a laugh, the first he’d even felt like laughing that day, the sound warm and pleasant to her ears judging from her smile. “For kissin’ me? Naw, Carol, I know your tricks by now. Y’ was tryin’ t’ cover for me.” He got out of the car and moved to sit on the hood, pulling his cigarettes from his jacket and lighting one. Inhaling deeply, he rubbed a hand over his face and looked down at his feet. He’d wanted so badly for the kiss to be real, his perfect girl wrapped in his arms, her lips molded to his, bodies flushed and wanting more. The memory alone was enough to keep him warm on the cold winter nights to come, but damnit, now that he’d had a taste, he knew it would never be enough.

He wanted it all. Daryl had spent his life trying to be good, to be someone worthy of Carol. Now, as her voice filtered through his mind, interspersed with Francine’s little talks and William’s sage advice, he realized … he’d always been enough because she’d chosen him. She’d seen directly
into his soul and claimed him as her own long ago. He just hadn't been ready to see it. His hand shook as he took another drag off his cigarette. Maybe he was deluding himself, but he wasn't going to spend another two years hiding his feelings behind the mask of friendship.

Tomorrow night, after work, he was going to drive her out to the lake and show her the stars. There, with the moon full and bright, glinting off the surface of the blue water surrounded by the rock walls of the quarry … he was going to tell her just how much he loved her.

When Daryl got back into the car, he felt light, happier, though nervous as all hell about his decision, but he couldn’t continue to live in fear of her rejection. He had to know for sure. If she didn’t feel the same way about him, he knew they’d still be able to retain their friendship, and eventually get over the awkwardness of his confession. Hell, when wasn’t he awkward? She remained quiet as he started the civic and pulled back onto the road, so he finally shot a quick glance her way to make sure she was alright.

“S’matter? Y’ ok?”

Carol released her bottom lip from between her teeth and nodded, her eyes luminous as if she was holding back tears. “I crossed a line, Daryl.” She snorted at herself in disgust. “I didn’t just cross it, I pole-vaulted right over it! You asked me not to let him see you like that … and … and it was the only thing I could think of to help!” She brushed angrily at a tear which slipped over her lashes. “Are you mad? I don’t want you to be mad … I just … I wanted him so badly to see how much better you are than he is. I was so … angry,” she said, slamming her hand against the door.

Daryl reached over and took her other hand where it rested in her lap and squeezed it gently. He’d always loved her fierce protectiveness when it came to him. “I ain’t mad at y’, Carol Ann, an’ I really don’t give two shits about what Jackson thinks about that lil’ show y’ put on for him. I’m jus’ glad he didn’t try t’ hurt y’.” Carol sucked in a sharp breath as he turned to her and she could see the intensity in his darkened eyes. “I won’t let him hurt y’ … ever.”

“We’re ok?”

The corners of his lips quirked up as he returned his gaze to the road. “Yeah, Car … we’re us.”

*.*.*

Oh, what she wouldn’t do for a hot shower, Carol thought as she made a new batch of white almond frosting and filled a piping bag. Rick and Glenn looked miserable as they toiled over the worksheets she’d made up for them. They should be more than ready for the test on Thursday. She swiped a forearm over her damp brow and groaned. Quickly, she lined up the tray holding two dozen cooled cupcakes and expertly piped the frosting onto each one. It took her approximately three minutes, and she stood back, smiling down at her work.

“What?!” she asked, catching the slack-jawed looks the boys were shooting her way.

“Dang, Carol, is there anything you can’t do?” Glenn asked.

She giggled and reached for the bowl of crushed almonds to sprinkle on top. “Oh, hush. Focus on your work or we’ll be here all night.”
Sam smiled at her as she came through the kitchen, discarding her apron as she made her way to the time clock. “I’m going to head out, Carol. Do you need anything before I go?”

“No, Sam, thanks. Enjoy the rest of your night.”

Carol set the tray aside and let her mind wander as she set about cleaning her work space. She was glad she’d let Daryl drive. As much as she knew the area like the back of her hand, she never would have found the seedy dive bar hidden far back down a heavily concealed dirt road in an area of Senoia she hoped never to visit again. When he’d pulled up, her eyes had been instantly drawn to Jackson’s bike. The Harley was a thing of beauty, and she’d wondered how someone like Jackson Dixon had been able to afford it. She’d nearly swallowed her tongue when Daryl had told her Merle had built it from the ground up, even the intricate paint job on the tank and fenders of an American flag blowing in the wind. She’d had no idea Merle possessed such talent, which made her furious to find out their father had taken it from him and claimed it as his own when it was finished. It had made her hate Jackson even more, something she hadn’t thought possible. Daryl had explained, it had been then when Merle had left their home for good, gotten himself in trouble and chose the military over jail time.

They’d dropped the Harley back at Daryl’s and got to school just as the bell rang, rushing towards their first period with no time to spare. At least, he’d been able to finish up his essay in time to turn it in for English at the end of the day. And what a day it had been, she groaned inwardly. One time, during fourth period she’d glanced at her watch, wondering if it had stopped entirely. She just couldn’t wait until their shifts were done and she could pick Daryl up from the clinic.

When she was done with her closing clean up, she glanced over to see how far the boys had come with their assignments. “Almost done?”

Rick nodded. “Yeah, just a few more.”

Carol set a cupcake in front of each of them, and then picked up the tray to carry up front. “Alright, I’m going to head up front and talk to the girls. Just bring those to me when you’re done.”

“Well, it’s about time!” Maggie chided as she and Lori vacated the booth they were sharing and moved to sit on a stool at the counter.

Carol grinned, opening the display case and switching out the empty trays. She shrugged. “Work is work, ladies. I need to help Mom when I can. Besides, it keeps my mind off of things when I can work and tutor in the afternoons.”

“Hmm,” Lori hummed, arching one raven’s wing brow. “And what plagues that brilliant mind of yours, Carol Ann? A certain Dixon we all know and love?”

Maggie snorted which turned into a giggle as Carol tossed her towel at Lori. “Stahp!” she blushed, looking away.

“Oh, come on, we all know you’re head over toes for him, Carol. When are you going to admit it?” Maggie badgered.

Carol stared at her friends before glancing over her shoulder to make sure the boys were still in the kitchen. “Tonight.”

She wanted to cover her ears at the high-pitched squealing coming from the two. “I knew it,” Maggie gushed excitedly. “Where are you going to tell him? ‘Cause we all know it’ll be you, Carol. That boy ain’t one to make the first move. I WANT DETAILS, WOMAN!”
“Shhhhhhh!” she shushed them, waving her hands in front of her. “See! This is why I don’t tell you things. And I’m not giving you details.”

Lori sighed and propped her chin on her hand. “Mean. Just plain mean, Carol Ann.”

“I will not discuss whatever relationship I share with Daryl. We’re very private people, and _—_

Maggie reached out and squeezed her hand. “We know, Carol. We’re just teasing you. We want both of you to be happy, is all.”

Carol smiled and opted to change the subject. “Everything is ready for tomorrow night. I talked to Mom earlier, and she’s so excited. All y’all have to do is show up between seven thirty and seven forty-five. I’ll have Daryl there by ten after eight.”

Lori fiddled with her straw before taking a big sip. “Your mom is so cool, Carol. I wish my parents were like yours. This is going to be Daryl’s best birthday yet.”

“Which is why I haven’t told Glenn a thing,” Maggie nodded sagely. “It would be all over the school. I just don’t get it. He was so shy when I met him. Never would have thought he’d be such a big gossip.”

The girls were still laughing when the boys finished up with their assignments and joined them, ready to head home.

* * *

Carol watched the old beat up digital alarm clock on the nightstand and groaned. It was only eleven forty-five. What was it with time wishing to bedevil her at every turn that day, she thought irritably. Daryl made a noise in his sleep, the sound somewhere between a snuffle and a whimper, but he settled instantly as her hand crept beneath his worn t-shirt to caress his belly. A wicked smirk toyed at her lips, reveling her position as the big spoon.

They hadn’t gotten to do everything they’d planned for the evening. With little to no sleep the night before, the stress of the morning, school, and work, packing up his room at Jackson’s place had been the last thing they’d wanted to tackle. Instead, Daryl had talked her into greasy takeout from the diner, which they’d brought back to the cabin and eaten picnic style in front of the fire.

He’d taken a shower, and suggested she do the same, but she’d eyed the door to the bathroom, her eyes wide as a shudder roared through her. It wasn’t until he’d assured her he’d patched the hole in the closet - where the varmint had gotten in – that she’d agreed, choosing to enjoy a long soak in the old clawfoot tub.

Her poor Daryl had been passed out, face down in the pillows, when she’d finally joined him in the bedroom, his exhaustion having won the battle against his desire to talk with her – as they usually did – before bed. She snuggled closer, her fingers raking gently through the fine hair below his navel. Just a few more minutes … she couldn’t fall asleep now. Not just yet.

“Carol …” he moaned ever so softly.

She raised slightly on her elbow, peering over his shoulder to see the smile on his lips. Carol
hoped it was a nice dream he was having. He deserved an escape from the pain and fear he’d lived with for so long. Her phone vibrated where it laid behind her on the bed. Yes! It was midnight! Finally! Daryl Dixon was officially eighteen years old. She wanted to shout it from the rooftops!

Carol could barely contain herself as she nuzzled her lips against his ear. “Daryl … Daryl, wake up.”

Daryl slung his arm over his face. “Five more minutes,” he slurred sleepily.

“Daryl!”

His head jerked up off the pillow, his eyes wide and wary as he searched the room for danger before turning to Carol. “What is it … y’ ok … somethin’ scare y’?”

Carol was lying there, looking good enough to eat, braced on one elbow, her teeth clamped around her lush lower lip and a lovely pink tint dotting her cheeks. He forced himself to look away and bunched the blankets around his lap. “Happy Birthday, Dixon,” she purred.

He looked at the clock before glancing back at her. She’d woken him at midnight, wanting to be the first to offer her best wishes. Why wasn’t he surprised? “Gawd, Carol Ann,” he yawned now that the adrenaline was wearing off. “I thought y’ were in trouble.”

More than you know, baby! “No, just impatient.” She reached over to the nightstand on her side of the bed and retrieved a long thin box, plopping it onto his lap as she knelt beside him in the middle of the huge bed.

“Y’ always impatient, woman,” he dead-panned, scooting until he could sit up and lean against the pillows at his back. He eyed her warily, remembering some of the gag gifts she’d given him when he was younger. He’d never forget the Spongebob speedos.

“Daryl,” she whined, drawing out the last syllable of his name. “C’mon!”

Daryl chuckled, slowly sliding his fingers beneath the edge of the silver wrapping paper. By the time he lifted the lid to the box, she was practically in his lap. A soft gasp fell from his lips as he looked down at the gleam of the soft lamp light which caught the blade of the hand crafted bowie knife. “Car … Carol,” he murmured in awe.

“You like it?” she asked hopefully, her hands clasped beneath her chin.

“It’s amazin’,” he breathed. Six inches with his name engraved into the polished ebony handle. “This musta cost a fortune.” He stared at her accusingly.

“Don’t you even start with me, Dixon!” she chuckled. It was the same old argument every time she gave him a gift. Expense. “You’re only eighteen once, and I wanted to get you something special as well as practical. The … ah … sheath was on back order, but it should be here next week.”

He set the box on the nightstand and pulled her into his arms, burying his face in her hair to hide the glimmer of tears in his eyes. “Thank you. It’s awesome, Car … really.”

Carol sat back on her knees, smiling gently as she brushed his hair away from his brow and lost herself in his eyes. Memories flooded her mind, reminding her of every reason she loved him, and she couldn’t hold back any longer. She inched forward, brushing her lips to his. “I love you, Daryl.”
“I know that,” he chuckled, twining her fingers with his. “Y’ tell me enough.”

She bit her lip, gathering her courage. “No, baby. I mean … yeah, I’ll always love you, you’ll always be my best friend, but … what I’m trying to say is … I’m in love with you, Daryl.”

Chapter End Notes

A/n: My evil knows no bounds, apparently. Next time … feelings are shared, Daryl thinks their friends forgot his birthday, and Surprise! Really hope you enjoyed this one. Thank you so much for your support and patience. It means so much to me!
Daryl felt his chest tighten, desperate for air, but he’d be damned if he could draw a breath. He had to be dreaming. Now, all he had to do was wait for Jackson to barge through the door and call him all kinds of stupid to effectively put him back in his place.

“Daryl! Would you say something?” She tentatively rested her hand on his chest, feeling his erratic heartbeat and the absence of motion in his air passages. “Daryl, breathe!”

He gasped, pulling in the air his body craved, never taking his eyes from her. “Pinch me.”

“What … why?” This was getting entirely too weird.

When she wouldn’t comply, he pinched his forearm … hard, wincing when he felt the sharp stinging pain. “I’m really not dreaming …”

Carol sniffled, a furrow appearing between her perfectly arched auburn brows. “I’m sorry … I … I wouldn’t have told you if I’d known you’d react like this … I just … dammit! I couldn’t hold it in any longer.” She swiped at an errant tear and averted her gaze to her fidgeting hands. “It’s not like I asked you to marry me or anything, Daryl. I just wanted you to know how I feel. I -“

His strong arms banded around her waist, lifting her onto his lap, her knees cradling his hips. “Don’t cry, Car … please,” he begged, kissing away her tears with the lightest strokes of his lips. Her hands cupped either side of his neck, her thumbs caressing the pulse points just beneath his jaw, drawing him closer, reveling in the feel of his lips on her skin without the slightest provocation on her part. She had always been the one to initiate touch, but there was no room for hesitancy now.

Carol sighed breathily. “I’ve loved you for so long.”

Daryl retreated just enough to meet her gaze. “I love you too.” He pulled one of her hands free from his neck and pressed a sweet kiss to her palm. “Cain’t ever remember a time when I didn’t love y’, Carol. I was gonna take y’ out t’ Quarry Lake tomorrow night, sit under th’ stars an’ finally tell y’, but o’ course y’ had t’ beat me t’ it, Miss Impatient. Had a little speech planned an’ everythin’.”

Her mouth fell open in shock. “And just how was I supposed to know!??” she squeaked. “I’ve been trying for well over a month to show you how I feel.”

Daryl grinned as she nestled into his chest and rested her head on his shoulder, remembering when things had begun to change. How they’d begun to gravitate closer to one another in their sleep when he’d spend the night with her, their desperate need to constantly hold each other’s hand when they were out together or at home watching a movie, the mischief in her smile, the heat in her eyes. Most of all her coming to his rescue when Beth had wanted to ask him to the Sadie Hawkins dance. His girl had been jealous. “I’m a blind idiot,” he grumbled. “Why didn’t y’ jus’ tell me?”

“I guess I was afraid things would change between us if you didn’t feel the same way,” she admitted. “I couldn’t stand the thought of losing you.” She tilted her head back, searching his hooded gaze. “Is that why you didn’t tell me?”
He nodded, his fingers continuing their lazy path through her unbound hair. “I always thought y’ deserved better than me, but ...” he whispered, his voice thick with emotion, his lower lip trembling as he fought back tears. “I jus’ ... I couldn’t give y’ up, Carol. I dreaded th’ day you’d find some boy an’ fall in love. I wanted it t’ be me, but how could y’ want t’ be with me like that? I jus’ ... I jus’ couldn’t take that first step outta your life. I wouldn’t be th’ one t’ cause y’ pain.” His arms crushed her to his chest. “You’re th’ first thing I think about when I wake up, an’ the last thing I think about when I close my eyes at night. I’m yours, sweetheart. My heart, my body, my soul ... they’re yours. They’ve always been yours. It’s gonna be up t’ you t’ tell me y’ don’t want me anymore.”

She could hear the naked vulnerability in his tone, and Carol sniffled again, moved beyond words by the passion behind his heartfelt words. “Never! I would never send you away, Daryl. I need you so much; sometimes I can’t even focus when we’re apart for a few hours,” she confessed.

Daryl’s lips ghosted over her brow in a tender kiss. “Why y’ think I had an anxiety attack this mornin’? One reason is ‘cause I wasn’t with y’, Car.”

Carol sat up, her fingers twisting nervously in the fabric of his shirt. “I don’t want you to think I’m just some hormonal lovestruck teenager, Daryl. This thing between us has been building all our lives.” She took his hand and brought it to rest over her heart, the heat of his hand burning pleasantly through her thin camisole top. “I feel it ... here.”

He couldn’t remember the last time – if ever – he’d been so happy or felt so loved. “You’re th’ smartest person I know. I’d never think so little o’ y’, Carol Ann.” His hands rose to cradle her face in his warm palms, his thumbs drying her tears. “I love y’ so damn much. I just want t’ share my life with y’, try t’ make y’ happy an’ not fuck up too badly.”

Carol let out a little huff, somewhere between a laugh and a sob, joy evident in her teary blue eyes. She pulled him closer, her fingers tangling in the hair at his nape, pressing her lips sweetly to his. He felt little frissons of pleasure ripple through him, her touch, her lips, her scent which plagued his dreams with longing, everything about her calling him with her siren’s song. And he surrendered willingly, his lips parting as her own closed over it, the sweet pull so close to perfect he could have wept.

When she drew back to gauge his reaction, he was wearing a blissful smile. “What?” she chuckled softly. “Was it that bad?”

Daryl shook his head, giving her hips a little squeeze. “That was our first kiss,” he murmured dreamily.

“Baby, I just kissed you this morning, remember?”

“Nope, that one don’t count,” he argued. He brushed her long curls back off her shoulder and planted a kiss near her collarbone.

Carol gasped, easily becoming distracted. “And why is that?” she breathed.

His warm breath against the shell of her ear sent shivers down her spine. “Because I didn’t know y’ loved me then.”

Carol didn’t know how to answer, overwhelmed by the sweetly spoken words of love he’d uttered. Who knew he could be so romantic? He didn’t give her a chance to reply, nor to think for that matter. She simply melted into his arms as his lips claimed hers once more.
Light was already pervading the still dimness, chasing away the shadows which lingered in the room, creeping beneath the heavy curtains Daryl had tacked over the window. Carol smiled, her eyes open barely a crack as she stared at his class ring perched on her index finger. It was rather funny, the mad dash through the cabin he’d made in search of corn pads to make it fit properly on her dainty digit, the blood ruby – her birthstone – winking back at her. She could still remember her mother’s confusion when they’d purchased their class rings. His bearing a ruby, hers a sapphire. Even then, they’d found a small way to show their deep love for one another.

Her smile widened as Daryl shifted behind her, his hand clenching slightly where it had sneaked under her shirt to splay against her belly. Her lips still tingled from his kisses, though almost chaste in their delivery. He was so shy and tentative when he touched her, seeming almost afraid she’d slap his hand away and tell him she’d changed her mind. They were going to have to work on that. Daryl could be as closed off as he wanted with everyone else, but not with her. Now that he was away from Jackson and his abuse, she knew he would thrive. Little by little, he’d come out of his shell.

Daryl wiggled again until his body was flush with hers, and heat crept up into her cheeks, his morning erection pressed against her ass. It sent a thrill of excitement racing through her, and she scooted back even further. Sometimes, she felt she could never be close enough to him, and now, having committed to a new phase of their relationship, she had the freedom to touch him without her doubts getting in the way. It was liberating and more than a little empowering.

She shivered as his lips brushed the sensitive spot beneath her right ear, but it was nothing compared to the sensations he evoked from her as his thumb drew little circles around her belly button. “Mornin’, beautiful,” he whispered, his voice graveled and rough.

Carol moaned and buried her face in the pillow to muffle the sound. “Unghf …”

“Don’t move … be right back,” he said, springing out of the bed and heading for the bathroom.

She turned over and leaned up on her elbows to look over at the clock. It was only six-fifteen. Carol collapsed back on her pillows, mentally calculating her to-do list in her head, but everything was forgotten when she looked up to see Daryl standing in the doorway, watching her with avid interest. She crooked her finger at him, and he blushed.

Daryl approached her slowly, never taking his eyes from her as he climbed onto the bed and settled into her open arms. Her fingers carded through his hair, brushing it away from his brow and he sighed with pleasure, dipping his head to nuzzle his nose against hers.

“Happy birthday, baby,” she crooned, tilting his chin up to receive her kiss. And she wasn’t playing games this time. If nothing else, she was determined to taste him. She let him lead, his lips soft against hers, gently exploring. Yet, even that small sweet kiss ignited a fire in her. Molten heat spread through her, searing her bones, and making her weak.

It was all Daryl could do to hold himself in check, to remain in the moment with a clear head so as not to frighten her. He knew how easily it would be to lose himself in her, and he refused to be like his father, taking what he wanted with no regard to her feelings. Carol’s arms wrapped around
his neck, her nails scoring his flesh through his t-shirt and he groaned, fisting his hand in the sheets near her hip. He burned for her … it was too much, yet not enough, and when her tongue darted out to glide over the seam of his lips … he thought he’d die.

Daryl jerked back, his eyes wide and dark as he looked down at her. “Carol …”

She frowned. “Did I do something wrong?”

“N-No.” More calmly, “No, ‘course not. Jus’ … I don’t wanna push you into somethin’ neither of us are ready for. That ain’t us.”

Her smile returned. “I know that, Daryl, but there’s no reason why we can’t enjoy a few kisses before we get ready for school.” She sighed. “I just don’t want you to hold back. I can feel it, so don’t even think to argue. You’re taut as a bow string.”

His face tinted a fiery red and he ducked his head, hiding in the crook of her neck. “What if y’ don’t like it?”

Carol traced the line of his jaw with her fingertips, trying to soothe him. “You’re kidding, right?”

Daryl shook his head, but still refused to vacate his hiding place.

“Daryl, look at me,” she commanded gently, tugging on his hair until he did as she wished. “Just for argument’s sake, what do you think I would do? Ridicule you? Laugh at you?” When he averted his gaze, she knew, and she cursed Jackson to the pits of hell.

“Don’t want t’ disappoint y’,” he murmured dejectedly.

“Kiss me, Daryl,” she said, her voice a seductive purr he couldn’t resist. She tightened her hold around his neck, hooked a leg over his hip and pressed her breasts into his chest so he had no hope of escape.

Carol moaned as his lips claimed hers, gently nipping. The tension began to slowly ebb from his shoulders, and he melted into her embrace, surrendering to her. He bucked against her as her nails dug into his nape, his arousal pressing hotly against her core and she gasped. Taking advantage of her parted lips, Daryl flicked his tongue against hers. Instead of pushing him away – as he’d feared – she writhed beneath him, craving more. His tongue slid sinuously against her own, making him light-headed from the sheer pleasure her mouth provided. He yielded to her earlier demand, holding nothing back as he plundered the honeyed recesses, until the alarm blared and he was forced to put an end to their kiss.

“Let’s skip school today,” Carol groaned as he rolled over to shut off the alarm. “We can stay in bed all day.”

Daryl snorted. “Yeah, an’ your mom’ll never let y’ stay th’ night with me again.” Carol crawled over and knelt behind him, wrapping her arms around him and dropping a kiss to his neck. “Was it ok?” he asked, unable to look back at her to see her reaction for fear of what he would see.

“No, Daryl, it wasn’t ok. It was wonderful,” she said softly, hugging him. “I’d ask where you’d learned to kiss so well if I didn’t know better.”

He grinned sheepishly. “For th’ last two years, it’s all I been able t’ think about, Carol. An’ I ain’t even gonna tell y’ what I dream about y’.”
Carol arched a brow, a wicked smile on her lips as she got out of bed and rummaged in her bag to get ready for school. “Well, maybe tonight you can show me some of those dreams if you can’t talk about them.” She went to his dresser and pulled out a clean pair of jeans, tossing them on the bed beside him. “C’mon, maybe if we hurry, we can go by Sweet Dreams and have a pastry for breakfast.”

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Carol stared down at the chicken and rice casserole her mother had packed her for lunch, picking at it with her fork as her stomach roiled. Francine hadn’t been at the bakery this morning when they’d stopped for breakfast. Angela had told her she’d just stopped in long enough to drop off their lunch bag and check the schedule to make sure everything was running smoothly before she’d taken off again. Francine was up to something, and it was killing Carol not to know what it was.

“We should cut our last two periods. I can’t concentrate,” she groaned, putting the lid back on the container.

Daryl stopped chewing, his head whipping around to stare at her. “A’right, where’s Carol an’ what’ve y’ done with her?”

She chuckled, though it was weak. “I’m serious, Daryl.”

“We already checked out early last Friday an’ we were late yesterday. Cain’t afford t’ leave today.” He finished off his casserole and stuffed the container back into their bag before wrapping an arm around her shoulders. “C’mon, what’s wrong?”

“My mother!” she huffed in irritation. “I still haven’t figured out what she’s up to.”

Daryl rolled his eyes and reached for the little white bakery box. He grinned and rubbed his hands together finding a Chocolate Sin cupcake inside. “Stop worryin’ about your mom, Carol Ann. Y’ know when she sets her mind on somethin’ there ain’t nothin’ t’ do but stand back an’ hope y’ don’t get caught in her wake.”

She nodded. She had to agree with him on that point. Her mother was a force of nature. Their friends finally made it through the lunch line and made their way to the table.

“It’s not fair you have a mom who packs all those goodies while the four of us have to eat school food,” Glenn said by way of greeting.

Maggie swatted him on the arm. “Your mom is an awesome cook. I don’t know why you’re complaining. You could pack a lunch if you wanted to.”

Rick smiled over at Carol as he took a huge bite of the burger he’d selected. “What’s up with you two today? Something is different,” he remarked, unaware of the ruckus he was about to cause with his careless words.

Maggie and Lori leaned towards one another, heads together as their scrutinizing gazes settled on the pair across the table. Carol and Daryl were leaned into each other, closer than they’d ever sat before at lunch, and though her posture was somewhat relaxed – at least for school anyway – her cheeks were tinted a lovely pink. Lori’s eyes narrowed … nothing wrong with her clothes; her
jeans, long-sleeved scooped neck tee and boots not in the least out of the ordinary. And then Maggie squealed as Daryl reached over and offered Carol a bite of his cupcake. Carol had raised her left hand to hold his wrist steady and the sparkling gem of his class ring caught their notice.

“Oh, my God!!” Maggie shrieked, practically leaping from her seat to get a closer look. Daryl would be surprised if the entire school hadn’t heard her.

Glenn was grinning from ear to ear. “Dude, it’s about time.”

“An’ jus’ what th’ hell’s that s’posed t’ mean, Rhee,” he growled threateningly.

Rick butted in, grinning over at the pair. “Glenn’s right. We’ve all been waiting for her to show up wearing your ring.”

Lori contained her excitement, pouring Italian vinaigrette over her salad. “And Rick, darling, you need to pay up,” she smirked smugly.

His eyes widened as Daryl’s menacing stare pierced him. “Y’ were bettin’ on us?!”

Maggie swirled a fry in her ketchup and popped it in her mouth. “It was all in good fun. You know we wouldn’t do anything to hurt you,” she said gently. “I kinda wish ol’ Ed was still around so you could shove it in his face!”

Rick eyed the still full container in front of Carol. “You gonna eat that, Carol?”

She arched her brow, but slid the container towards him regardless. “You are a bottomless pit, Grimes. Doesn’t your mother feed you?”

“I run off all m’ calories at practice,” he slurred around a mouth full of food, which earned him a slap from Lori, warning him not to talk with his mouth full.

Maggie crossed her arms before her on the table, having finished her fries. She leaned forward, her jade eyes twinkling. “So … Carol …”

Carol groaned. Anytime Maggie started a sentence like that, she knew it wasn’t going to end well.

“How is he? Is he a good kisser?”

“Fuckin’ hell, Mags!”

Carol packed up their lunch bag while Daryl grabbed everything else. “And on that note, I think I’ll accompany my BOYFRIEND out to the quad for a little stroll before Biology,” she snarked.


“I was only teasin’,” Maggie offered.

Glenn plopped his chin in his hand, looking crestfallen that the entertainment was over.

Lori shot Maggie a withering look for making the couple so uncomfortable. “Nice going, Maggie.”
Daryl forced himself not the roll his eyes, focusing on inventorying the vials of vaccines in the cabinet as he listened to Beth drone on in the background. Why’d he have to get stuck with her tonight? When Maggie or Shawn worked the desk, they were quiet, keeping to themselves and letting him concentrate on the tasks Hershel assigned him. Not Beth. She followed him around like a puppy steadily nipping at his heels. She was a nice girl in her own right, but annoying as all hell. He glanced at his watch … ten minutes to go before he could meet Carol. He was going over the clipboard for the third time, having finished already, anything to keep from having to talk to Beth.

“So … are you really going to Sadie Hawkins with Carol? Not that there’s anything wrong with going with your best friend,” she rushed to add. “But wouldn’t you rather go with a girl you didn’t have to keep at arm’s length?”

Daryl huffed in frustration, shaking his head, but he didn’t answer. He thought he heard someone in the outer office, but he couldn’t be sure. “Don’t y’ need t’ be up front in case someone comes in?” he asked pointedly.

She ignored his question. “Are you sure, Daryl? I think we could have a lot of fun together,” she said, batting her big doe eyes at him as she rested her hand on his arm.

He flinched away at her touch, his hand shaking as he stared down at her pale hand.

“Elizabeth Greene! Take your hands off my boyfriend before I call your father and tell him you’re harassing his staff,” Carol growled low and menacingly as she stepped out of the shadows. She was beyond furious, ready to snatch the girl’s blonde ponytail and slam her head into the wall. She could see the cold sweat beading Daryl’s upper lip, and she hadn’t missed the slight tremor in his hands. She moved to his side, putting herself between them as Beth backed away. “Daryl doesn’t like to be touched, so I think it’s best you stay out of his personal space.”

“I didn’t mean nothing by it, Carol. I didn’t know y’all were dating,” the girl replied in her defense.

“Well, now y’ do,” Daryl said, setting the clipboard atop the cabinet and moving through to the back room to change his clothes and grab his jacket. He tossed his scrubs into the hamper and pulled his jeans up over his hips. For a day which had begun with such promise, it was spiraling downhill … fast. They’d been assigned another essay for English, this one on Romeo and Juliet. *Fuckin’ kill me now,* he thought irritably. Then his friends had seemingly forgotten it was his birthday, and now Beth was trying to put the moves on him. Gawd! Though it had been beyond hot to see Carol get all jealous and protective. Thoughts of spending the rest of the evening with her perked him right up, however.

Carol was waiting for him in the reception area when he came out, glaring daggers at Beth who stood nearby ready to lock up. He was never so glad as when he was able to climb in the civic with her and draw her close for a kiss. “Missed y’ today,” he grinned, seeing the dreamy little smile on her lips when he let her go.

“Missed you too. You ok?” she asked worriedly. “I know she makes you uncomfortable.”

“I am now.” He turned the key and shifted the car into drive, heading towards her house. He was always better when they were together.
Chapter End Notes

A/n: I really hope y’all liked this chapter. Next one is going to be fun as the Masons celebrate Daryl’s birthday. Please let me know what you thought!! *hugs*
Daryl’s belly growled as he followed Carol into the house. He shrugged at her knowing grin and handed over his jacket to hang beside hers on the coat rack. “Sorry, I’m starved.”

“When aren’t you starved,” she chuckled.

“We’re not still goin’ out, right? Your mom had said she wanted to go to Atlanta to that new Chinese place, an’ I jus’ don’t know if I got it in me after school and work.”

Carol shifted nervously. “No, I’m sure there’s been a change in plans … since your change in jobs and all.”

His eyes narrowed, studiously searching her face. “What’re you hidin’ from me, Car?”

Thankfully, her mother bursting through the front door behind them prevented her from answering. She hated to lie to Daryl, even if it was by omission, but she’d hate to ruin the surprise even more. “Mom!” Carol cast a bewildered glance between Francine and the den where she knew the rest of their friends were congregated.

Fran ignored Carol and pulled Daryl into a fierce hug. “Daryl, sweetheart … happy birthday!” she gushed, kissing him on the cheek. “Have you had a good day so far?”

Daryl returned her hug, unable to halt the grin spreading over his face. “Yes, ma’am. It’s been … interesting,” he said, shooting a heated look in Carol’s direction.

His girl blushed to the roots of her auburn hair, but she ignored his comment, reaching out to her mother and pulling a piece of packaging filler from her shoulder-length curls. “Mother, what’ve you been doing, hmm?” she asked in a droll tone. “And why are you just getting home?”

Francine waggled her brows, close-mouthed as ever. “Never you mind, dear,” she replied, slipping out of her coat and hanging it up. She set off ahead of them, dodging her daughter’s inquisitive looks as she headed towards the den. “I wonder if your father ordered dinner like I asked.”

Daryl gave Carol a pointed look as he linked his fingers with hers, jerking his head to Francine as he silently asked if she was going to tell her their news. He was rather surprised it hadn’t been the first thing out of her mouth when Francine had come through the door. All day, Carol had been telling anyone who would listen about them going steady.

He was still pondering her odd behavior – she was entirely too fidgety – when Francine opened the double doors leading into the den and a chorus of “SURPRISE!” rang throughout the room. He stood momentarily frozen, stunned as their friends rushed forward to wish him a happy birthday. Stars danced behind his eyes as William stood nearby, snapping pictures, the flash bright after the dimness of the hallway.

“Betcha thought we forgot, huh?” Rick said, clapping Daryl on the shoulder.
Daryl chuckled. “Yeah, kinda … when y’ didn’t say anythin’ at lunch.”

Maggie rushed forward and popped him in the cheek with a noisemaker before giving him a hug. “Never!”

Glenn got in a fist bump. “We’re not just friends, Daryl. You’re our family.”

Lori leaned in for a hug of her own. “The best family.”

The six of them stood there in a circle, grinning like idiots, just happy to all be there together to celebrate his birthday. William herded them into a pose, Daryl and Carol standing while the other four knelt in front of them while Francine hid her tears behind a lacy handkerchief. Once she’d seen the sheen of moisture in Daryl’s eyes, she’d pretty much lost it. She was thrilled to see her boy so happy.

Daryl kept his girl close to his side, hating to be photographed, but unable to deny her parents request for the pictures. He kept a small smile on his face, taking in the party favors and the banner hung over the big picture window reading ‘Happy 18th Birthday, Daryl’. This was how families were supposed to act when one of them turned another year older. The one time Jackson had deigned to remember Daryl’s birthday, his gift had been a slap upside his head. And this year, he wouldn’t have to hide the gift Carol always gave him, afraid his old man would try to pawn it. There, in William’s den, surrounded by his ‘family’ and friends, he couldn’t remember ever feeling so loved. It was humbling.

Maggie blew her noisemaker again to get everyone’s attention. “So, what now? Food or presents?” she asked excitedly.

“FOOD!” the guys practically shouted.

The girls rolled their eyes.

Francine led the way to the dining room, which had totally been transformed. More streamers and balloons hung from the chandelier and the dining table had been removed to make way for a long low table surrounded by huge plump pillows to sit on. “Wow, Mom, you really went all out,” Carol complimented.

Daryl elbowed his way past Rick to be the first one at the buffet style table in the corner, laden with all his favorite Chinese dishes. He was already munching an eggroll when he finally sat down.

Francine chuckled. “Daryl, slow down, sweetheart. You’re going to give yourself indigestion.”

“Starvin’,” he mumbled around a bite of sesame chicken. “This is great, Mrs. Mason. ‘S it from China Express here in town? I don’t remember their eggrolls bein’ this good.”

Carol’s dad shook his head from where he sat to Daryl’s right at the head of the table. “No, since we couldn’t take you to Atlanta, we thought we’d bring it to you. This is from Pagoda Dragon.”

Daryl set his fork down and shook his head. “Y’all didn’t have t’ go t’ all that trouble for me, Mr. Mason.”

“Nonsense, son. You’re only eighteen once, and we wanted to help make it memorable,” William said with a soft smile.
Their friends were laughing and joking, and Daryl felt his heart flutter again at the open warmth in the room. He only wished his brother could have been there to celebrate with them. He caught Francine’s eye across the table and mouthed ‘thank you’, unable to get the words past the onslaught of emotion constricting his throat. She simply nodded, her smile filled with all the motherly devotion she felt for him.

Carol leaned over, her warm breath tickling his ear. “You ok? Would you like to get some air?”

He sucked in a deep breath and picked up his fork again. “Naw … I’m good,” he assured her. Somehow, she always knew exactly what he needed, and he would be forever grateful. He just hoped as time passed, he could give her even a fraction of what she so selflessly gave him emotionally.

Francine’s fork clattered to her plate, her hands flying up to cover her mouth as her eyes grew to the size of dessert plates. “Carol!”

His girl turned her startled gaze on her mother. “What?”

“Why are you wearing Daryl’s ring?” she fairly shrieked.

“Franny, calm down, dear. You’re going to hyperventilate,” William warned as he bit into a piece of shrimp toast.

“But, William … she … he … ring!”

Maggie and Lori shared a smug look.

Glenn nudged Rick in the ribs with an elbow. “She reacted nearly as badly as Mags did at lunch.”

The teens in question both blushed, but it was Carol who answered. “Well, Mom, when I tried to call, you were off doing god knows what on some secret mission and wouldn’t answer my calls. Then when you came in, we were so distracted with the surprise for Daryl, I guess I forgot to mention it,” Carol bit out in a rush.

“Forgot?!” Maggie snorted. “Forgot! The one girl who all day has been shoving that ring in the face of every bimbo who’s ever even thought of looking at Daryl? I think not.”

Daryl shoved half an eggroll into his mouth to prevent himself from having to answer. There was no way he was getting in the middle of this.

“Well, it’s about time!” Francine chortled. “The electricity coming from you two could power the grid for more than a month.”

“Franny!”

“Mom!”

Francine took a sip of her iced tea and shrugged, her expression one of complete innocence.

“What?”

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“I was robbed!” Rick roared, falling back against the cushions on the love seat next to Lori. “That was a trick question.”

Daryl stared at him in helpless surprise. “Man, I cain’t believe y’ missed a sports question. That’s your best category.”

Francine sipped daintily from her glass of wine from the armchair she shared with her husband, quietly enjoying watching the teens play Trivial Pursuit. They’d adjourned to the den after dinner, needing time to digest before she served the cake. Mostly, she was content just watching Daryl so relaxed as he sat next to Carol, gently stroking her back without even realizing what he was doing.

Maggie drummed her nails on the coffee table where she sat next to Glenn on the rug. “Well, there’s no chance of catching up despite Rick’s fumble,” she groused with good humor. “Smash him, Daryl.”

Lori reached for a card while Rick sulked and looked at the pair on the sofa as Carol rolled the die. “Alright, guys, this is for the win, and the category is science. Who’s going to take it?”

Carol winced. She was good at science, but Daryl was better … though he’d never willingly admit it. “This one is Daryl’s,” she said, holding up her hands in surrender.

The group leaned forward in anticipation. They took their games seriously, each one of them competitive in their own right. Daryl gnawed on the inside of his lower lip and nodded.

Lori chuckled. “Oh, even you won’t get this one, Dixon.”

“C’mon … try me,” he said, his eyes narrowing.

“Ok … What is the scientific name for a rabbit’s tail?”

Maggie had a death grip on Glenn’s hand, her eyes wide. Glenn winced.

Daryl’s lips slowly spread into a smug smirk. “A scut.”

Lori’s face fell as she tossed the card onto the center of the game board. “No way! How’d you know that?”

Rick laughed outright at the mock outrage on his girlfriend’s face. “Duh, Lori, he wants to be a vet. Why wouldn’t he know that?”

“That was well-played,” William toasted them. “But now I think it’s time for presents. You’re lucky Franny has contained her eagerness this long.”

“Oh, hush, Will,” she admonished gently, her eyes twinkling.

Carol and Maggie hurried to put the game away as Rick and Glenn took the small pile of presents from William’s desk and stacked them on the coffee table in front of Daryl.

Rick gave a quick count and frowned. “Uh, Carol … I don’t see yours here. Did you leave it upstairs or something?”

Daryl grinned, his fingers linked with Carol’s. “She gave it t’ me last night.”
Glenn nearly choked on his Coke. “Did she now?”

Maggie punched him in the arm. “God, Glenn, her parents are sitting right there,” she gritted out through clenched teeth. Carol’s mouth dropped open, shocked that anything could make Maggie blush.

“Y’ asshole.” He pulled up his photos on his phone and showed them the pic of his gift. “Best present though.”

“How do you know? You haven’t opened the others yet,” Lori questioned.

“She’s wearin’ my ring ain’t she? Ain’t no material gift could ever top that,” he said, smiling as she nestled into his side and rested her head on his shoulder.

Lori and Maggie ‘aww-ed’ before she turned to Rick and swatted his shoulder. “Why can’t you be romantic like that?!”

“Ow!”

Francine decided it was her turn to intervene, taking a seat beside her kids on the sofa and picking a gift off the top of the pile. “Here, sweetheart, let’s get started before Lori and Rick come to blows.” She leaned over to whisper. “My money’s on her.”

Daryl chuckled and tore open the envelope to find a gift card to the home improvement store in Peachtree City. It was from Glenn. “I know you’ve been working on the cabin, and thought it might help with some of the supplies. Something practical, y’know?”

“Thanks, man, it’s great,” Daryl said. Any little bit would help, he thought, handing it to Carol as her mother set a box on his lap.

This one was from Rick. Inside was a pack of black t-shirts and a hunter green long sleeved button up. “Thought you might want to wear that to the dance, considering there’s very little you own which haven’t had the sleeves ripped off.”

“Ha ha, Grimes.”

Next was Lori’s. His eyes lit up when he saw the fine leather-bound journal inside with its loose-leaf inserts, pockets, calendar and contacts list. “You’re going to need something like that for college next fall.” It amazed him how much thought his friends had put into their gifts.

“This is … thanks, Lori, really.”

Maggie was practically bouncing on her heels when Francine handed him her gift. He was almost afraid to open it. Her jade eyes held a calculating gleam and her hands were clasped beneath her chin with evident glee. Uh-oh!

When Daryl hesitated, Carol reached over to feel the packaging to see if she could guess what it was. “It feels like a book. Go on, Daryl, how bad could it be?”

He arched a dubious brow at his girl and then ripped the paper … wishing the floor would open and swallow him whole. How to Please Your Woman by Anne O’Shea. His face burned as he quickly shoved the paperback behind him before either Carol or Francine could get a good look at it.

“Oh, you’re going to pay for that one, Greene,” he warned in his most menacing growl.
Maggie nearly choked on her suppressed laughter, falling back against Glenn.

“What is it?” Carol asked, trying to inch her hand behind him to retrieve the book.

“NO! There ain’t no way I’m showing y’, Carol. Forget it,” he mumbled heatedly, wondering if the blush would ever recede from his face. He doubted he’d ever been more mortified.

“Aw, c’mon, Dixon, don’t be like that,” Maggie cajoled. “I’m sure it will be very … informative.” And she set off into peals of laughter.

Francine wished she could be in on the joke, but she was too anxious to present the gift she and William had picked out together for their boy. “Speaking of college,” she interrupted the silent war between Daryl and Maggie. “I think you’ll find this quite useful.”

Daryl’s hands smoothed over the scarlet wrapping paper, a little line forming between his brows as he met her gaze. “Y’ already threw this wonderful party for me, Mrs. Mason. I shouldn’t –“

“But you will,” she insisted. She cupped his cheek in her hand as the others grew silent, watching them. “Today – of all days – you will let me spoil you.”

William came to stand behind the sofa and rested a hand on Daryl’s shoulder. “Son … please.”

Daryl felt his chest tighten. He was so very thankful to have them in his life. It didn’t matter what was in the box or how many parties they wanted to throw for him … it was the love he could feel radiating from them which made it easy to forget his pain, his sorrow, and bask in their warmth, the warmth of his ‘family’. He chewed the inside of his lip and let it go, sliding the huge gold bow and ribbon off and tearing into the paper.

“A laptop? Y’ kiddin’ me!” He speared them both with his stunned cobalt gaze. “It’s too much.”

“Nonsense,” William said. “Your academic workload is going to be tripled when you get into Cornell, and this will make it easier. You can’t expect to share with Carol when she’s going to be working just as hard as you.”

“T-Thank you … so much,” he said, burying his face against Francine’s shoulder as she pulled him into a hug.

“You’re so welcome, sweetheart,” Francine sniffled, equally moved.

“Thank all o’ y’all for everything. This weekend, I want y’ all t’ come on out t’ th’ cabin. Merle’s gonna be home. We’ll throw some meat on th’ pit an’ barbeque, make a day of it.”

“Hell yeah!” Rick whooped.

Francine got the girl’s moving to clean up the wrapping paper while she dragged Carol off to the kitchen with her to get the cake.

* * *
Francine shut the kitchen door behind her as Carol preceded her into the kitchen. She ignored the small catering staff from *Pagoda Dragon*, finishing their clean up and pulled her daughter into her arms. Carol went willingly, snuggling happily into her mother’s embrace. “Thank you, Mom … so much.”

Fran brushed an errant curl behind Carol’s ear as she continued to stroke her hair. “For what, darling?”

“For loving Daryl as much as I do, and for throwing him this wonderful party,” Carol sniffled, pulling away so Francine could see the genuine gratitude etched on her features.

Francine ushered her over to the breakfast nook and pulled out a chair. “You know your father and I have always thought of him as ours. He’s too good for the likes of Jackson Dixon,” she spat bitterly. “And I’m so thrilled to see the both of you so happy.”

Carol curled her legs under her and leaned forward on the table, clasping her mother’s hands in her own. “Oh, Mom, I am, but … I was so afraid to tell him.”

A little furrow appeared between Fran’s auburn brows. “Why? You can’t be that obtuse, Carol Ann. Anyone can see how much the boy adores you.”

Carol waved a dismissive hand. “I knew he loved me, Mom … just not that he was *in* love with me. I was afraid if I told him how I felt, things would change. I didn’t want to lose him.”

Francine cupped Carol’s chin in her hand, her voice gentle when she spoke. “Sweetheart, things will always change. It’s how you grow. You’ve always been so gung-ho with your decisions. Once you’ve made up your mind about something you always follow through immediately, and most of the time your instincts are correct.”

“But this is different, Mom. This is my heart, Daryl’s heart. I could deal with it if he only wanted to be friends.” She ducked her head, biting her lip for a moment as a wealth of pain crushed her chest and made it hard to breathe. “I wouldn’t like it, but I would find some way to remain friends with him. I just couldn’t stand the thought of hurting *him*. I didn’t want him to feel pressured if he didn’t love me back.”

Fran wasn’t surprised in the least, remembering the conversation she’d had with him just days before when he’d told her of his fears. “How did he react … when you told him? I’m assuming you told him first?”

Carol’s smile turned dreamy. “At first I thought I’d screwed everything up and he was going to have another panic attack, but then … “ she sighed. “Oh, Mom, he was so sweet. I still get butterflies thinking of some of the things he said to me last night.” Her face lit up like a roman candle. “And then he kissed me, and he was so shy and hesitant, and … wow.”

Her mother let out a rather undignified squeak before she composed herself. “Please, Carol Ann, tell me you’re being responsible.”

“Mom! Gawd!” she squawked, burying her face in her hands, totally mortified. “I’m still taking my birth control, if that’s what you’re asking, but we’re not ready for that yet.” Leave it to Francine to bring up a subject she’d like to avoid. If she was going to talk about safe sex with anyone, it would be Daryl. Though, she had to admit, she was glad her cycles weren’t regular and had been on the pill for several years now.

Fran reached out and cupped her hands over Carol’s, giving them a gentle squeeze. “I just
wanted to make sure, darling. Do you think I’m so old I can’t remember how it felt to be in the first bloom of love? I can’t tell you how many times your father snuck in through my window —"

“MOM! Please, I don’t want to know stuff about you and dad. Ew!” she cringed.

“All I’m saying is … I remember what it’s like and how carried away you can get when your hormones are out of control. Carol, I’m too young to be a grandmother!”

Carol leaned over and banged her head on the table several times. At least, Francine hadn’t dragged Daryl in there with them for the talk. “OK! Moving on … I want to know what you’ve been up to.”

Francine looked away guiltily. “Nothing. Well, nothing too extravagant.”

Carol groaned. “You saw how he reacted to his birthday present. He was overwhelmed. I don’t want you to —"

“I just bought him and Merle a housewarming gift,” Francine finally admitted. She reached into her pocket and slid Carol’s key to the cabin towards her.

“You took my key?!” she asked in a horrified whisper.

“Well, I couldn’t have it installed without a way to get in, now could I?” Fran sighed, folding her hands on the table in front of her. “Daryl and Merle want a fresh start. I, for one, couldn’t just sit back and not do my part. I’m sure once the shock wears off, he’s going to love it.”

Carol shot a panicked look at her mother. Shock? Oh, hell! “We’ll be lucky if he doesn’t wring both our necks.”

Francine just smiled and rose from the table. “Come along, dear. It’s about time our boy had his cake.”

Chapter End Notes

A/n: Well, I really hope you enjoyed the party. It was a struggle, but I really wanted to post this chapter on my own birthday. So glad I made it :) I promise next chapter will be the big reveal of Francine’s gift. Thank you all so much for the lovely reviews you’ve been leaving on this story. It makes me so incredibly happy to have your support.

*hugs*
Carol turned to face him, leaning her head against the back of the passenger seat of her civic, his profile cast in shadow as they sped down the highway which would lead them to the cabin he now called home. She could just make out the tiny grin toying at the corner of his mouth. “Did you enjoy the party?” she asked quietly, hating to intrude on the solitude which had fallen over the car.

Daryl took one hand off the steering wheel to clasp one of hers. “Y’ know I did. It was a lotta fun. Still cain’t believe your parents got me a laptop though,” he said, shaking his head.

Carol bit her lip anxiously, her brow knitting in a worried frown. “I talked to Mom.”

“Yeah? She finally tell y’ what she’s been up t’?”

She sighed as he pulled into the long drive and began creeping forward, the gravel crunching beneath the tires. “She was still pretty vague.” Finally, she sighed and her breath rushed out along with her words, unable to keep it from him another moment. “Daryl, she took my key … without asking! There’s no telling what we’re going to find when we get to your place, and I don’t want you to think I had anything to do with it, because she wouldn’t tell me what she’d been planning, and I probably wouldn’t have agreed if she had, and –“

“Carol Ann!” he cut her off. Reaching over, he unbuckled her seatbelt and dragged her over to sit sideways on his lap. “Breathe, woman.” After she’d taken several deep breaths, he kissed her sweetly and smiled. “She gave the key back, didn’t she?”

“Mhmm,” she said, much calmer now. “I put it on my ring with the car keys.”

“Your parents are always welcome here, Car. She probably just came an’ cleaned up after my sorry ass or somethin’,” he offered as an excuse.

Carol gave him a dubious look. “You know better than that. This is my mother we’re talking about. She brings new meaning to the phrase ‘go big or go home’.”

He had to agree with her. When Francine Mason did something, it was always over the top, and they were always forced sit back and ride the tsunami to the beach. Daryl pinched the bridge of his nose and then stared at the front door of the cabin through the windshield as if it were the temple of doom. “I s’pose we oughta get this over with. Otherwise, y’ ain’t never gonna relax.”

She wrapped her arms around his neck and trailed her fingers over his stubbled jaw. “I just don’t want you to be upset. “I just want to soak in the tub and then crawl into that big bed of yours and wrap myself around you. Is that too much to ask? I’m not in the mood for Mama’s drama!”

A lazy smile spread over his lips, parts of him already applauding her little speech. “A’right, let’s do this.”

Carol slid off his lap and back into her seat so she could get out of the car, staring ahead at the moonlit path towards the door, her heart pounding with dread. Daryl used her key to unlock the door, his fingers searching out the light switch as they stepped inside. Her eyes slammed closed,
afraid to look. Her hand rested on his lower back, and she could feel his muscles tighten with tension. Unable to stand the silence another second, she warily cracked one eye open and peeked over his shoulder.

She gasped, taking in the room with wide eyes. The lumpy sofa was gone. In its place was a huge leather sectional. She’d be surprised if it didn’t have a sleeper tucked away inside. Shiny end tables with matching lamps, a sheepskin rug before the hearth, a table by the door with a little basket for his keys … it didn’t look like the same cabin they’d left behind that morning. There was an armoire against one wall which she was certain doubled as an entertainment center. But what had her love frozen to the spot next to her were the pictures adorning the walls. There were some of him and Carol at various ages, others of Daryl and Merle – one in particular caught her eye of Daryl sitting on Merle’s bike, his brother behind him, smiling and happy. Daryl couldn’t have been more than eight or nine in that photo. But where had Francine found them?

“Daryl? Baby, are you alright?” she asked, but it was as though she hadn’t heard him. He moved woodenly across the room to stand in front of the fireplace, his eyes glassy with unshed tears as he looked up at the portrait of a chestnut-haired beauty and her two sons.

Emma Dixon sat on an antique rocking chair on a wide porch, four-year-old Daryl perched on her lap while Merle stood at her left, smiling widely for the camera. She wore a serene smile on her lovely face, but her blue eyes – so familiar – couldn’t mask her pain. His shoulders quaked with silent sobs as he reached up and traced a finger over her cheek.

Carol watched him wipe surreptitiously at his eyes as he stalked towards the kitchen, and she ran after him, nearly plowing into his back as he came to a dead stop. “Th’ hell?!” he thundered. There was a new kitchen table with four matching chairs, a new stove and refrigerator, and a microwave and toaster. At the moment, he really didn’t care. His mind was too full of questions. He yanked the refrigerator door open, not in the least surprised to find it fully stocked, and reached for a bottle of water to quench his parched throat.

“I suppose we should check the bathroom as well,” she murmured, unsure of what to say or do for the first time in her life. She couldn’t read him, and it scared the hell out of her. It was as though he was intentionally hiding his emotions.

Daryl nodded curtly and led the way, grabbing her hand and pulling her behind him. Flipping on the light, he just shook his head. “I’d be willin’ t’ bet this is why she was late gettin’ home,” he sniped, gesturing towards the huge tub which had been installed, and the brand new toilet. One which didn’t run constantly. There was even a separate shower stall which fit perfectly between the linen closet and the storage area for the hot water heater.

Carol moved forward to investigate the tub. “Holy crow! It has jets!”

Daryl growled low in his throat and turned on his heel, doing a quick sweep of the bedrooms, but they’d been left untouched aside from the few picture frames Francine had set out on his dresser and desk. He didn’t even glance at the small stylish table on the wall facing the bed which held a TV and blue-ray player. That woman!

He was nearly to the front door, his stride determined, when her soft voice brought him up short. “Daryl? Where are you going?”

“T’ have a lil’ chat with your mother,” he said, the look in his eyes daring her to argue. “Y’ comin’?”
“Are you sure this is a good idea? I mean … it’s late. She might be in bed already,”

Daryl was speeding again. Not that the little Honda couldn’t take it, but she was worried about him. He was alternating between simmering anger and the need to cry. She was ready to wring her mother’s meddling neck!

Carol reached over and rested her hand over his on the gear shift. “Baby, talk to me … please.”

He turned his hand, twining his fingers with hers and giving it a reassuring squeeze as he dragged it over to rest on his lap. “I jus’ cain’t right now, Carol. Not yet.”

Well, that didn’t bode well, she thought. She let out a rather undignified squeak as he pulled into the driveway and parked behind Francine’s Lexus, stopping a hare’s breath from the bumper. Carol got out of the car and had to jog to catch up with him, his stride long and determined. Light shining from the kitchen windows shone onto the side yard, so she knew exactly where to find her mother.

In fact, Francine was standing at the stove in her flannel pjs and a pair of fuzzy socks, stirring what appeared to be her famous hot chocolate, three mugs already set out on the counter. She appeared unruffled as her kids barged into the kitchen to confront her. And Daryl knew she’d been waiting on them to arrive.

Storm clouds were brewing behind his smoky blue gaze as Francine lifted her eyes to meet his. “Come in, dears, and have a seat.”

Daryl eased himself onto a bar stool, his fists on the island’s surface curled into fists as Carol crossed her arms over her chest and glared at Francine. Yet, Carol was determined to hold her tongue and allow Daryl to vent his anger.

“Why’d y’ do it?” he hissed in a heated whisper. “I don’t mean no disrespect, but WHY?!” His fist slammed down on the marble.

Francine blinked back the sheen of tears in her eyes, stirring in a spoon of sugar as she poured the cocoa and topping it with whipped cream and chocolate syrup before sliding one in front of each of her kids. “I did it because I love you, Daryl. Just as I love Merle.”

“I work … I work hard t’ make a livin’. I could buy all those things. It was jus’ gonna take time! Is it Carol? Y’ think I cain’t provide for her, ‘s that it?” he asked, his voice rising as all the pent-up emotion inside him burst free. “I’d do anything for her. I can take care of her. I don’t even know how I’m s’posed t’ pay y’ back for all that stuff.”

Francine rounded the island and took his chin in her hand, tilting his head up to meet her gaze. She brushed his angry tears away and smiled. “Oh, sweetheart, you don’t owe me anything. It was a housewarming gift. For you and your brother.”

His expression was pained as he shook his head at her. “it ain’t right. It’s too much!”

“It will NEVER be enough, Daryl Mark,” she said sternly. “And don’t ever believe I don’t think you can take care of my daughter. It’s only money, sweetheart. Between William’s practice, my bakery and the money my parents left me, we’ll never hurt for money. I should be able to spend
it as I wish.”

“Mom …” Carol groaned, dropping her head into her hand.

“I don’t need fancy stuff like that. Bein’ part o’ this fam’ly … that’s enough,” he croaked, staring down at the melting whipped cream floating atop his cocoa. “But the pictures … my mama.”

Francine sipped delicately from her cup as Carol moved to Daryl’s side and wrapped her arms around him, pressing her brow to his. “Your mother would have been so very proud of you, Daryl,” Francine said, a hint of pride in her own voice. “I loved Emma so much. I may only have known her three short years, but I felt as if I’d known her all my life. She was sweet and kind, and such a wonderful mother to you boys. I just wish she would have allowed me to help her get away from that monster she married.”

Daryl kept one arm locked around Carol’s waist, needing her to remain close to him, craving her strength, her warmth … her love. He sipped from his cup, reveling in the heat and flavor of the cocoa. “Jackson don’t let his possessions go easily. He woulda found her an’ it woulda been worse.”

“She left those pictures with me, so one day I would be able to pass them on to you. I had them all restored and resized before I framed them.”

“But why’d y’ wait so long?” he asked brokenly, staring down into his cup, his eyes hidden as his hair fell over his brow. He didn’t want her to see just how upset he was. What he wouldn’t have given to have had that picture of his mother in his possession on the really bad nights Jackson had beaten him bloody. It would have comforted him, having a piece of his mama there with him. Maybe he wouldn’t have felt so alone.

Francine wrapped her hand around his which was holding his mug. “I had to wait until you were free of him, sweetheart. If he would have found them, he’d have destroyed them in a fit of temper.”

“True.”

“I promise I won’t buy anything over the top for you ever again … without consulting you first—” Francine said, crossing her heart in a childish gesture. “Not if it’s going to upset you so badly.” He didn’t protest when she pulled him into her arms and stroked his hair, much like his own mama had done so long ago. “I promised Emma I would always watch over you, Daryl, and I’m not going to stop just because you’re eighteen now. I tried so hard to get you away from Jackson, but there are some things even money can’t buy,” she said bitterly. “Even when you continued to refuse me, I still tried. I love you, Daryl.”

His arms banded even tighter around her waist as she soothed him, his tension easing, heart fluttering madly to know she was still fighting for him. “I … I love y’ too … Mom.”

* * *

Carol couldn’t help but shake her head as she began putting away all the food Francine had sent home with them. Then again, that woman never did anything in small measure. Not only was the refrigerator stocked, but the freezer and cupboards as well with all of Daryl’s favorites. And in the lower cabinets were pots and pans, bakeware, tupperware and small appliances. She couldn’t
wait to cook breakfast for him in the morning.

Daryl had finished unloading the car, stacking his presents on the table to go through in the morning – with the exception of that book Maggie had given him which he hid under a loose floorboard in his closet – and just stood there watching his girl make herself at home. It just felt so right having her there with him.

“Y’ sure y’ parents don’t mind y’ stayin’ two nights in a row?” he asked, his voice soft so as not to startle her.

Carol hummed low in her throat, what seemed to be a permanent smile etched upon her lips. “I think they know our days of sleeping alone are well and truly done, Daryl. Either you’re staying with me at my house or I’ll be here with you at the cabin, we’re together now. They know we’re responsible, and they trust us to make good choices.”

Her house was as much his home as the cabin now was. “I can live with that,” he grinned. “I jus’ don’t want them t’ think I’m tryin’ t’ steal y’ away from them.”

She slid the last of the tupperware containers into their lunch bag for school the next day and shoved it onto a shelf in the refrigerator. “They won’t.” She leaned up on her toes and pressed a sweet kiss to the corner of his mouth near his beauty mark. “Stop worrying.”

“Y’ ready for bed?” he asked, ducking his head when she smirked, realizing how that had sounded. “I … I mean sleep, Carol Ann!”

Carol giggled. “Actually, I’m still kinda wound up. I think I want to go soak in that new tub and let those jets work the kinks out of my back.”

His breath hitched at the thought of her lounging in his tub. He closed his eyes, letting the fantasy play out behind his lids. Her hair would be piled loosely atop her head, a few tendrils clinging to the moisture on her neck, bubbles her only cover dissipating rapidly beneath his gaze. Daryl imagined kneeling behind her and rolling up his sleeves, his fingers itching to map a path across her delicate shoulders before he pressed a kiss just below her ear. His girl would shiver, her back arching sinfully as she purred his name …

“Daryl?”

Busted! “Huh?” he asked, blinking owlishly at having been caught daydreaming.

Carol arched a brow as his cheeks reddened, but decided against teasing him for the moment. “I asked if you’d please light the heater in the bathroom for me?”

“Uh … yeah. Go grab your stuff an’ I should have it warm for y’ in no time,” he stammered, praying she wouldn’t notice the sizable bulge in his pants. Thankfully, she skipped off to the bedroom to fetch her things without another word. She must be rather excited about the new tub, he snorted, grabbing the box of matches off the mantel and moving into the bathroom to light the old gas heater. He hoped someday he’d be able to put in central air and heat for the cabin.

Satisfied with the heat emanating from the old heater, he rose from his crouch and moved to the tub. He still marveled over Francine’s ingenuity in being able to transform the cabin in a single day while he’d been occupied with school and work. She must have had an entire work crew out there to help her. And he’d acted like an ungrateful ass. At least she’d forgiven him. It had taken him long enough, but he had finally accepted his role in Carol’s family, and he felt better for it.

Sitting on the edge of the tub, he stoppered the tub and turned the knobs to the desired
settings, steam rising from the water as it began to fill the tub. His gaze wandered to the shelf which was stocked with both his and Carol’s favorite shampoo, conditioner and body wash, but the little box holding what resembled multi-colored sparkly ‘grenades’ threw him off. He was still frowning at the box as he dumped a healthy dollop of vanilla bubble bath into the water.

Carol leaned against the doorjamb, giggling softly when she saw Daryl remove the box and give it a wary sniff. “Careful, baby … you don’t want to drop them in there all at once.”

He glanced at her over his shoulder as she moved into the room and set her clothes next to the sink. “Th’ hell are these things? They’re all sparkly an’ shit.”

She took the box from him and set it back on the shelf. “They’re bath bombs. You know … drop one in the water and it dissolves, making the water all sparkly and sweetly scented. It makes your skin so soft, and sometimes there’s even a little prize,” she explained.

His eyes narrowed. “You’re messin’ with me, right?”

Carol shook her head. “Nope. I’ll show you tomorrow if you like.”

“Why y’ even need that? Your skin’s already baby soft,” he murmured quietly, peering at her from beneath his lashes.

She came to his side, running her fingers through his shaggy hair before leaning over to nuzzle his ear. “You’ll see … it will make me even softer.”

He swallowed audibly, unable to respond, his hands clenched into fists to keep from wrenching her into his lap.

Daryl shut off the tap and rose to his feet, wiping his damp hands on his jeans, suddenly nervous to be crowding her space. “A’right … I’ll um …. I’ma go get ready for bed, I guess,” he mumbled, averting his gaze down to his boots.

She caught his hand before he could slip away, wishing it was his bare skin instead of soft flannel as she trailed her fingertips along his arm to rest on his shoulder. She easily invaded his personal space, his hand settling on her hip as she pulled him into a sweet kiss. Her touch was confident where his was shy, making her smile against his lips. “I won’t be long.”

Daryl was reluctant to let her go, but the thought of remaining there with her sent a slight shiver of panic coursing through him. Now was not the time to let his hormones out for a joy ride. Instead, he locked his fantasies in a box in his mind – with a double padlock – and left her to her bath, going into the living room first to light a fire in the hearth. It should keep the entire cabin toasty warm, but if it happened to die down in the night, he’d have Carol to snuggle up against. That done, he went into the bedroom and shucked his clothes, donning a worn t-shirt and a pair of cotton sleeping pants.

He stood in the center of the room, chewing incessantly on his cuticle in indecision. Carol would be at her bath for thirty minutes at the very least, and he couldn’t deny he was curious about the book. Maybe … What would it hurt to have a quick peek? There was a good chance Maggie had just bought it to embarrass him. She enjoyed teasing him almost as much as Carol did, but what if she’d actually been trying to help. It was no secret how shy he was around girls. And if it had been any other girl Maggie had been trying to hook him up with, he’d have immediately tossed the book in the trash.

But this was Carol, the girl he’d been in love with all his life. His biggest fear was
disappointing her. Ninth grade sex ed class had been mortifying, listening to the teacher explain reproduction and the benefits of safe sex, but it wasn’t as though they were given handy little tips on how to please their partner. Was that something you were just supposed to know? If so, he’d missed that lecture. Merle was constantly sending him links to porn sites – which was embarrassing as hell for him – but what he’d seen hadn’t been helpful at all. He didn’t want some fling just to gain release. He wanted gentleness, a genuine mutual desire, a connection he could feel with his entire heart. He wanted love.

Daryl knew he already had that with Carol. It was the physical delivery he was worried about. What if he did something she didn’t like, or – god forbid – he hurt her? He wouldn’t be able to live with himself. His shoulders slumped, and a tortured sigh shuddered through him as he went to the closet and fetched the book. He took it with him, lying down on his side of the bed and staring at the non-descript cover, the title mocking him. Could it possibly hold the answers he so desperately sought? It could, at least, point him in the right direction. Right?

* * *

Carol hadn’t wanted to get out of the tub. The pulsing sensations of the jets pummeling her body had been a little slice of heaven. She couldn’t wait for Daryl to try it out. If anyone needed to relax, it was him. She slipped into her shirt – or rather Daryl’s shirt – the warm, long-sleeved flannel hitting her about mid-thigh. It gave her a little rush of pleasure to wear his clothes. She’d worn his leather jacket plenty of times, but this was different, more intimate. It still made her giddy to know they were together … finally.

Turning off the light in the bathroom, she padded softly across the polished wood floor to where he waited for her in the bedroom, pausing in the doorway as her gaze traveled the length of his body. Apparently, the day had been too much for him, his soft snores echoing off the dark-paneled walls, the book he’d been reading lying open and face down on his chest.

Carol made her way silently to the bed, her eyes widening as she took in the title. Oh, Maggie! No wonder he’d been so adamant about keeping that particular gift from her. Yet, he had been reading it. At least the first few chapters, judging from the thickness of the pages he’d already turned. She frowned. Could it be he was as nervous about this aspect of their relationship as she was? It was almost funny considering he was Merle Dixon’s brother. Determined not to worry about it, she marked his place and set the book on his nightstand next to the alarm clock.

She really hated to wake him, but he was lying atop the duvet and she didn’t want him to get cold during the night. A sweet smile curved the corners of her lips as she reached out and ran her hand soothingly over his chest so as not to startle him. Carol definitely wasn’t expecting his violent reaction. She jumped back instinctively as he jerked awake, his arms flying up to cover his head, curling in on himself with a strained whimper. She could only deduce he’d been dreaming of his father.

Carol climbed onto the bed, kneeling beside him, and wrapped her hands around his wrists, her thumbs caressing the undersides in a gentle caress. “Daryl … stop, baby. Nothing is going to hurt you here. We’re at the cabin … remember? You’re safe,” she crooned.

Daryl slowly lowered his arms, his eyes wild and tortured with the demons of his nightmares as he glanced around at his room to see he was indeed in his new home. He pushed himself up, his back coming to rest against the wall as he struggled to calm his breathing. “I’m sorry. Did I scare
“Y’?” he asked, pulling her onto his lap.

She scrutinized every facet of his face, not liking what she saw. His dream must have been a really bad one to have him so close to a panic attack. She wouldn’t smile, nor would she patronize him in an effort to calm him. Instead, she set to work with the techniques she’d honed over the years. And now she could draw on her love – their love – to work her magic.

“Close your eyes,” she demanded in a gentle but firm tone, barely a whisper to be heard over his labored breathing. He responded immediately, obeying her without hesitation. She leaned in closer, pressing her cheek to his as she moved his hands to brace against her hips. “Breathe with me, baby. Deep and slow. Will you do that for me?”

Daryl concentrated on her steady breaths, trying to match them with his own until his heart began to slow and the tightness in his chest began to recede. He focused on her touch as a hand slipped into his hair to scratch pleasantly at his scalp, sending a wave of goosebumps erupting along his skin. He moaned as her other hand began to knead the knot at the top of his spine. The fierce grip he had on her hips eased, and he smoothed his palms over her upper thighs as she straddled him.

His heavily-lidded eyes opened just a crack as he watched her lips part in a silent gasp, her gaze darkening with desire. “My angel,” he breathed, his grip settling over the sweet swell of her ass as he buried his face in the crook of her neck. “Don’t know what I ever did t’ deserve y’, Car.”

Carol’s hot little hands cupped his neck, dragging him away from the nipping bites he was leaving on her throat, her lips crashing into his urgently. Her head spun as he ravaged her mouth, reveling in the slow sinuous slide of his tongue against hers, heat coiling through her like a brush fire, the center of the blaze raging fiercely in her core. She’d never felt anything like it, despite the fantasies she’d had of him in the past. Nothing could compare to the blissful reality she found in his arms.

Wetness pooled between her legs, a warm rush which left her aching for more. “Daryl …” she moaned, grinding herself down on the growing hardness which pressed against her. His hands gripped her waist and she shivered as his calloused thumbs traced symmetrical patterns onto her bare skin. A nigglng voice in the back of her mind screamed at her to stop before they went too far, but she ignored it, lost in his touch and the heat of his mouth. Again, she rocked her hips into him, seeking more of him, needing that delicious friction where they were joined, his sleeping pants and her skimpy underwear not enough to hinder the heat between them.

Daryl groaned as her nails pierced his chest through the thin t-shirt he wore, his grip tightening on her, dragging her down harder against his arousal. Gawd! What the hell were they doing, he thought through a haze of unsated desire. It was too much, yet not enough, and the tenuous control he clung to was slowly reaching the end of its tether. Something primal was rising within him, whispering in his ear, taunting him to take what he wanted, to damn the consequences and claim her flesh. NO! He would not hurt her. He would not give in to his baser urges demanding for release. She was far too precious to use in such a way.

With the last ounce of will power he possessed, he removed his hands from beneath her shirt and cradled her face in his warm palms, forcing himself to gentle their kiss before pulling away to catch her gaze. She moaned in frustration, following his lips with hers for one last kiss before she acquiesced to his wishes.

He hissed, a sharp sound through his teeth as she rocked her hips again. “Carol …”
“Why’d you stop?” she asked, tracing a finger over his lower lip. “Did I do something wrong?”

Daryl huffed a laugh, the left side of his mouth curving up into a wry smirk. “There ain’t no ‘wrong’ with us, Car. I jus’ think we need t’ stop for now … before I cain’t.”

Carol bit her lip, already swollen from his kisses. “Oh,” she breathed, still unsure if that would have been such a bad idea. “But –“

“I love y’ too much t’ hurt y’,” he whispered, pressing his brow to hers as his arms wrapped around her. Finally, he let her go so they could crawl under the covers. She was still pouting when he pulled her into his arms and closed his eyes.

She tilted her chin up, searching for his eyes in the dark. “Daryl, I know it’s going to hurt the first time, but I still want you … I still want us.”

“I do too,” he admitted, “but not ’til we’re ready.”

Carol smiled and nestled against his side, trying to get comfortable. “There’s still other stuff we can do too, you know.”

His eyes flew open in alarm. It seemed like he was going to have to finish that book Maggie had given him … quickly. Who knew his angel could be such a little wanton? Not that he was complaining. “Go t’ sleep, woman. We still got school in th’ mornin’.”

Carol shifted again, not quite sure why she couldn’t settle in for sleep. It took her several minutes before it dawned on her. “Daryl?”

“Hmm?” he murmured sleepily.

“Will you hold my hand … like when we fall asleep at my house?”

Daryl smiled without opening his eyes and curled his fingers around hers. “Better?”

But she’d already drifted off.

Chapter End Notes

A/n: Sorry for the delay. I really hope y’all enjoyed this one :D
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Daryl woke, a lazy smile upon his lips as he pressed closer to his girl, spooned against her back as he was. It wasn’t his norm to wake so warm and contented, but she had that effect on him. His left arm was stretched out beneath her head, his fingers entwined with hers. His other hand was splayed against her bare stomach, his fingers having crept under her shirt sometime during the night. He sighed, his warm breath tickling the hair along her nape, and she shivered, pressing back more closely to him. He could definitely get used to waking up like this with her, wrapped in a cocoon of warmth and love.

Reaching over Carol, he swiped his thumb across the home button to check the time. It was only five and he was wide awake. It wasn’t that surprising. Living with Jackson, he’d learned to sleep light and get very little sleep. Now, he was learning to sleep more deeply and wake rested, only needing five or six hours a night. If he got up now, he’d have more than enough time to grab a shower and spend a little time out on the porch enjoying the morning before they had to get ready for school. Disentangling himself from Carol, however – without waking her up – was going to be harder than it looked.

Daryl released her hand, and wiggled his numb fingers before caressing her knuckles soothingly, but it was enough to have her eyes cracking open to judge the amount of light peeking through the curtains. “Where’re you going?” she mumbled sleepily. “It’s not even dawn yet.”

He chuckled as she rolled over and snuggled deeply against his chest, slinging a leg up over his hip, but it gave him the opportunity to free his arm. “Gonna go take a shower,” he replied, pressing a kiss to her brow. “Go back t’ sleep.”

Carol nodded, accepting his answer and pulled his pillow against her as he eased out of the bed. Quietly, so as not to disturb her, he grabbed some clothes and padded off to the bathroom. He was still a bit overwhelmed at the changes Francine had wrought on his home, but with time, he was sure he’d get used to it. He knew Merle would be over the moon, knowing they could spend more money on repairs and improvements instead of having to buy new appliances and comforts.

He lit the bathroom heater and opened the glass door on the shower to turn on the water. It was bigger than it looked from the outside, a shelf built into the tiles already stocked with their favorite bath products. But it was the showerhead which caught his attention, with all its settings. His brows rose as he went through each one, finally settling on one which was a combination between rain and a pulsating jet. It must be the latest model, he thought, because it was fancier than the one Carol had in her bathroom.

Daryl shucked his clothes and tossed them into the hamper, anxious to climb in. He couldn’t help the low rumble of pleasure which escaped his throat as the water cascaded over his head, the jets pounding relentlessly against his nape as the rain chased away the sting. He grinned as he thought of his girl. Carol was going to love this. And as his thoughts turned to her, his smile widened, remembering her sweet innocence from the night before. She never slept well when they were apart. He didn’t either, come to think of it, and even though they were free now to snuggle closer to one another, she still felt the need to hold his hand in order to let go and drift off.
It had been that way since they were children. He could still remember clearly, the first time he’d held her hand in his, the first time it had been him to initiate the contact …

Daryl hated nap time. It was a waste of time, in his opinion. His mama didn’t make him take naps like he was a baby or something. He believed it was just a way to get them to settle down so the teacher could have a break. Miss Michna looked as if she were ready to pull her hair out by the time she got them all settled. He especially didn’t like it that she had separated him from Carol. Miss Michna didn’t like him. It was only their second day of preschool and she was already trying to make his life miserable. But he was used to people’s scorn towards him. It was hard to listen to his mama when people were giving him the evil eye all the time. “Hold your head up, my sweet boy. Don’t let them see how much it hurts you. Because of their small mindedness, they’ll never know how sweet and kind you are, or how much love you have to give.” He missed his mama when he was forced to go to school. He would much rather be home with her.

He looked across the classroom, leaning up on his elbow so he could see Carol. But if he was home, he couldn’t be with his new friend. Already, she was so important to him. It wasn’t fair he couldn’t be close to her during nap time when they spent every other moment together at school. From the troubled look in her azure eyes, he had a feeling she was less than pleased at the prospect of being parted from him as well. He looked up at the windows, seeing the sky had darkened through the blinds. He didn’t like storms, and the one rolling in looked as if it was going to be bad.

Miss Michna snapped her fingers at him as she walked among the resting children, pointing down, her face twisted into a stern frown. He dropped back onto his mat and sighed. A soft knock at the door of their classroom, soon shifted her focus as she went to see who was there. The moment her back was turned, Carol picked up her mat and thin blanket and crept across the room, setting her things beside him with a calculating little grin. He felt his heart flutter with happiness, unable to keep the smile off his face. “Mean old teacher,” she grumbled.

“You’re gonna get in trouble when she sees y’, Carol Ann,” he whispered.

Carol pulled the blanket up to her chin as thunder boomed in the distance. He could see her shivering beneath the soft fleece blanket. “I don’t want t-to be way over there by myself. I-I don’t like storms.”

Daryl frowned. He’d never have thought his brave little friend would be scared of a thunderstorm. Her eyes closed as she ducked her head, and he wondered if she thought he’d make fun of her. He knew then she’d taken a big chance by telling him of her fears, all the while afraid he would make fun of her. “Don’t be scared. It’s jus’ a bunch o’ noise an’ stuff. We’re safe here.”

Carol scooted to the edge of her mat so she could be closer to her friend. “You don’t think I’m stupid for being afraid?”

“Course not,” he assured her. “Everybody’s got somethin’ they’re scared of.”

A radiant smile lit up her face like sunshine on a warm spring day. “Not you. You’re so brave.”

Lightning illuminated the classroom, followed by an ominous crack of thunder and she let out a little squeak. “It’s ok, Carol.” He reached over and wrapped his hand around her much smaller one. “Ain’t gonna let nothin’ happen t’ y’. Jus’ hold my hand, an’ try not t’ think about th’ storm … ok?”

She nodded, the warmth of his hand around hers seeming to soothe her. “Thank you, Daryl.”
“What for?” he asked, puzzled.

“For being my friend … my best friend.”

He took a deep shuddering breath, his eyes stinging with unshed tears. So, this is what it felt like to have a friend, he thought, watching her pretty eyes close as she relaxed enough to doze. As his own eyes drooped, he made a promise to himself never to do anything which would chase her away.

Miss Michna had been livid when she’d closed the classroom door and checked on her students. She’d scolded Carol for moving her mat, which only made Daryl mad, especially when he noticed the tears clinging to Carol’s lashes. He’d stepped between his friend and their horrid teacher and told her to leave Carol alone. Miss Michna had kept them both after school and called their parents. Daryl knew he was going to get it – having gotten in trouble two days in a row – but he couldn’t find it in himself to care.

Emma and Francine had stalked into that classroom, a united front, mama bears ready to protect their cubs. The teacher had hurriedly explained the rules they’d broken. The girls were to nap on one side of the room, the boys on the other. She didn’t want the children to grow up thinking it was alright to sleep next to one another. Francine was outraged at the woman’s audacity and Emma looked as if she wanted to throttle the woman.

“You’re scolding our kids because they were lying side by side during nap time? Are you for real?” Emma snapped, her blue eyes flashing fire. “I could understand your concern if they were sixteen, but they are FIVE! They are FRIENDS.” She took a threatening step towards Miss Michna, and Daryl’s eyes bugged, never having seen his mother quite so upset. “Or is it you have a problem with my son?”

“I am a teacher, Mrs. Dixon. I assure you, I see all the kids the same, as little ones in need of guidance. I just –“

Francine cut her off with an icy glare. “Oh, I’m sure. Did they teach you to say that in college, dear? Don’t think I missed the way you looked at Daryl yesterday in Mr. Hovarth’s office. You were delighted to see our kids in trouble.” She held up a hand to forestall the woman’s protests. “Let me tell you something … Emma and I will not tolerate you bullying our kids.”

Carol hopped up out of her seat and slipped her hand into her mother’s. “Mom, it’s my fault. I was scared of the storm, and I wanted to be with my friend. I didn’t mean to cause trouble.”

Miss Michna turned a fiery shade of red as the two women glowered at her.

Emma ushered Daryl over to her side as Francine knelt before her daughter. “And did Daryl make you feel better, darling?”

Carol bobbed her head in a nod. “He did, Mom. Daryl held my hand and made me feel safe. I really didn’t mean to break Miss Michna’s rules.”

“I know you didn’t.” Francine turned back to the teacher. “Did they cause trouble or disturb the other children?” she asked.

“N-No, I can’t say as they did.”

Emma wrapped her arm around Daryl’s shoulders as she glared at Miss Michna. “They are not to be parted. If they were misbehaving, I could understand you calling us in here to discuss their behavior, but this is beyond ridiculous. School is a new experience for them. They need time
to adjust, and if they bring comfort to one another, there is no reason for your concern.”

“I-I –“

“Kids, get your things, and we’ll go to Sweet Dreams for a treat,” Francine said, smiling down at them before winking at Emma.

Daryl was beyond thrilled. He was going to get a cupcake and spend a few more hours with his friend. And the teacher he loathed so much had gotten a dressing down from their mothers. From that day on, during nap time, Miss Michna placed their mats right in front of her desk, side by side where she could keep an eye on them, but at least they were together.

Daryl grinned at the memory as he turned off the water and stepped out of the shower to dry himself. It amazed him that so many years later, she still slept better with his hand enveloping hers.

* * *

That evening, Francine was puttering about the kitchen as Daryl and Carol made their way into the house, tired after their long day. Thursday was testing day at school, and though they hadn’t had a chance to study the night before, the kids felt as if they’d done well. Daryl couldn’t help but grin smugly as he remembered Rick bursting out of Trig class waving his test in the air as he whooped joyfully. He’d passed with a B- and secured his place on the team … at least for another week. Carol’s tutoring had pulled his ass out of the fire.

Fran pulled the large pan of Stromboli from the oven and placed it atop the oven to cool before greeting them both with a hug. The entire room smelled like an Italian eatery. “How was your day, dears? And where did you go after school, Carol Ann?”

“It was good, I guess,” she answered, her voice muffled as she dug through the refrigerator in search of drinks. “Rick passed his Trig test.”

Daryl snorted. “He was scared if he didn’t, you’d give him a beat down.” His gaze was glued to the succulent loaves filled with cheesy goodness, his mouth watering.

“As much time as I spent studying with him this past week … you’re probably right,” Carol grinned. “As for after school, Mom, I went to the clinic with Daryl. Thought I’d keep Maggie company.” She’d had a few words for her friend, as well. “I remembered you telling me you were going to be interviewing a new girl and would be working at the bakery today. How’d that go, by the way?”

“It went fine. Brandi is a lovely girl, and I think she’ll fit right in with the rest of the staff.” She didn’t add that she was paying the girl a bit more than what she’d been making at SW&G to make sure she didn’t feel the need to go back and work for that lecher. Francine turned back to the stove and cut them a slice of the pepperoni, sausage and cheese Stromboli she’d made for dinner. She slid a plate before each of the teens wearing her best apologetic smile. “I’m sorry I didn’t go all out tonight, but William had an emergency by-pass to perform, and there’s no telling what time he’ll make it in.”

“Ain’t gonna hear me complainin’,” Daryl said, his mouth full of delight as he chased the gooey cheese strung between the Stromboli and his teeth. “Amazin’ as usual.”
Carol shot him a look of amusement. “You think all food is amazing.” Considering there were times in his past where he’d never had enough to eat, she couldn’t blame him. A rush of pure hatred for Jackson coursed through her and it took some effort to bite it back.

“Leave him alone, Carol Ann,” Francine admonished her daughter. “He’s a growing boy. With his metabolism and his active lifestyle, he can afford it.”

Daryl waggled his brows at her playfully and gave her a sloppy kiss, grease smearing across her cheek.

“Gawd, Daryl, eww!” she protested, reaching for a napkin.

Francine beamed at them, enjoying their teasing banter. How long had she waited to see them so in love and happy? She sighed. “So … what are your plans for this evening? Are the two of you staying here or at the cabin? Don’t look at me like that Carol Ann. I just want to know where my children are going to be,” she added the last when she saw her daughter’s obstinate chin lift, ready to defend their choices.

Carol backed down immediately, her defensiveness quickly morphing into relief that her mother wasn’t going to argue with her about sleeping arrangements. “We’re going to stay at the cabin. When we leave here, we’re going to Jackson’s place to clear out the rest of Daryl’s things. Then tomorrow, Merle’s coming home, followed by the barbeque Saturday,” she ticked off on her fingers. “So, we probably won’t be back here until Sunday night. That’s ok, right?”

“Of course, dear. I trust you … both of you … to make good choices.”

Daryl quickly opted for a subject change. “Ain’t your dinner party tomorrow night?”

“Yeah, Mom … how’s the menu coming?” Carol asked, pushing her plate aside and sipping at her bottle of iced green tea.

Francine arched one finely sculpted auburn brow, her mouth pursed in a moue of displeasure. “I had four new orders come in today. Apparently, Roseanne Marks left her husband in charge of placing the order for their twins’ birthday party on Saturday and he didn’t remember until this afternoon. I’ll be busy all day tomorrow getting them done. Four dozen cupcakes, two miniature cakes, two dozen petit fours and a full sheet cake.”

“Wow! Well, it is their first birthday, so I suppose she wants to go all out. She’s probably invited every family who has kids in Senoia,” Carol replied, hopping down from her stool to get Daryl another slice of Stromboli. “But look on the bright side, Mom … it’ll give your new trainee a great learning experience. If you want, I can work tomorrow after school.”

Francine beamed at her. “Would you, darling? That will give me the opportunity to get home to shower, change and see to the caterers when they arrive. Thankfully, it’s going to be a small affair. Only William’s partner and his wife will be attending. I’d ask the two of you to join us if Merle wasn’t coming in tomorrow night.”

Daryl patted his belly as he finished his dinner. “Yeah, he should be in sometime after eight. Least that’s what he told us this mornin’ when he called.”

“Well, you know where we’ll be if you need anything. All you have to do is call,” she assured them as she lifted the lid off the cake server to reveal a triple chocolate fudge cake covered in chocolate ganache. “Now, who wants cake?”

Carol groaned and buried her face in her hands. “Mommmmmmm …”
Daryl stared through the dusty windshield of his truck, cursing the tremor in his hands as he reached out to turn off the ignition. The security light installed by the electric company cast an eerie glow on the ramshackle cabin crumbling on the property Jackson owned. This was the last place he wanted to spend his evening. The fact that he had his girl with him made his eye twitch.

Sitting in the middle of the seat, her hip pressed warmly against his, Carol rested her head against his shoulder and trailed her fingers along his forearm. “Baby, what’s wrong?” she asked softly. She – better than anyone – knew how hard it was for him to be there now that he’d won his freedom from his prison. Yet, he needed to put his fears into words. He would eventually, she just had to be patient.

He leaned his cheek against the top of her head and sighed, relishing the feel of her nestled against his side. No one could ever make him feel as safe and loved as she did. She made him believe all things were possible. After a lifetime of hearing her positive reinforcements, he was finally beginning to believe it. He just wished he could skip this part. “Ain’t nothin’ wrong, not really. Jus’ hate y’ bein’ here, having t’ go in there with me … seein’ how I’ve had t’ live.”

Carol watched him through sympathetic eyes as he pulled his cigarettes from his jacket pocket and lit one, rolling the window down to the cool night air. He wasn’t ready to face his former life, and she wasn’t going to push him. “You know none of that matters to me, Daryl. I would never judge you for something so trifling.” Her hand sneaked under his jacket to rest against his chest where his heart beat a steady rhythm. “I love what’s in here.”

Daryl’s free hand crept up to cover hers as he closed his eyes and took another lungful of smoke. “I love y’, Carol Ann … so damn much it scares me sometimes,” he whispered fervently.

“I love you too,” she replied, just as earnestly. “We don’t have to do this at all if you don’t want to. Whatever you’ve left behind can be replaced. We can just walk away …”

He was quiet for a long moment, pondering her words before he shook his head. “No. I ain’t got much, but it’s mine. I ain’t gonna leave it for him. I jus’ cain’t … not after everythin’ he’s already taken from me.”

Daryl flicked the cigarette butt out the window and opened the door, reaching in to take Carol’s hand. She wrapped her arms around his neck and hugged him tightly, her breath warm against the shell of his ear. “I’m here for you, Daryl. It’s going to be ok … I promise.”

How many times had she said that to him over the years? She hadn’t been wrong yet, and that knowledge seemed to bolster his flagging spirits. He could get through this. Twining his fingers with hers, he led her across the yard and up onto the rickety porch, slowly pushing the door open for her to enter ahead of him. It was the first time he’d ever allowed her to come inside. He’d never wanted her to see him living in such squalor. Looking down at her with a side eyed glance, he could see her taking it all in with wide eyes.

He let her hand drop as he shifted from foot to foot, uncomfortable as her scrutinizing gaze swept over the living room. Unable to bear it a second longer, he moved further into the room, hurrying to pick up the trash and multiple beer cans Jackson had left on the coffee table next to an overflowing ashtray. He took them into the kitchen and dropped it all into the trash can. He had bagged that up, ready to take it out before collecting the coffee mugs and setting them in the sink. He would have started to wash the dishes if he hadn’t felt her hand tracing over his back, drawing his
“What are you doing?” she asked, one brow rising in askance.

Daryl flushed, heat spreading up his neck to settle in his cheeks. “Jus’ … jus’ cleanin’ up.”

“This isn’t your home any more, Daryl. You don’t have to clean up behind Jackson. He made the mess … let him take care of it when he comes back. You’re here to pack, not do chores.”

He dried his hands on a towel and ducked his head, refusing to meet her gaze. “Sorry … habit, I guess.”

Carol followed him to his bedroom, smiling when he turned on the light and she got a good eyeful. It was the cleanest room she’d seen thus far. She couldn’t understand how Daryl could be so neat and orderly and Jackson … well, he was just a pig. He dropped to his knees, reaching under the bed to pull out a worn duffle bag, handing it to her. “What do you want me to do?”

“Um … grab th’ clothes from my dresser while I get th’ rest? Shouldn’t take us long,” he murmured, still not quite believing this was the last time he’d have to step foot in his father’s house.

Carol worked silently, folding and packing his clothes away in the bag. It didn’t take her long before she began on the closet. She took everything on hangers and simply slipped a trash bag over them all to protect them from any grime in the back of his truck. It was then she began to notice some of the things he’d began packing away in the box next to his nightstand. Spare bolts for his crossbow, his hunting satchel, a few knives … a .45 pistol? Where the hell had he gotten that? Better question … why had he never used it on his no account father?

She shook her head, focusing her attention on him as he lifted the corner of a poster to reveal a moderately sized hole in the wall. There was only one thing hidden within the space, a small metal lock box. “What’s that?”

Daryl grinned, his eyes alight with mischief. “College fund. Had t’ find a place t’ hide it from Jackson.” He dug in his pockets to locate his keys and opened it to show her. It was filled with neatly rolled bills.

Carol gasped. “God, Daryl, how much have you been able to save?”

“It ain’t much … ’bout five thousand. Been savin’ for about three years now.” He ducked his head as he closed and locked it before setting it in the cardboard box with the rest of his things. “Wasn’t easy t’ save that much what with Jackson never wantin’ t’ pay th’ bills or buy groceries, but I figured it was a start.”

She mentally calculated how much more he could have saved if he hadn’t had to spend it on necessities his father should have provided. It made her furious to think of one more thing Jackson had taken from him. “You are so amazing,” she said, flinging her arms around his neck.

Daryl overbalanced, taken unawares by her sudden burst of exuberance, and toppled down to the bare mattress. Carol landed on top of him with an oomph! and his surprise quickly morphed into something else entirely at the feel of her soft curves aligned so perfectly with his lean lines. She seemed to be aware of it as well, her eyes darkening with desire as she leaned down and captured his lips with hers.

“And you’re beautiful … and mine,” he whispered huskily against her lips. “You’re mine, ain’t y’, Carol Ann, my angel?”
Carol moaned, a low throaty sound which set his body ablaze. “Yours, Daryl … always yours,” she keened softly a second before her tongue plunged into his mouth, sinuously dueling with his for dominance of the kiss. His hands slipped into the curls at her nape, holding her in place as he explored at his leisure, reveling in her surrender, his other hand gliding down her back to cup the sweet swell of her ass encased in low-slung jeans.

Daryl was quickly losing his shyness, the breathy little sounds she made fueling his desire for her. He flipped them, rolling her beneath him in one smooth movement. His chest rumbled with pleasure as he settled between her legs, his tumescent flesh painfully hard where it pressed against the zipper of his cargos. A shudder rippled through her as he rolled his hips and drew her bottom lip into his mouth to suck gently, a thousand of his fantasies come to life. And then he stopped, releasing her lip with a soft wet pop.

Carol panted in frustration. “W-Why’d you stop?” she whined, trying to draw his lips back down to hers.

Daryl sighed, sending up a silent prayer to whatever deity watching over him for the return of his self-control. “Did y’ forget where we are?” he asked, shaking his head. “We ain’t doin’ this here. Yeah, we got carried away, but when we do finally make love … it ain’t gonna be in a place like this. I want us t’ feel safe, not worried if Jackson’s gonna come home early. I want y’ t’ have soft sheets an’ candles an’ whatever else I can think of t’ make y’ feel loved an’ cherished. Y’ get me, angel?”

She pressed her lips into a thin line, fighting to hold back the tears his heartfelt words invoked. “You have a way of making me lose my head completely. You know that, right?”

He smiled unrepentantly and rolled off of her, rising to his feet and offering her a hand up. “Yeah, I know … because y’ do th’ same t’ me. Now come on. I want t’ finish so we can get th’ hell outta here an’ go home.”

They hurried through the rest of the packing, stowing it away in the back of Daryl’s truck. If he’d thought packing was miserable, he soon came to learn packing with a hard on was the height of frustration. At least he wasn’t alone if he was correctly judging the furtive scorching looks she kept sending his way. After he’d cleared out his room, he and Carol retrieved the makeshift ramp from the shed and loaded Merle’s bike. She hadn’t wanted him to ride and take the chance of catching a cold. The temperature had already dropped below freezing that evening, a rarity in Georgia in late September. With one last look around the house, there was only one thing left.

“I cain’t leave it.”

“Why?” Carol asked, uncomfortable standing just in the doorway of Jackson’s bedroom as Daryl fiddled with the lock on the hope chest sitting at the end of the bed.

His eyes were filled with sorrow as he met her gaze. “’Cause it belonged t’ my mama. Th’ only reason it survived th’ fire was because it was in the back yard. Merle had just finished cleaning it up and putting a fresh coat of varnish on it. S’all I got left o’ her, an’ I’m not leavin’ it for Jackson. I cain’t,” he explained.

Carol straightened her shoulders and moved to catch one end, Daryl the other. “Then we’ll load it up too.” But as much as they tried to move the heavy piece of furniture, it wouldn’t budge on her end. “Crap! I’m just not strong enough to lift it,” she pouted. “Maybe we could call Rick to come out here and help?”

Daryl paled slightly. None of their friends had ever seen where he lived, and he didn’t want
that to change. Not now. “No. Merle’ll be home tomorrow night. We’ll just get him t’ meet us here instead of at th’ cabin. He can help me load it. He wouldn’t want Jackson t’ have it any more than I do.”

She twined her fingers with his, letting him lead her out to the truck. Carol looked back at the hovel, an ominous feeling of oncoming doom churning in her gut, but she pushed it aside. What was one more day? Tomorrow, all ties with Jackson Dixon would be severed for good. She climbed in the truck and took her seat in the middle, Daryl sliding in after her to start the truck. Yet, she couldn’t shake the feeling that something … something big … was headed their way.

Chapter End Notes

A/n: Dum Dum Dum! Yep, you know the angst is coming! Sorry (not sorry) :D
Chapter 17

Daryl fought valiantly to keep a contented smile off his lips as he shook off the last remnants of sleep. Cracking one eye open, he glanced down at Carol’s fingers slowly trailing through the hair below his navel along his Adonis best. He’d been sleeping on his right side, his girl spooned up behind him, but now as he was reaching full wakefulness, he could feel the position of her body. She was propped up on an elbow, slowly teasing him in a bid to wake him up, her actions deliberate. Focusing on the large red numbers of their alarm clock, seeing it was just after six, he wondered how long she’d been at her task. Just thinking of her waking earlier than normal just to tease him … he couldn’t hold his grin back any longer.

Her petal soft lips found the sensitive spot behind his ear and he shivered. “I know you’re awake, Dixon … you’re smiling,” Carol purred, her nails raking gently across his skin. “What has you in such a good mood this morning, hmm?”

His hand lowered to cover hers, his thumb brushing softly over her knuckles as her fingers teased him mere inches from where he craved her touch.

Don’t even go there, dumbass, he chided himself. “I like when you’re th’ big spoon,” he drawled, rolling onto his back to gaze up at her sleepily. She giggled, and he gave her a quick kiss before bounding out of bed to go to the bathroom.

Daryl was so quick, Carol barely had time to pout over his absence. Water droplets still clung to his morning stubble from where he’d washed his face, and she squealed as a few of them landed on her chest as he leaned over her to kiss her properly. “Mornin’, angel.”

Carol kissed him back, tenderly nibbling at his lips and reveling in the freedom of being able to touch him so intimately after having wanted him for so long. “Good morning, baby. Did you rest well? No nightmares?”

He shook his head. “Not a one. Y’ chased them all away,” he replied with a goofy grin. He leaned in for another kiss, still hovering slightly above her, before asking, “Why were y’ up so early?”

Carol shrugged, her eyes locked with his as she slipped her hands beneath the hem of his shirt. She didn’t want him to know of the nightmares she’d had throughout the night. She knew how important it was to Daryl to go back for the last remaining memento of his mother, but she couldn’t shake the ominous feelings coiling in her gut, worries which had manifested in her dreams. “Guess I wasn’t as tired as I’d thought.”

Daryl accepted her answer, his eyes sloe-lidded and dark with desire. When she touched him, all else ceased to exist, even his worry over her nighttime musings. He was sure he’d remember later … when there were several feet of space between them. Now, he could concentrate on nothing but the slow slide of her fingers on his heated flesh as they dragged higher, pulling his t-shirt up to where it caught beneath his armpits. Every brush of her hand seemed to fuel the fire igniting in his body.

“Please …” she whispered, tugging on the offending garment.
He frowned darkly. *Oh, this is so not a good idea!* Yet, he felt the need to obey her, dropping back onto his haunches to remove his shirt. Carol’s lips formed a small ‘o’ of appreciation, and she didn’t hesitate to draw him back into her arms. She sucked in a sharp breath as he settled into the cradle of her thighs. Daryl’s own lips parted, a little sigh escaping as he came in contact with her sex, their thin sleepwear little barrier against the heat radiating from them both.

Daryl braced himself on his arms, watching her as she began to trace the myriad scars on his torso. Each touch was a little electric shock which sent a surge of lust straight to his cock. With Carol, there was no reason to be ashamed of his scars. There was no reason to hide, never with his angel. She’d taught him so much over the years. With his girl, he was reborn, he was worthy, and he would relish every moment of their future which stretched out before them.

He buried his face in the crook of her neck as his arms wound tightly about her. He worried if his weight was too much for her, but she simply clung to him, her hands tracing the scars on his back with soothing strokes. Her sweet scent assaulted his nose, so strong there where her neck met shoulder, and he groaned, using his teeth, lips and tongue to worship her fevered skin. Her nails dug into his ass, and he couldn’t help himself, bucking against the heat of her core. Bending her knees and planting her feet flat against the bed, she lifted her hips to give him more.

His teeth sank into her creamy flesh before soothing the bite with his tongue, her back arching so her breasts pressed firmly against his chest, her taut nipples sending a little thrill through him. “Tell me t’ stop. Tell me y’ don’t want me. Somethin’, for fuck’s sake,” he growled helplessly as she grinded against him.

“No,” she breathed, one hand trailing up his back to grip the hair at his nape, holding him in place and urging him to continue. “We’re fine … god, are we fine,” she moaned. “We still have our clothes on, so …”

Carol’s words trailed away, her breath hitching as he rocked into her again, hitting her just right. She could feel pressure building in her center, something she’d never felt before. Sure, she’d been aroused in the past. How could she not with as much time as she spent with her delectable friend? But this was different. She ached, yearned … she longed to be filled by him, and it scared her. He rocked into her again, and her eyes slammed closed, her inner walls grasping at nothing. She whimpered in frustration, her lower lip quivering … and he stopped.

Daryl brought his thumb up, brushing tenderly at her lower lip. “Look at me, Carol Ann,” he whispered, his jaw tight as his own need raged through him. When she finally opened her eyes, he could see the emotion as well as conflict within the cerulean depths. “Tell me what y’ want, angel.”

“I-I don’t know,” she groaned. “I’ve never done anything like this, and I don’t know what I’m supposed to do. The closest I’ve ever gotten to sex is by reading one of Maggie’s trashy romance novels.”

He chuckled, leaning down to smile against her lips before he kissed her. “Yeah, like I’ve got so much experience. This is new for me too, but I promise I won’t pressure y’, Carol. Y’ have me. Y’ ain’t gotta do nothing y’ ain’t ready for t’ hold onto me.”

Carol closed her eyes and drew in a shaky breath before meeting his gaze again. “I just … I just want to be enough for you.” She groaned. “I guess I killed the mood, huh?”

“Pfft,” Daryl scoffed. “I’ve been in the mood for three years, woman.” He gripped her chin in his gentle grasp and kissed her again, long and deep. “An’ don’t y’ be worrying y’ ain’t enough. This is it for me, Carol. I’m yours forever.”
She giggled as he made light of their situation, running her fingers through his hair as he scooted lower so he could lay his head against her breasts, seemingly content just to hold her. Carol reached over to turn off the alarm as it blared to life, noisily telling them it was time to meet the day. Just as she’d settled back against the pillows for a few more minutes of snuggling, her phone rang.

Carol groaned as she slid her finger across the screen, connecting the face time call. She hadn’t been paying attention to the caller, and her eyes widened as she came face to face with her mother. “Mom … uh … hi!” she stammered, trying to hold the phone where Francine couldn’t see Daryl’s head pillowed against her bosom. “Good morning!”

Francine arched a brow at her daughter’s overly cheerful greeting. “Good morning to you too, darling.” Her eyes narrowed as she peered more closely at the screen on her end. “Why is your face red? Is that … whisker burn?”

“Mother!”

“Move the phone so I can see Daryl,” she ordered, her tone daring Carol to disobey.

Carol rolled her eyes and held the phone so Francine could see the picture they presented. Daryl stifled a yawn and looked at the screen with a sleepy smile. “Mornin’, Mom,” he said, knowing the moniker was sure to take some of the heat out of her expression.

“Good morning, dear, I hope you rested well.” She wasn’t going to scold or lecture them, seeing as they were still dressed – mostly – in their pajamas.

“Mom, is there a reason you’re calling so early?” Carol asked, rubbing her free hand over her face.

“Oh, yes … I got one of those automated phone calls from the school. Apparently, there was a pipe that ruptured, and classes are cancelled today so they can get a plumber in there to fix the problem.”

“Sweet!” Daryl grinned at the thought of a free day. It would give them a chance to catch up on some of the homework they’d been neglecting over the past two days.

Carol shook her head. “I’m not surprised, to be honest. You should hear how the pipes groan in the locker room. It was just a matter of time.”

“Sweetheart, do you think you could come in a few hours early to help out? I’d really rather you decorate the cupcakes on order. Your piping skills are so much better than mine,” her mother cajoled.

Carol smiled warmly at Francine through the phone and nodded. “Sure, Mom. I’ll see you at one.”

“You’re a lifesaver!” Fran gushed. “Thank you so much, sweetheart. I’ll see you both later.”

Carol said goodbye and disconnected the call, setting the phone back on the nightstand. Her hand returned to delve into Daryl’s soft hair as she sighed. “Long weekend, I guess,” she murmured.

“Mhmm. Whatcha wanna do first?”

“Breakfast?”
His stomach rumbled, and she scooted out from beneath him, his hunger settling the matter. “Go take a shower and I’ll get started.”

* * *

Daryl shivered, hurriedly toweling off and turning up the gas heater in the bathroom. Too many cold showers were sure to lead to pneumonia, he thought wryly. Tossing the towel in the hamper, he pulled on the clothes he’d selected and followed the heavenly aroma of breakfast into the main room, his bare feet padding silently against the hardwood floor as he ventured towards the kitchen. His stomach growled as he wrapped his arms around Carol’s waist and rested his chin on her shoulder where she stood at the stove, creating something remarkable, he was sure.

“Whatcha cookin’?” he asked, pressing a kiss to her neck before moving off to grab the jug of orange juice off the top shelf of the refrigerator, and two glasses from the cupboard. “Ready for me t’ set th’ table?”

Carol grinned at him briefly over her shoulder as she began to assemble her creation on the two warmed plates set next to the stove. “Just the silverware, if you don’t mind,” she murmured, reaching out to turn the burner off before setting the pan aside. “I’ve got everything else under control.”

He hated surprises, but that was exactly what she had in store for him as she set the plate before him. His mouth dropped open, and his brows disappeared somewhere near his hairline as he stared down at the food. “Hot damn! Y’ made my favorite.”

Carol brought her own plate to the table and sat down next to him, gratified by the pleasure oozing from him. “It’s not quite the traditional recipe, but I really like this one better,” she said, cutting into her version of Eggs Benedict. Instead of the usual English muffin topped with Canadian bacon and poached egg and covered in creamy Hollandaise sauce, Carol had spread a bed of hashbrowns on the plate and topped it with a buttermilk biscuit. Then she’d added the Canadian bacon, poached egg and Hollandaise sauce. “Unfortunately, the cinnamon rolls came out of a can.”

Daryl shoveled another bite into his mouth and grinned, the corners of his eyes crinkling in delight. “Don’t care,” he mumbled. “This is amazin’. Where’d y’ learn t’ make this?”

“Remember that last trip Mom and Dad made me take with them to see uncle Roman?”

“That your dad’s brother who lives in Louisiana?” he asked, steadily devouring everything on his plate.

“Mhmm. Well, there’s this little diner in Crowley we stopped at on the way back which served Eggs Benedict just like this.” She giggled as she took a sip of juice. “Mom was steadily picking hers apart trying to see how they’d made it. You know how her OCD acts up.”

Daryl drained his glass and poured a second. “I jus’ remember y’ bein’ gone for a week.”

Carol reached out and covered his hand with hers, giving it a gentle squeeze. “Oh, come on … was it really so bad?”

“What d’you think? Wasn’t like that time when your mom sent y’ off t’ summer camp an’ y’ was sent home early,” he snorted. “Don’t think I’d ever seen Francine Mason quite so pissed.”
She picked apart her cinnamon roll, ducking her head sheepishly as she recalled the memory. “Well she shouldn’t have made me go … KNEW I didn’t want to go without you! Besides, I came back to you.”

Daryl rose from the table and stretched before he leaned over to give her a sweet kiss. “Y’ always do, angel.” He took his plate to the sink and dropped it in to soak in the dishwater. She’d gone to the trouble to make breakfast for them, so he’d be the one to clean up their mess. He didn’t want her to feel as if he was taking advantage of her, and wanted to do his share of the chores. But first, he wanted a smoke. “I’ll be right back. Go on an’ get your shower so we can tackle some of that homework we’ve been putting off.”

“Don’t forget to call your brother,” she called after him as he headed towards the front door to let himself out onto the porch. She couldn’t shake the feeling they were going to need him.

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“County morgue; you kill ‘em, we chill ‘em.”

Daryl banged his head back against the support beam where he sat on the railing surrounding the porch and rolled his eyes. Leave it to his brother to answer the phone in such a way. “What th’ fuck, Merle? I coulda been your CO callin’ for all y’ know.”

“Caller ID, shithead,” Merle chortled, forcing Daryl to pull the phone a few inches away from his ear. “What’s up, baby brother? Anxious t’ have me home with y’?”

Daryl ducked his head, thankful Merle couldn’t see his expression through the phone. He hadn’t seen his brother in three years, not since he’d been injured on a covert mission and sent home – well, home to Francine since he couldn’t return to Jackson’s – and spent six weeks recuperating. Hell yeah, he was ready for the fucker to be home for good. “Y’ know I am,” he said, exhaling a thin stream of cigarette smoke through his nose. “Y’ been gone too damn long.”

Merle didn’t say anything for a long moment, and Daryl suspected his brother was dealing with his own emotions. “Yeah … well, I ain’t leavin’ again. I know ten years o’ service might seem long, but it’s over now. I got a nice chunk o’ change squirreled away, an’ we’ve got a chance t’ make th’ name Dixon worth somethin’ again, right?”

“I reckon we do. Oscar and Caesar know what they’re in for goin’ into business with y’?” Daryl asked, trying to change the subject. He hated to talk about the time his brother had been away. It left him raw and aching, and even a tiny bit resentful towards Merle’s absence. He understood why he’d left – the situation, not him – but he didn’t have to like it. After the strings William had pulled, Merle was lucky he’d been offered the chance to join the military rather than go to jail.

He could hear a scuffle for the phone right before Caesar greeted, “Hey, lil’ brother! Hope you got the welcome wagon ready to roll … beer, strippers, food … the usual.”

Daryl snorted as he heard a smack, followed by Merle’s voice. “Back off, Paco! Y’ know he ain’t old enough t’ buy alcohol yet, an’ he ain’t a delinquent like I was at that age.”

“Merle …” He stubbed his cigarette out and sighed. “There’s been a change o’ plans.”
The eldest Dixon tensed on the other end of the line. “What’s wrong? And don’t lie t’ me, ’cause I can hear it in yer voice, Daryl.”

Daryl raked a hand through his shaggy hair, leaving several strands sticking up at odd angles. “Nothin’ is wrong, I jus’ need y’ t’ meet me at Jackson’s when y’ get in.”

“WHY?!” his brother barked. After their mother’s death, and the ensuing fallout with their father, Merle had sworn never to step foot in Jackson’s house again. Daryl hated to ask such a favor, but he felt Merle was the only person he could ask. “Why would y’ even need t’ go back there? Y’ said y’ was gonna get all yer stuff last night.”

“I still need t’ get mama’s hope chest. It’s too heavy for jus’ me an’ Carol. Need some extra muscle.” Daryl lit another cigarette, frustration emanating from his every pore. “I ain’t leavin’ it for him, Merle! It’s th’ only thing I got left o’ her.”

“Goddamnit!”

“He ain’t even gonna be there. Jackson’s outta town on a job an’ won’t be back ‘til Tuesday at th’ latest,” he reassured his brother.

Merle sighed heavily over the phone. “A’right, don’t get yer knickers in a knot, brother. Barring any slow-downs – I swear I’m never takin’ th’ fuckin’ bus again – we should be in ‘round eight. That’ll put us at Jackson’s before eight thirty.”

Daryl huffed a breath of relief and smiled for the first time since calling his brother. “Thanks, Merle, I owe y’ one.”

Merle snorted a laugh. “Y’ jus’ get that spitfire o’ yers t’ cook us up some fine vittles, an’ we’ll call it even.”

* * *

Daryl gaze searched out his girl as he stepped back into the cabin. He could hear the steady hum of the jets in the new bathtub, and grinned. He was happy she derived so much pleasure from her bath. Making his way into the kitchen, he rolled up his sleeves and went to the sink, hurriedly doing the dishes and wiping the counter and stove down before returning to the living room. It was another ten minutes before she emerged from the bathroom, her curls messily piled in a loose bun. She looked far more relaxed now as she tugged on the hem of her pink hoodie, her brow arched as his eyes traveled her form from top to toe.

“How’d it go? Is Merle going to meet us tonight at Jackson’s?” she asked, brushing an imaginary speck of lint from her jeans.

“He wasn’t too thrilled about it, but yeah … he’ll be there.”

Carol fidgeted, peering at him from beneath her lashes before she moved to hook up her laptop to the new TV. “I … um … I still think we should have called Rick to help us move it last night,” she said, her voice holding a tentative undertone. “Don’t get me wrong, Daryl … I know why you didn’t want him to come out there, but I still think we should have asked him.”

Daryl stretched out on the sectional, sinking into the buttery leather with a winsome smile.
Francine knew her retail, god love her. “The point is moot now, Car. Merle will be home tonight and we can get it then.” He patted the space beside him, beckoning her closer, but she wasn’t done fiddling with her computer. “What’re we doin’? Thought we were gonna tackle some homework.”

She pulled up her instant video account and selected a movie before crawling into the space beside him on the sofa. “We are.”

As Daryl watched the opening credits, he groaned. “Romeo and Juliet? Ugh!” he grumbled, swiping a hand over his face. “Do we have to watch this?”

Carol arched a brow. “Unless you’d rather read the book. We all know just how much you love to read Shakespeare,” she replied dryly.

“Gawd, I hate that shit!”

“Which is why we’re watching the movie.”

He could see her logic – wanting to spare him from something he absolutely detested – though he knew she’d already read the book numerous times. “They always leave stuff out of the movie. What if I need what’s missing for the report we gotta do?”

“The movie adaptation I chose is the closest to the novel,” she said, throwing her leg over both of Daryl’s and snuggling up close to him.

“I’m gonna be bored t’ death, ain’t I?”

“Just pay attention and you’ll be fine for the report, baby. It’s the 1936 version and though it lacks luster in the romance department, it’s a committed representation. Besides, if you get bored, we could always make out,” she grinned, dramatically batting her eye lashes.

Daryl snorted and reached for the remote to turn up the TV. Fifteen minutes in, he was ready for a nap. After a half an hour, Carol was snuffling softly against his chest, dead to the world. He sent up a silent prayer of thanks as his phone alerted him to a text, saving him from pulling his hair out.

‘Sup, man? We’re going to the Matinee in Peachtree. Come with?

Daryl groaned inwardly as he read Rick’s message. Cain’t. Gotta study before me an’ Carol have t’ go t’ work. Have fun though.

The theme song for the old reality show – Cops – blasted over the phone speakers and then Rick’s irritated voice. “Dude … c’mon. We get a free day and you want to study? Seriously?” his friend complained.

“R & J book report for English IV due next Friday. Carol’s got us watchin’ the movie,” he said quietly so as not to wake his girl.

Rick scoffed. “You’re killing me here, Dixon! Call in sick, put the damn schoolwork away, and get your ass down here.”

Daryl chuckled. “Jus’ because you’re going t’ the academy next summer t’ follow in your old man’s footsteps, don’t mean th’ rest o’ us aren’t trying t’ get into college. I cain’t afford for my grades t’ slip. And there ain’t no way in hell I’m callin’ in sick. An’ Carol promised her mom she’d be in at one t’ help her out.”
“Well, damn,” Rick whined. “Alright, so we’ll just have to go without you. One of these days, you’re gonna have to man up and actually hang out with us.”

“Which is why we’re barbequing at my place tomorrow.”

“Speaking of … what do you want me to bring?”

Daryl winced. Rick was not known for his culinary skills, evidenced in his shoddy performance in Home Ec last year. “I dunno. Whatever y’ feel like bringin’ I guess.”

“Ok, man. I gotta go pick up Lori anyway. Maybe she might have an idea of what I can bring.”

“Later, Rick.”

“See ya.”

“Please don’t tell me Rick wants to bring food tomorrow,” Carol said with a shudder.

“That’s what he said.”

Carol groaned.

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Carol stifled a yawn as she followed Daryl into his father’s house. She really needed some sleep in the worst way … especially considering the little she’d gotten the night before. Lack of sleep, homework and then working at the bakery had left her exhausted, and the last place she wanted to be was here. The hair stood up on the back of her neck and goosebumps erupted on her arms as she crossed the threshold. She clutched his hand just a little more tightly and bit back a whimper, still unable to shake the feeling of impending doom.

Daryl went straight to his father’s room and set the duffel bag at his feet. “Y’ a’right, Car? Y’ been mighty quiet since y’ picked me up at work,” he said, side-eyeing her as he dropped to his knees in front of the chest and withdrew a small lock-picking kit from the pocket of his jacket.

‘F-Fine,” she waved away his worries with a dismissive hand. “Just a little cold, is all.” She refused to burden him with her worries.

He frowned. “Want me t’ light th’ heater?”

“No, it’s fine. We won’t be here long.” She offered him a sweet smile, hoping it would distract him. Her stomach churned with dread, feeling like a thief, but she’d balked at the thought of him coming there without her.

Daryl nodded, wondering over her strange mood, but he knew it was simply a case of nerves. He didn’t like being there any more than she did … if not more. He fiddled more with the lock and then grinned as the tumblers engaged and the mechanism clicked. “There. Let’s get this stuff out so it won’t be so heavy when we move it.”

Carol knelt beside him on the hardwood floor and peered over the side, curious to see what was stored within. “All of this belonged to your mother?”
“Unless Jackson added some stuff,” he said, picking up an aged crocheted baby blanket. It was blue with a tinge of yellow along the edges. He’d carried that blanket around until he was four … until Jackson had called him a pansy and ripped it out of his hands. He shoved it into the bag and looked over to see what had captured Carol’s attention. The chest was filled with little treasures. Emma’s wedding dress, a few pairs of baby booties he was sure either he or Merle had worn long ago, their baby books crammed full of pictures and handwritten notes, but it was the small ring box he found himself reaching for.

Carol leaned into his side as he opened it, showing her the platinum band with an array of tiny sapphires embedded within the surface. “What is it?”

“It’s th’ … um … promise ring Jackson gave her on her sixteenth birthday.” His voice was barely more than a whisper. “I remember when she put it in here. Things had gotten bad between them, an’ she said she couldn’t wear it anymore … not when she felt he didn’t love her anymore.”

She shifted uncomfortably, watching her love struggle with the ghost of his mother. “They weren’t always …”

Daryl looked over at her when her voice trailed away, a small rueful quirk to his lips as he shook his head. “Nah … they were happy a long time ago. When grandad was still alive. Jackson was real close to his daddy, an’ Mama said when he died, Jackson was never th’ same. He thought he could find th’ answers at th’ bottom of a bottle or a needle in his arm. Merle told me it only got worse when I came along … jus’ another mouth t’ feed.” He ducked his head, feeling his eyes burn with unshed tears for a man he despised. “Y’ think … maybe … that’s why he hates me so much?”

Carol pulled him into her arms, his head falling heavily against her shoulder as she stroked his hair. “No! It’s not your fault the way Jackson treats you, baby. He’s a bitter fool who sought vices instead of taking comfort in his family. It’s his fault he doesn’t know what a wonderful son he has,” she hissed, angry tears coursing over her cheeks. “Think of the joy you brought Emma. She loved you so much, Daryl. Don’t let him into your head.”

He pulled away from her and turned his head, swiping at the moisture in his eyes. “C’mon, let’s get this packed up. Merle’s gonna be here soon.”

The duffel bag was nearly full, the chest almost empty, when Carol found a file folder - with Daryl’s name on it - under a handmade quilt. It wasn’t sealed, and several documents spilled out as she lifted it out of the hope chest. Both his and Merle’s original birth certificates, social security cards, and what looked like a life insurance policy. She remembered when Daryl had been ready to find his first job, asking William to help him procure copies since he’d been sure the originals had perished in the fire which had taken Emma’s life.

Daryl peered curiously at her, his brow knitted into a deep frown. “What’s that y’ got there?” His lips parted, his mouth opening and closing several times as he looked down at the papers she handed him.

“There’s some legal documents too,” she said, her eyes quickly scanning the papers. “Holy shit!”

“What?!” he asked, snatching them from her when she seemed to lose her ability to speak. He sat back on his heels, stunned at what he was reading. One year before her death, she’d taken out a life insurance policy for two hundred fifty thousand dollars which would be doubled with accidental death or dismemberment … and named Daryl as her sole beneficiary. If her death occurred before Daryl had reached his eighteenth birthday, his guardian would be provided with a one-thousand-dollar stipend per month to provide for his care until he reached his majority. The rest
of the money would be held in trust, yielding interest until such time he could claim it.

“Daryl … baby …” Carol hedged, watching dawning realization break out across his face. “You’re worth over five hundred thousand dollars!”

He stared back at her, just as wide-eyed before the unmitigated rage built within him to make his face burn an unholy red. “And he knew! This is why he wouldn’t … why he wouldn’t let me go. He wanted the money!” He shot to his feet, pacing furiously until he couldn’t cage his inner beast any longer and he sent his hand flying into the wall in a burst of outrage. “All this time he’s been usin’ th’ money t’ feed his habits while I’ve been strugglin’ t’ pay th’ fuckin’ bills an’ keep food on th’ table. All this time … everythin’ I’ve had t’ endure … bastard!”

Carol grabbed both of his wrists, her fingers digging into his skin to stop him from punching the wall again. “Daryl! Stop … please.”

Daryl calmed somewhat at her touch, though the anger still bubbled hotly beneath his skin.

She trailed her hands over his arms, moving upward to wrap around his neck. “He can’t hurt you anymore. You’re free now. I know you’re hurting, baby, but this is a new beginning for you and Jackson can no longer taint your mother’s legacy. She did that for you, Daryl, because she loved you so much, her sweet boy,” she murmured soothingly. “You can go to college and fulfill your dreams, and all the while she’ll be smiling down at you, thrilled to see you free of him, to see you happy.”

He clung to her desperately, fighting to rein in his overwrought emotions, only the sound of a car door slamming, bringing him out of his funk. “That’s Merle,” he said, excitement evident in his voice. “He’s finally here. Let’s go grab a few beers out o’ th’ fridge so we can celebrate.”

Carol chuckled. “I’ll get the beer while you get the door. Are you sure you’re ok?”

“I gotta be,” he replied, determined not to allow what he’d discovered ruin Merle’s homecoming.

Daryl followed after her, nearly bouncing on the balls of his feet he was so ready to see his brother. She disappeared into the kitchen as he reached for the doorknob, but the smile abruptly slithered off his face as he yanked the door open … meeting his father’s cold glassy stare.

Chapter End Notes

A/n: Bad writer, BAD writer! Evil! Yes, I’m awful. Sorry! (not sorry, mwahahaha). The suspense is killing me! Hope you all enjoyed :D Please review!
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

A/n: This is your friendly trigger warning for violence, and all around Jackson Dixon nastiness. Read at your own risk!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Daryl felt the blood freeze in his veins as he took in Jackson’s glassy-eyed stare, his palms beginning to sweat as his breath hitched. *Now is not th’ time for a panic attack, Dixon!* Instead, he blurted out, “What’re y’ doin’ here?” Which - on a good day - would have gotten him slapped. But he wasn’t thinking of himself, but rather his girl rummaging in the fridge. “Whatcha mean, what am I doin’ here?” Jackson slurred. “I fuckin’ live here, don’t I, boy? Th’ hell’s wrong with y’?” Daryl let go of the doorknob as his old man brushed past him with a shove to his shoulder. “Y’ act like y’ was expectin’ someone else,” Daryl’s head dropped submissively, despite his efforts to let go of years of dominance and abuse. He watched his father through his fringe of bangs as Jackson moved farther into the room to close the door behind him. “Y’ said y’ wasn’t comin’ home ‘til next week,” he said accusingly. If only he’d known, he’d never have brought Carol with him … or himself for that matter.

“Yes … well, I got fired.”

“Again?” Daryl asked dryly, crossing his arms over his chest. He fought the urge to roll his eyes. This was the fourth job his father had lost this year due to his substance abuse issues. *Not your problem,* said the voice in his head. *You don’t owe him a damn thing … you’re free.*

Jackson waved a dismissive hand. “Ain’t worried. ‘Sides, y’ didn’t think I’d miss yer eighteenth birthday, now didja?”

“His birthday was this past Wednesday, Mr. Dixon,” Carol said coldly, drawing the attention of both men. “We’re so sorry you couldn’t make it.”

Daryl’s eyes widened just a bit as he took in her imperiously arched brow and the sweetly fake smile plastered to her lips, groaning inwardly.

Jackson’s look turned feral as his gaze swung to her. “Well … lookie here what we got,” he murmured with a lascivious smack of his lips before glancing down at the beer in her hands. “Seems like I’m jus’ in time fer th’ party.”

Daryl snorted. “Already had my party. We thought y’ was Merle.”

Jackson’s eyes flashed hotly, his face mottling angrily as his right hand shot out, catching his son by the throat, pulling him towards him, their faces so close Daryl nearly gagged from the rancid breath washing over his face. “What I told y’ about speakin’ that name, boy?! He ain’t no son o’ mine, an’ I’ll be damned if he ever sets foot in my house again!”
Daryl clenched his teeth, his lips drawing back into a snarl as he pushed his father off of him. “Get off me!” he growled, his chest heaving. “I ain’t gonna be your fuckin’ punching bag no more. An’ we all know why y’ remembered this birthday an’ not any o’ th’ others.”

“S’that right?”

“Yeah,” he hissed. “I found out all about y’ little secret, an’ how y’ been stealin’ from me all these years. Mama left that money so y’ could take care o’ me, jackass! When th’ fuck did y’ ever take look out for me? All I ever got from y’ was abuse an’ neglect. Well, I ain’t gotta take your shit no more.” He turned his back on his father, his gaze searching for Carol. “Go an’ grab my bag, Carol Ann. We’ll come back for th’ chest another time.”

Carol skirted around Daryl, setting the unopened beer bottle on the coffee table and hurrying to the room where he’d left the duffel bag. Her hands trembled, but she couldn’t help the feeling of pride making her heart swell as she replayed the scene of Daryl standing up to his father once more in her mind’s eye. She stuffed the file into the bag, and made her way back to the living room, more than ready to leave.

She returned just as Jackson was getting his second wind. “Y’ ain’t leavin’, boy! That money belongs t’ me. Emma wanted those uppity friends o’ yours t’ take y’ if somethin’ happened t’ her,” he scoffed, edging closer to his son. “But then she ain’t had a lot o’ say in th’ matter … I made sure o’ that.”

Daryl felt the icy hand of dread clutch his heart. “W-What d’you mean?” he asked, motioning for Carol to stay where she was.

“Came home early from work,” Jackson said, his words still slurred as his eyes swam in and out of focus. “She was on th’ back porch, on th’ phone. Sounded like she was talkin’ t’ th’ doctor’s wife. Them two was thick as thieves y’know. I didn’t pay attention t’ what she was sayin, didn’t much care. I’d only had t’ work half a day, an’ I wanted t’ take advantage of it.”

Daryl stared at his father, dumbfounded. Jackson had never been one to volunteer information, and the fact he was doing so now was probably due to whatever drug he’d shot into his worn veins. He was scared to move, even to breathe, afraid it would somehow snap his father out of the trance he was in.

“She had papers scattered all over th’ coffee table … th’ life insurance policy, yours an’ Merle’s personal documents, a copy o’ her wishes drawn up by ‘er lawyer … but what got me,” he laughed bitterly, “was th’ papers on top, statin’ she wanted th’ doc an’ his wife t’ take y’ if somethin’ ever happened t’ her. Th’ bitch was gonna jus’ give y’ away.”

Daryl’s gaze flickered briefly to Carol, unable to miss the lone tear which escaped her lashes.

“Quite th’ shock when she came back in an’ saw ‘er little secret’d been exposed,” Jackson laughed. “Y’ should’ve seen th’ way she stood up t’ me. I hadn’t seen such fire in years, but there was no way I was gonna let her walk out that door.” All trace of mocking humor drained out of his face, replaced with rage and a menacing madness Daryl had never seen before. “She was MINE! ‘Til death do us part! Wasn’t nothin’ in th’ vows we took sayin’ ‘only ‘til things got bad’. Worst fight we’d ever had, but I showed her in th’ end.”

Daryl clenched his jaw, his teeth grinding with an audible squeak as he suppressed the tears stinging his eyes. He couldn’t allow himself to show weakness to this monster. He wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of seeing the pain he wrought. “Y’ killed her,” he whispered, his voice thick with anguish, a statement rather than a question.
“As was my RIGHT! She was _my_ wife. She gave ‘er life t’ me th’ day she said ‘I do’.” His eyes gleamed with insanity and malicious glee, reveling in his son’s horror. “I wrapped my hands around her throat and squeezed …” his fingers curled into claws as he mimicked his actions from so long ago, “… ‘til th’ light left ‘er. Much as I loved her, I fuckin’ hated her then.”

Daryl felt sick, the burger he’d eaten at the diner threatening to make a reappearance. He couldn’t find his voice, lost somewhere in his throat as the truth battered against his very soul. His hand rose to cover his mouth, his eyes closing as the memory of his mother’s sweet smile came to him. Looking at Jackson again, he wanted to throw up, but he pushed it down and growled, “An’ y’ made it look like an accident. Y’ hid what you’d done … y’ made us all think she’d burned alive. Th’ fuck kinda man are y’ t’ do somethin’ like that?!”

“I will not be mocked, boy! I wasn’t about t’ let Emma leave an’ make me th’ laughingstock of th’ entire town,” Jackson roared.

Carol choked out a muffled sob, dropping the duffel bag as she took a step towards Daryl in her desperate need to offer him comfort. Yet, before she could reach him, Jackson’s meaty arm snaked out and curled around her throat, dragging her back against his chest.

Daryl’s entire body seized in panic as he stared into Carol’s panic-stricken gaze. “Take your hands offa her!”

Jackson laughed mirthlessly. “Or what, runt? Whatcha gonna do ‘bout it? I could snap ‘er neck like a fuckin’ twig before y’ could blink. Y’ really wanna risk it?” Carol’s struggles, her nails biting into his flesh as she sought to keep a distance between his arm and her delicate throat, went unnoticed. He brought up a lone finger to trail along her cheek almost tenderly. “Yer girl ain’t no better, boy. She’s a spoiled little rich girl. What … y’ think she really wants y’? She’s prob’ly only sniffin’ after yer sorry ass t’ piss off mommy an’ daddy.”

Daryl’s eyes turned a steely gray as he felt a sense of clarity wash over him. Rage bubbled beneath his skin, the pure primal need to protect his mate surging to life. He didn’t care for himself, not that Jackson was nearly a head taller than him and more than capable of wiping the floor with him. Nothing mattered but his girl. Jackson’s eyes flared wide as Daryl threw himself at the taller man, Daryl’s fist meeting his jaw with a sickening crack.

Carol dropped to her knees as Jackson let go, his fingers wrapping tightly around Daryl’s throat, pushing him back against the wall with a loud thud, one of the mounted deer heads swaying precariously. Though Daryl was fighting with a fierceness she hadn’t known he possessed, he was beginning to falter, the need for oxygen sapping his strength. Looking around, she reached for the bottle of warm beer she’d abandoned on the coffee table. Her shaking hand wrapped around the neck as she pushed herself to her feet, not hesitating for a second before she brought it down against the back of Jackson’s head, beer and glass spraying them all.

Jackson dropped Daryl to the floor, his son gasping and coughing behind him as he turned to Carol, backhanding her without a thought. “Stupid bitch!”

She fell like a stone to the hardwood, a whimper of shock and pain escaping her lips. “Noooo!” Daryl cried. With a strength born of rage, he grabbed the flimsy coffee table and swung, hitting his father on the right side of his face. Jackson’s bulk shook the entire cabin as he crumpled to the floor. Daryl dropped to his knees beside Carol, shaking her shoulder as she groaned.

“Carol? Please, angel … please be ok,” he said softly, his lower lip trembling to see the bruise already forming on her cheek. “Please …”
Her lashes fluttered as she looked up at him, but he could tell the blow had left her disoriented. “Daryl …”

His world righted itself as her fingers brushed over the marks Jackson had left on his throat, and the urgency he felt to get her out of the cabin was overwhelming. “C’mon, we gotta get out of here!” Daryl helped her to her feet, grabbing the duffel bag and thrusting it into her arms as she opened the door. “We gotta call Merle. I don’t want him comin’ here … he’ll fuckin’ kill Jackson with his bare hands.”

Carol nodded as she stepped through the door, followed by a scream of terror as Daryl’s hand was ripped from hers. Jackson had come to, a handful of Daryl’s shirt caught in his fist, dragging his son back into the house just before the door was slammed in her face, the click of the lock ominous in the still night.

The duffel bag slipped from Carol’s numb fingers to land with a thud against the worn planks of the porch. Her head pounded painfully from the blow Jackson had delivered to her face, but she knew it was unimportant in the light of what Daryl must be going through inside. She could hear yelling, though she couldn’t make out what they were saying. Her fists beat frantically at the door, one hand gripping the knob and giving it a sharp twist, pulling with all her might. Tears streamed over her cheeks and her voice grew hoarse, screaming his name futilely into the night.

She thought about the back door which led into the kitchen, but even should she find it unlocked, how could she help him? Jackson was a big mountain of a man, and stoned out of his mind. He could tear both of them apart in the time it took to blink. And what if she somehow distracted Daryl and it shifted his focus, giving Jackson an edge to hurt him further. She needed help! She’d call Merle first, her mind warring with itself against calling the police first. It was instinct to call Walter Grimes first, to have the sheriff come out here to settle the dispute, but Daryl’s panic, his plea to call his brother had negated every sensible thought in her head.

Carol dug her iPhone from the back pocket of her jeans, and with quaking fingers pulled the familiar number from her most recent call list, her heart thundering painfully as she waited for the call to connect. The sound of his voice was sweeter than a chorus of angels. “Merle!”

“Cool yer heels there, darlin’. We’d be there already if Habib here didn’t think ‘e had t’ drive ten miles under th’ speed limit,” he said by way of greeting.

She didn’t even try to muffle the hysterical sob which was torn from her throat. “Merle! Please … you’ve got to hurry! J-Jackson came home early because he got fired, and he’s fucking high as a kite, and OH MY GOD, HE’S IN THERE WITH DARYL! H-He’s going to kill him, Merle!”

The elder brother cursed at the cab driver. “Step on it, jackass.”

Martinez offered the man a fifty-dollar tip to get them there within the next five minutes.

“Carol Ann,” Merle barked into the phone. “You are NOT t’ go in there, y’ hear me, girl?! There ain’t nothin’ y’ can do. WAIT for us t’ get there.”

She fought back a hiccoughing sob, nodding despite the fact he couldn’t see her. “I c-can’t
“You do what I say, girl, and that’s an order!”

“I’m not one of your soldiers!”

“Carol!”

“FINE!” Her voice softened. “Just please … hurry!”

Oscar muttered an epithet as the cab turned the corner and Merle squashed him against the door. “We’re almost there.”

Carol shrieked as a chair was thrown through the living room window and she could hear Jackson’s yowl of pain before it morphed into a feral roar. “M-Merle!”

“Call yer daddy,” Merle said, the color leeching from his face as the sounds of the fight carried over the phone. “From th’ sound of it, we’re gonna need him.”

She stared down at the phone in her hand as the call abruptly disconnected, and immediately called the Mason’s house phone. Her parents never kept their cell phones on them when they entertained, and though she knew Francine and William would probably only be done with the second course, this was an emergency. Her mother answered on the fourth ring. “Mama!” Carol choked out.

“Carol, dear, what’s wrong?” Francine asked, her tone – though calm – deadly serious. Her daughter never called her *mama* unless the matter were grave. “Are you alright? Has something happened to Daryl?”

“Mama, I need Daddy. Please … put him on the phone,” she fairly shrieked, the panic seizing her chest almost driving her to her knees.

“Carol -”

“Mom, please!”

William took the phone from his wife, startled by the look of abject terror on Francine’s face. “Carol Ann, where are you?”

“Daddy!” she cried, fighting for breath. “We’re at Jackson’s … hope chest … he came home. Daddy, I’m s-scared and I don’t know what to do. Merle’s on h-his way here now, but what if he’s too late?”

William could hear the fear in his daughter’s voice, and he was forced to push back his own at the thought of Carol and Daryl there at the mercy of Jackson Dixon. “Sweetheart, where are you exactly?”

“Outside. Daryl pushed me out the d-door … we were trying t-to get away, but … Jackson grabbed Daryl and hauled him back inside. H-He locked the door behind him … oh, god, Daddy …”

“Promise me you won’t try to go back in.” He took his jacket from Francine as she hurried forward with it, his keys in her other hand. “I’ll be there as soon as I can. I’m going to get your mother to call for an ambulance.” He ran a hand over his pale face, worry etched into every line. “Wait for Merle, Carol Ann.”
“I will,” she promised.

Francine pounced the second he hung up the phone. “What’s happening, William? I’ve never heard her so frightened?”

William pulled his jacket on and hurried to the den to grab his medical bag, his wife hot on his heels. “Apparently, when they went to get the hope chest, Jackson came home. Carol’s outside, but our boy is in there probably fighting for his life against that bastard,” he snarled, snapping the bag closed after checking to make sure he had everything he might need.

“Where the hell is MERLE!?!?”

“On his way.” He turned to her, noting the tears in her eyes. “Franny, don’t fall apart on me now. Carol needs us.” He picked up the cordless from his desk and thrust it into her hands. “Call an ambulance and send it out there, then I want you to call Walter Grimes and tell him what’s going on so he can send a squad car out to arrest Jackson. This is the last time he’s EVER going to lay hands on our boy.”

A knock on the door of the den was a firm reminder of their guests, and Everett Nolan stared back at them with concern in his dark eyes. The man had been William’s partner and friend for decades, one of the few outsiders privy to Daryl’s plight. “How bad is it, Will? Is there anything Mary and I can do?”

William stared back at his most trusted friend for a long moment before nodding. “Take Franny to the hospital. We’ll meet you there in the ER bay, and you might want to book an OR if possible … just to be on the safe side. If Daryl is as bad off as Carol fears, we might need it and I want to be prepared.”

“Of course.”

William moved towards the door, bag in hand, pausing briefly to let the man see the terror in his eyes. “Everett … thank you.”

Tears streamed down Carol’s face as she shoved her phone back into her pocket and hurtled down the steps to meet the car barreling up the drive. Merle and Oscar jumped out as Martinez paid the cabbie and retrieved their luggage from the trunk, tossing it haphazardly into the yard so the man could be on his way. Carol threw herself at Merle, burying her blotchy face against his neck as he held onto her.

“C’mon, darlin’, I need y’ t’ tell me what’s goin’ on,” he admonished her gently, setting her back on her feet.

She looked back over her shoulder at the ramshackle cabin he’d once called home, a shudder passing through her. “They’re still going at it, and I-I don’t know how bad it is. I can only imagine by the sounds of breaking furniture and –”

“Captain?” Oscar asked, his deep voice muted. “Orders, sir?”

Merle narrowed his eyes at the man. The three of them had grown up with each other, Oscar
and Martinez joining up when Merle had been forced into the Army so he wouldn’t be alone. They were all as close – if not closer – than brothers. Oscar, dropping back into military mode, was the man’s way of distancing himself from such a personal issue. Each had a soft spot for the youngest Dixon, and there would be hell to pay when all was said and done. There was no way this wouldn’t be the end of Jackson. Full military mode would help them all do what needed to be done. He shot his gaze to Martinez next, the same dark purpose in his eyes.

“Cover all exits,” Merle commanded. “Sergeant,” he said to Oscar, “take Daryl’s bedroom. He always keeps a window open. Lieutenant, y’ take th’ kitchen door.”

Martinez nodded. “And you?”

Merle rolled up his sleeves. “I’m goin’ in th’ front door.” He lifted the cover on his watch and glanced down at the illuminated dial. “Three minutes.”

Carol pulled on his sleeve as the others set off to round the house. “What about me?”

He shot her an assessing look. “I s’pose there’s no way you’d stay here short o’ tying y’ t’ a tree, huh?”

She punched him in the arm … hard. “What the hell do you think? That’s my boyfriend in there!”

Merle shook his head. “C’mon. Y’ stay behind me. Y’ ain’t t’ cross that threshold until Jackson is secure. Y’ get me?” At her nod, he continued. “I don’t give a damn what y’ see or hear, Carol Ann … y’ don’t come in ‘til I give th’ all clear.”

Carol bit her lip, knowing it was going to be hard to follow that order, but if it got her back to Daryl’s side, she’d obey. When he was assured of her willingness to follow his orders, Merle headed towards the house, stamping down on age-old memories of his father. He didn’t need the distraction. Checking his watch once more, he waited the last few remaining seconds before he took a deep breath and aimed a solid kick to the door.

The door splintered under the force, breaking the knob from the doorjamb, and he could hear Jackson’s words as he stood over Daryl, his heavy steel-toed boot kicking the boy over and over. His father, so intent on the damage he was inflicting, hadn’t even heard the thunderous crash. Merle froze, his muscles seizing, the pain of long ago memories holding him in place.

“Y’ fuckin’ worthless little bastard … useless … no good,” their old man boomed, and with each epithet, another kick landed into Daryl’s left side. “Y’ gonna die tonight, boy, an’ there ain’t even gonna be no one t’ mourn yer sorry ass!”

His men converged on Jackson with stealth and precision as only those who’d fought together for years could have managed. Martinez raced from the hallway leading from Daryl’s bedroom and tackled the older man, sending him reeling back into Oscar’s chest. The sergeant had crept in from the kitchen, a set of zip ties in his hand. It seemed to snap Merle out of his head and into action. His eyes were icy, lethal and held a promise of what was in store for Jackson.

As soon as he was secure, Merle bellowed over his shoulder. “Clear! Carol, get yer ass in here an’ see about m’ brother!”

“Mutha fucker!” Jackson roared, struggling against the men who held him. “Toldja I never wanted t’ see yer ugly face again.”

Merle pulled his arm back and let it fly, his fist landing squarely in the center of his father’s
nose, and he felt a keen sense of satisfaction as he felt the bone break. Jackson was already a mess, blood flowing from a cut near his temple, and the split in his lip raw and nasty, spittle clinging to it. And the familiar blue eyes staring back at him were glassy, caused by whatever substance he’d procured that evening for his own selfish need to get stoned. “Don’t much care right now,” he returned. “Not after what y’ done here t’night.”

Jackson laughed. “Fuckin’ coward. Gotta let yer boys do y’ dirty work for y’, right? Always was a sneaky little shit. Shoulda stayed gone, boy.”

Merle hit him twice more, the darkness he carried with him, that discerning trait which had made him perfect for the special forces team he’d led, rushed to the surface, and he had to force himself not to kill him right then and there. “Shut yer fuckin’ mouth! I ain’t here for you, y’ simple minded piece o’ shit.” He grabbed two fistfuls of Jackson’s shirt and hauled him closer, until they were practically nose to nose. “And yer gonna pay for what y’ did t’ my brother. Y’ can’t bet yer ass on that.”

Caesar Martinez, first lieutenant, army special forces, second to Captain Merle Dixon. He’d seen things in his military career which could only be described as waking terror, yet nothing had ever horrified him more than seeing Jackson beat the living hell out of his son. “What do you want to do with him, Cap?”

Merle could hear the need for justice behind his friend’s nonchalant tone and smiled. “Take him t’ th’ cellar. We can deal with ‘im later. Take Daryl’s truck.”

“Somebody’s sure to have called the cops by now,” Oscar muttered, strengthening his grip on Jackson’s arm.

“Then y’ better hurry then, hadn’t y’? Take our gear too an’ drop if off at th’ cabin. I’ll worry about Grimes when he shows up.” He winced as he glanced down at his brother, unconscious on the floor. “Be quick about it, an’ then meet us at th’ hospital in Peachtree City.”

Jackson was still screaming and cursing as he was dragged away.

* * *

“Oh, god,” Carol whimpered as her knees buckled, sending her to the floor next to Daryl. He was curled loosely into a ball, his shirt hanging in tatters over his chest and shoulders. One arm was hanging next to his side while the other was wrapped around his head, trying to shield himself from the next blow. She was almost afraid to touch him. “D-Daryl?”

He groaned, his eyes remaining closed as he removed the arm protecting his head. “Car…”

“Shh, I’m here,” she whispered brokenly, tears coursing over her ashen cheeks.

Daryl cried out as he shifted onto his back, his body screaming in agony from the slightest movement. He blinked open the one eye which hadn’t swollen shut, and winced as her face swam into focus. “You’re ok? I was so scared when he was done with me, he’d come after y’.”

“Don’t worry about me,” she admonished gently. “It’s you I’m worried about.”

He let out another whimper of pain as he lifted his hand, his fingers brushing against the
bruise on her cheek, cursing as he tried to dry her tears. “I tried t’ protect y’. Y’ know that, right?”

“You did! You got me out.” She carded her fingers through the hair at his temple, the strands tacky with blood. “You’ve always been my fierce protector,” she wept. “Now I need you to let me take care of you, ok? Will you let me look? I promise to be gentle, but I need to have something to tell Daddy when he gets here.”

“A’right,” he murmured, seeing the need in her clear blue gaze.

Carol pressed a feather light kiss to his lips before her demeanor changed. “Merle, I need a wet towel, some water – he’s no doubt parched – and a pen light if you’ve gone one,” she barked.

Merle was quick and efficient, worry evident on his swarthy features. He dropped to his knees, his face twisted in a mixture of anger and concern as he looked down at Daryl. “That sonofabitch,” he growled, his hands fidgeting as he looked to Carol for something to do with his hands.

Daryl smiled through the pain, never having been happier to see his older brother. “Brother,” he sighed, feeling as if everything would be ok now that Merle was there. It humbled him to see him so at a loss, but he couldn’t stop the question poised on his tongue. “Is he … is Jackson … dead?”

He shook his head, his jaw clenched tight. “Not yet. Don’tcha worry about that fucker right now. I’ll deal with his ass.”

“Always knew one day he’d try t’ kill me,” he said before his body surrendered to a wracking cough. A little sob tore from his throat at the pain, and Carol stared down in horror at the blood which had splattered against her jeans.

“Oh, god,” she cried. “Merle, go call Daddy and find out where he is. I need him.”

“I’ll be a’right, Carol Ann. Jus’ a little banged up, s’all,” he tried to soothe her as his gaze followed his brother out the door.

Carol shook her head and reached for the pen light. He cringed, trying to pull away from the bright light ghosting across his eyes. “Pupils are equal and reactive. At least we can rule out a concussion.” She was startled to see the amused grin which spread across his face.

“Equal an’ reactive, huh? Been readin’ your dad’s medical journals again?”

Carol tried to smile, but it turned out as more of a grimace. “I found the article on concussions and how to treat them to be quite informative,” she replied in a superior tone which only made his grin widen, despite his split lip.

He sighed as she began to wash the blood from his face with a soft cloth. “Dr. Carol Mason,” he huffed teasingly. “Maybe y’ can hyphenate it when we get married, yeah? Mason-Dixon.” He chuckled despite the pain. “That’s funny, huh?”

Carol forgot how to breathe. “Uh … yeah,” she said when her lungs forced her to take a breath. She doubted he even realized what he’d said, but damn if it didn’t make her heart flutter to know he’d considered their future together. Instead of losing herself to thoughts of the perfect wedding gown – she’d leave that to her mother – she focused her limited knowledge into examining him. There was so much damage, and it made her want to weep, but she couldn’t afford to fall apart now.

“Th’ first aid kit is under th’ sink in th’ bathroom,” he murmured drowsily, unable to hold his
eyes open any longer.

“Pfft,” Carol scoffed. “This is so beyond first aid, it’s not even funny! Daryl, don’t go to sleep on me. I need you to stay awake, baby, please. Are you thirsty?” At his nod, she unscrewed the cap and lifted his head a little, holding the bottle to his lips. “Just a sip, ok? We don’t want you throwing up all over the paramedics when they get here.”

“Ain’t goin’ t’ no hospital, Carol Ann!” he growled.

“Wanna bet?”

“Woman –“

She pressed a finger to his lips, effectively cutting him off. “Please don’t fight me on this. From what I can see, you’ve probably got a broken clavicle, maybe some broken ribs, your torso is littered with bruising, and that’s just what’s visible to the naked eye. It’s very possible you could have internal bleeding … actually, I’d be surprised if you didn’t. You don’t have a choice in the matter. You’re going to the hospital,” she stated matter-of-factly.

Daryl frowned. He’d seen her cry, bitch and wail over his injuries before – mostly flinging curses at his no-good father – but he’d never seen such fear in her eyes. “Fine,” he sighed, the pain it would cause to argue with her not worth the trouble. “I’ll go t’ th’ damn hospital. Can y’ at least help me sit up? This floor is murder on my back.”

Carol bit her lip in indecision. “I don’t know if that’s such a good idea.”

“C’mon … I promise I won’t run off. Not s’long as I got y’ here with me,” he teased, his head swimming drunkenly.

“But … it might do more harm than good, Daryl. You need to be assessed properly, and if there’s internal bleeding, a shift in position could make it worse.”

“I cain’t stay down here like this, though. I feel like I been hit by a fuckin’ train.”

Against her better judgement, she helped him into a sitting position, wedging herself behind him for support.

“Whoa!” He stifled a groan, his stomach roiling and his head spinning.

“Are you ok?”

“Yeah … jus’ hurts. I didn’t think he’d got me in my shoulder,” he complained.

Carol frowned. It wasn’t often that Daryl complained about anything, much less pain.

“Which one?”

He rolled his shoulder and grimaced. “Left. See … toldja … toldja I’d … be … fin-“

Carol felt her heart skip a beat as she watched his lids flutter down, his sentence trailing off. “Daryl? Daryl!” she cried, realizing he’d passed out. She mentally cursed herself for giving in to his wishes and ignoring her gut instincts. “Merle! Merle!”

The Dixon in question thundered up the porch steps and barreled into the house, his eyes wide with panic. He could hear the terror in her voice across the damn yard, and he was thankful William had arrived, the paramedics close behind. “What?! Is he ok? Talk t’ me, woman!”
Dr. Mason pushed past him where Merle had abruptly stopped in the doorway and dropped down next to Daryl. “Oh, god!” he whispered, feeling as if someone had kicked him in the gut. His boy … his son … so battered and bruised he looked an inch from death, his cheeks waxy and pale. How had he let this happen?

“Daddy, focus!” Carol cried, nudging him with her foot, her arms fighting to support Daryl’s weight. “Please, Daddy … he needs you.”

William snapped out of his own misery, meeting his daughter’s eyes, determination settling onto his features. His hands still trembled as he helped Carol lay Daryl flat on his back, but he was able to assess him with quick precision. He was ready when the paramedics came in with a backboard and their bags, the stretcher waiting just beyond the porch steps.

“Christ,” Mike David hissed as he got a good look at their patient, ignoring his partner’s reprimand to remain professional. “What’re we lookin’ at, Dr. Mason?”

William began to rattle off Daryl’s various injuries, paying little attention to the pain in his own chest. “Daryl Dixon … male, eighteen years old … height, five ten … weight, 158 … no previous medical history.” That he could divulge at least. “Contusions by blunt force trauma to the head, chest and abdomen … non-reactive for a minimum of five minutes … possible injury to abdomen. Multiple contusions around his left eye, lacerations to his left cheekbone and lower lip … possible fracture of the right clavicle … possible fractured or broken ribs.”

“Pulse is elevated, BP is 76/42, resp is good,” Tammy related, putting away her equipment. William shunted Carol out of the way, sending her over to stand by Merle while they gently placed a collar around Daryl’s neck and rolled him onto the backboard.

“I want him on fluids once we get him loaded.”

Once they had him on the stretcher, Mike asked, “Are you ridin’ with us, Dr. Mason?”

William shook his head. “No, I think it would be best if Carol were with him … if … when he regains consciousness. He’ll probably be anxious as it is, waking in unfamiliar surroundings. Carol will be able to keep him from panicking.”

“You got it, Doc.”

“Carol Ann, come on, dear. You’re riding in the wagon with Daryl,” her father called, and she hurried to his side.

“What about you? Shouldn’t you be with him?” she asked, her lower lip wibbling as she stared up at him through frightened eyes.

“Merle and I will be right behind you,” he assured her. He brushed her curls away so he could see her cheek, his jaw tightening as he took in the bruising. “I want to check you out when we get there as well. And I expect an explanation for tonight’s events.”

“Yes, Daddy,” she replied, ducking her head as he gave her a hand up into the ambulance. “Oh, and make sure one of you gets the bag I left on the porch. I don’t want to leave it here … it needs to come with us. It’s important to Daryl.”

William was already moving when the ambulance pulled out, siren blaring and lights flashing. He just prayed his boy’s injuries weren’t as severe as he feared.
Tammy smiled warmly at Carol as she pressed an ice pack to the girl’s cheek. “There, just hold that there for a few minutes. I think you’ll be just fine.”

But Carol wasn’t the least bit concerned for her own minor injury. “How is he?” she asked, the heated look she shot the EMS medic daring the woman to lie to her.

“I’ve got him on fluids, and something to make him comfortable until we can get him to the hospital. Once he’s in with the doc, we should be able to find out more. Hey, Mike! What’s our ETA?” she called to her partner, not the least bit worried the man seemed to think he was driving for NASCAR.

“Twelve minutes barring idiots!”

Carol shook her head, amused with the snarky paramedic. “Why isn’t he waking up?”

Tammy picked up the clipboard and made a notation, recording his newest set of vitals. She tried to give Carol a reassuring look as she checked the IV in Daryl’s arm.

“What are you giving him? Basic fluids? Why haven’t you given him anything for pain?” Carol questioned, her analytical mind whirling.

“Yes, simple saline to increase his volume. It will help raise his blood pressure. And I don’t want to give him anything for the pain since he’s not conscious. It could cause problems with his respiration,” she explained, adjusting the oxygen level being fed into the cannulas placed in his nose. “The oxygen is a must due to his elevated heart rate and respiration. Don’t worry, Carol, we’re doing everything we can for him right now.”

Daryl must have heard her, his lashes fluttering against his bruised cheek. “C-Carol!” he whimpered, disoriented and afraid. She dropped the ice pack and fell to her knees beside the stretcher, leaning over so he could see her, and he relaxed a little.

“I’m here. Don’t be scared, ok? We’re on our way to the hospital.”

He tried to reach for her hand, only to find himself strapped to the gurney, not even able to move his head. “What th’ fuck’re they doin’ t’ me, Carol. I’m tied down … WHY TH’ FUCK AM I TIED DOWN!”

“Calm down, baby,” she commanded, though her voice was whisper soft. Her hands cradled his scruffy cheeks, her thumbs lovingly stroking his high cheekbones. “It’s alright … just a safety precaution. They want to make sure you don’t roll over and fall off the stretcher.” She pressed a kiss to his brow as he seemed to accept her words. “Breathe for me, Daryl. That’s it.”

Daryl inhaled deeply, one of her long curls falling against his face as she leaned forward to kiss him. She smelled of peonies and jasmine, the scent all Carol … his girl … his life. All he wanted was for the pain to go away so he could take her home and wrap himself around her. The drugs had taken the edge off, but they left him feeling woozy and out of sorts. He didn’t like it at all. He didn’t want to have to rely on an artificial substance to get him through the pain, didn’t want to – god forbid – get hooked on it and end up like his daddy. But it didn’t last, the panic he felt at being restrained triggering memories he’d thought long buried. He jerked against the restraints, his back arching only for him to shrink away in pain as the strap across his abdomen dug into his abdomen.
“Goddamnit, that fuckin’ hurts!” His voice was stilted as his voice clenched in terror. “Don’t leave me … Carol, please …”

A tear rolled down her cheek to drip hotly against his skin. “I won’t. I promise.” She was terrified as his lids made a downward arc to rest against the deep circles beneath his eyes. “No, don’t go … stay …” she sobbed. “I can’t lose you, Daryl!”

“BP’s dropping!” The machine he was hooked to, monitoring his vitals, beeped erratically. Tammy pushed her out of the way and yelled to her partner. “How long, Mike. His vitals are dropping, man; we need to get him there NOW!”

“Two minutes!”

“Call it in! We’re going to need a room stat!”

Tammy pushed Carol out of the way, the girl grabbing onto the back of the seat as the driver took a sharp left. “WHAT’S HAPPENING!?!” she shrieked.

The EMS medic couldn’t answer, her focus shifting resolutely to her patient as she climbed atop him and began chest compressions. Mike threw the wagon in park and ran around to the back doors as a team rushed out of the ambulance bay to help.

Carol screamed as he was wheeled away, the sound of the machine flatlining echoing in her ears … his name a silent plea on her lips as she collapsed into a dead faint.

Chapter End Notes

A/n: I’m going to go hide now … from the angry mob which is sure to come after me. Believe me, this was not easy for me to write. It triggered the hell out of me, but for the sake of the story, I had to do it. Try not to hate me too much.

Great heaping helpings of heartfelt appreciation to Geektaire and BettyBubble for beta reading this for me. There were days during this past week I didn’t think I’d make it through, and the encouragement and long talks helped me as nothing else could. I love you both so much. Also … thank you Geek for your wonderful medical advice. It was invaluable.
Merle’s foot pressed just a little harder on the accelerator as he followed the ambulance in front of them, pushing the Mercedes coupe for more speed, the ebony finish blending into the night. He knew he shouldn’t be driving in the emotional state he was in, but William Mason was worse. Silence had fallen between them due to the single-minded focus to get them to the hospital with all haste, and Merle startled when the doctor spoke.

“What did you do with him?” William asked, his voice quiet and filled with menace.

Merle snorted softly. “What makes y’ think I know where th’ bastard is?” he replied, sidewayng the man who was more of a father to Daryl than Jackson Dixon had ever been. To both of them, if he were honest. He and Francine had welcomed Merle into their home on more than one occasion before Emma had died, and the few times he’d been able to come home for a visit or due to some injury. It was there he’d witnessed how comfortable his brother had been among the Masons.

Daryl had always been a squirrely little fucker, shying away from touch, and god forbid someone should intrude upon his personal space. But with them, he would not only accept touch, but would freely return it. With them, he would hold his head high and wouldn’t look away in fear when they spoke to him. Merle owed the Masons a debt he’d never be able to repay for they care they’d taken with Daryl.

“Don’t try to bullshit me, son,” Dr. Mason warned. “What he did to … what he did to Daryl … “ His voice broke with emotion and he swiped a trembling hand over his eyes.

“He ain’t gonna get away with it. Jackson damn near killed him this time, for fuck’s sake!” he seethed. “This is th’ last time he’s ever gonna put his fuckin’ hands on m’ brother. Don’t y’ worry … he’s gonna get what’s comin’ t’ him.”

William knew better than to ask questions. The less he knew, the better. Merle didn’t want the man to know what he’d planned for Jackson. It was the stuff of nightmares, and Merle was going to enjoy it. He was special forces. He had seen things which would cripple a lesser man, and he would take advantage of his vast knowledge. Jackson’s days were numbered, and the sands were quickly running out.

Merle made a sharp left into the long drive up to the hospital, hardly slowing. He had to give it to the EMS team; they wasted no time in opening the back and lowering the gurney. William was already climbing out of the car, blanching as he watched one of the paramedics administering chest compressions to Daryl. He snapped out of his fugue as William followed the team of hospital personnel, yelling at Merle to look after Carol.

He left the car there behind the ambulance in the bay and rushed to her side as she crumpled in a dead faint. They could tow it for all he cared. Merle swept her up into his arms, her weight light as feather, and strode into the ER. He glared at a nurse behind the desk. “Where?” was all he asked.

The petite brunette led him to a curtained area and he laid her gently upon the gurney, brushing the hair from her face. “She’s a’right … think she just fainted,” he explained.
“Isn’t that Dr. Mason’s daughter?” she asked, worry creasing her brow.

“Yeah, it is,” he replied, covering Carol with a blanket before moving back into the main hall. “Now where’d they take m’ brother? Paramedics just brought him in.”

She gave him instructions down the hall to Trauma Room Two, but before he could offer his thanks and move away, there was a clatter behind him and the sound of Carol cursing. They rushed into her cubicle to see her fighting with her blanket, trying to get out of the bed, a metal basin lying on the floor where she’d knocked it from the bedside table. Her eyes were wide and terrified as they met Merle’s.

Carol wobbled on unsteady legs as his hands reached out to cup her shoulders. “Darlin’, why don’t y’ jus’—”

“Where is he? Where’s Daryl? Have I been out long?” she questioned, shoving against his immovable chest in the hopes of getting to her boyfriend. “What’s happening, Merle!?”

“Calm down, sugar.” He wrapped an arm around her waist and led her in the direction of the trauma room. There’d be no keeping her from Daryl. “I jus’ found out where they took him, but y’ know they ain’t gonna let us in. Yer gonna have to settle for bein’ by th’ door, y’ hear me? Otherwise, they’re gonna banish us t’ th’ waitin’ room.”

Carol promised she’d stay with him as long as she could see what was happening to Daryl, and they took up a post outside the trauma room. Merle wished he could send her out to the waiting room, however, when her face paled and her eyes filled with tears, her nails feeling like claws as they gripped the cotton t-shirt over his chest.

The monitor beeped the steady rhythm of his heart, though she could see the bright pink patches they’d put on his chest should they need to use the defibrillator. She couldn’t ever remember being so scared. The cannulas had been removed from his nose, an oxygen mask now resting over the lower half of his face, and her father was in there assisting as best he could.

“Call down for two pints of O neg,” the attending physician barked at the senior trauma nurse.

William shook his head. “No, he’s AB positive.”

Callum Locke looked at the chart the nurse had started, a frown knitting his brow. “And you would know this how?”

“He’s family. Trust me, I know.” Daryl groaned as William probed the ribs on his left side and shrank away from his touch as it moved lower over his abdomen. “Tenderness to the abdomen. We’ll need the ultrasound and portable x-ray.”

“He’s stable for now,” Callum informed him as the nursing team inserted an IV line into each of Daryl’s arms, one pushing another bag of fluids while the other was set up for the blood the doctor had ordered for him.

Daryl’s clothes were cut off so they could get him into a gown. While they were wheeling the ultrasound over, Merle tried to make Carol turn away, but she was having none of it. The blood finally arrived, and Carol’s eyes were riveted to the little bag as it was hooked up, the viscous liquid entering the thin line which would feed his veins and replace what he’d lost.

William turned it on as Locke joined him, and a nurse squeezed some gel onto Daryl’s side to prepare him. He still hadn’t regained consciousness, and Carol trembled, terrified of losing him.
William’s hands shook as he moved the transducer through the gel, searching for the best angle to get a clear picture. He bit back a curse. Hadn’t his boy been through enough without adding surgery to his long list? “There’s free blood in his abdomen,” he said, pointing to the screen. “Call down to the OR; I have Everett Nolan on standby. Tell him to prepare for an exploratory laparotomy,” he said, removing his latex gloves and raking a hand through his hair.

Callum had the portable x-ray brought over to have a look at Daryl’s chest, and wasn’t happy with what he found. “Broken clavicle, right side, and two fissures to his ribs … number four on the right and number six on the left,” Callum said, studying the monitor, turning it so William could see it clearly. Carol cringed. Daryl had been wanting to go hunting for two weeks, and she knew this prognosis wouldn’t make him happy. Any kind of incapacitation would likely make him sulky and irritable. That she would think of something so inane when fearing for his life proved how out of sorts she was. She was clinging to her sanity by a thread.

William moved to the head of the bed and tenderly laid a hand on Daryl’s brow before leaning over, his words soft as he whispered in his ear. “Don’t worry, son …” his voice breaking at the last, “you’re in good hands. Don’t give up, Daryl. I need you to fight. I know you can do this. I’ve never met anyone as strong and brave as you are.”

“Dr. Mason?”

“Yes? What is it?”

The nurse smiled gently. “Dr. Nolan is on his way down to assess the patient. We need to prep him per his instructions.”

William nodded and backed away, moving towards the open double doors where his daughter stood with Merle. He wrapped Carol in his arms and buried his nose in her hair, breathing in the familiar scent of her shampoo and taking comfort from his child.

“D-Daddy, how is he?” she asked, her voice thick with unshed tears.

“He’s stable, sweetheart, but he’s going to need surgery. There’s internal bleeding and we need to find out where it’s coming from. Everett is already on his way down,” he replied wearily.

Merle shifted restlessly, feeling useless as he shoved his hands deep into his pockets. “What else? We couldn’t help but see y’all frowning at that monitor when y’ was looking at his chest.”

“Two cracked ribs and a broken clavicle.”

“Ain’t surprised th’ way that fucker was kickin’ him when we came in. Lucky he ain’t dead.”

Everett stormed down the hall at a brisk trot and breezed past them as he entered the trauma room, waving William in to follow him. Carol crept past the two doctors as they began to discuss what needed to be done for the boy, using the distraction to have a moment alone with Daryl.

Her gentle fingers carded through his tacky hair, blood missed by the nurses still clinging to some of the strands. “Daryl … baby,” she murmured, her voice breaking as the lump of emotion in her throat threatened to choke her. “I know you can hear me … somewhere deep down I know you can.” She laid her head on the gurney next to his so her lips were almost pressed to his ear. “I need you to be strong and fight, ok? We have such a wonderful future ahead of us, and I just can’t do it by myself. I need you,” she wept, tears coursing down her ashen cheeks. She pressed a kiss just below his ear. “I love you so much, Daryl Dixon. Please … please don’t leave me.”
Daryl’s lashes fluttered briefly before his eyes cracked open. He made not a sound as his head turned towards her and his lips formed the words … love you … before his gaze was shuttered from her once more. It was his affirmation, his promise, that he would always fight to be with her.

The machine monitoring his vitals beeped, and William turned, the color leeching from his face. “Damnit! Pressure’s dropping!”

Everett barked at the nurse and the two of them began readying the gurney for the trip to the OR. “Look alive, people, we need to move … NOW!”

Carol’s heart thundered in her chest as the activity in the room increased, her fingers tightening on Daryl’s left hand. She moved with the gurney as they wheeled it out, having to jog to keep pace. “Daddy, what’s happening?” she cried frantically.

She could feel Merle fall into step behind her, his hand white-knuckled on the railing alongside the temporary bed.

“We have to operate now, Carol Ann,” he explained, his free hand coming to rest against Daryl’s brow, trying to lend as much strength to his boy as possible. “He’s bleeding internally, and it’s imperative we find out why.”

The mad dash continued as they darted out of the elevator and towards the closed double doors at the end of the hall. There was so much she wanted to say, her heart breaking to see him lying there with no way to help him. He’d never been hurt so badly where she couldn’t mend him, and now he was pale, unmoving and fighting for his life. She broke down as the doors opened and she was prevented from entering the OR by Merle’s arm around her waist, the distance growing between her and the man she loved.

“Daryl!” she cried, great wracking sobs assaulting her body. She could still feel his hand being ripped from hers, see the doors closing behind him and the medical team who would try to stitch him back together from the inside out. All that was left now, as she collapsed into Merle’s embrace, was to wait. Wait and hope … and pray.

* * *

Everett scrubs feverishly at his hands and forearms, his mind running through the procedure over and over. He’d known Daryl Dixon since he was a child, bright-eyed with curiosity and wonder – when he could get the boy to look at him, that is. The signs of abuse and neglect hadn’t gone unnoticed, but Carol had been wonderful for him. Slowly, he’d watched Daryl come out of his shell and interact with the Masons. They became his family. When Daryl was with them, he lost some of his shyness and the ever-present fear someone would try to hurt him.

According to William, Jackson Dixon had fled the house when Merle had gotten there, disappearing into the night to escape the consequences of his actions. If Everett were honest, he sincerely hoped the man was never seen or heard from again.

He glanced up as the door to the scrub room was opened and his friend and partner strode over to a basin. Everett’s brow creased. “What do you think you’re doing, Will?”

William didn’t look up as his hands fumbled with the wrapper on a fresh bar of soap. “What does it look like? I’m scrubbing in.”
“Will … I can’t let you go in there, man. You’re too close to this,” Dr. Nolan argued, reaching out to take the soap from him. “Look at you! You have tremors in your hands. Even if it wasn’t Daryl, I couldn’t let you operate.”

William fisted his hands in Everett’s scrub top as he pushed him back against the wall, his face a mixture of fear and gut-wrenching pain. “That is my son in there! He may not be my blood, but I raised him … every bit as much as I did Carol. I’m the one who made sure he was clothed and fed, I’m the one who stitched up the worst of his wounds, I’m the one who read to him and Carol in the middle of the night when he’d wake up with night terrors. Ball games, picnics, movies …” A sob tore from his throat. “My son. I have to help him. I can’t face Carol and Franny if something happens to our boy.”

Everett’s freshly scrubbed hands came to rest on William’s shoulders. He didn’t care that he’d have to start all over, the need to comfort his friend was more important than extra time at the sink. “Which is why I can’t let you go in there. You know I’m right, Will,” he said, his voice low and even. “You know I’ll do everything within my power to help him.”

“We thought he was safe …” William whispered brokenly. “He’s eighteen, he’d moved out … how could I have let this happen? H-He was free of Jackson … finally. Goddamnit!”

“There’s nothing you can do about that now, Will. Get your ass in there and talk to him, tell him you love him. Then you can watch the procedure from the observation room,” Everett offered, moving back to the sink to begin scrubbing again. “Chuck’s on his way down to administer anesthesia, so you don’t have but a few minutes.”

“Everett –“

“I know, Will.”

***

Carol looked around the surgery waiting room with a blank stare. She was numb … had been since she’d collapsed in Merle’s arms and he’d carried her back here to await word on Daryl’s condition. She felt as if she were falling apart, the trembling hands, pale features and tears she couldn’t stem no matter how hard she tried being the first clue. She wanted Daryl back as he’d been that morning, grinning teasingly, his warm eyes alight with happiness with life in general. All of that had been blown to hell in the space of an hour. To hell with Merle; she wanted to take Jackson apart with her bare hands for what he’d done.

She watched Merle pace the carpet in front of her, a silent vigil to make sure she didn’t do something stupid like run back to the OR and camp out in front of the doors where Daryl and William had disappeared. The family had been called mere moments ago, asking them all to come to the second floor waiting room. Who ‘all’ encompassed, she could only imagine … nor could she find it in herself to care. Was her mother among them? She snorted. Of course, she would be. Nothing could keep her away, she was sure.

Carol dropped her head into her hands. As much as she wanted to be enveloped tightly in Francine’s embrace, she didn’t want to have to tell her what had happened to Daryl. It was going to kill her. She wrapped her arms around herself, a shiver along her spine as she heard Francine’s purposeful stride out in the corridor, heels tapping against the linoleum. *Crap!* Couldn’t
she have had a few minutes more to compose herself? Was she even capable of pulling of that miracle? Her thread was unraveling quickly, and it was with effort she suppressed a hysterical giggle.

It was strange that the first thing she noticed was how disheveled her mother looked. Francine never looked less than perfect; at least Carol thought so. Now as she barreled towards her daughter, her hair was tussled as if she had been raking her hands through the auburn strands over and over again, her eyes red-rimmed from crying, the tissue in her hand smudged with mascara, and her mouth was set in a firm line as if she were gnashing her teeth in an effort to remain strong.

Francine hissed in fury as she noticed Carol’s bruised and swollen cheek. “Oh, baby, what happened to you?”

“It’s nothing, Mama. Don’t worry about me,” she scoffed as she fell back into her chair. It was difficult to stand there when her knees felt like half-set jello.

Her mother took a seat next to her and Carol immediately fell into them, clinging helplessly to Francine. “Did you see Daryl before he was taken into surgery?” she whispered, her voice filled with pain. “The nurses wouldn’t tell me anything more … just that he was being taken to surgery and Everett and William were with him.”

“H-He was so pale, Mama … and there were IVs and wires and … oh, god, I’m so scared for him.”

“Your father’s with him. William isn’t going to allow anything bad to happen to him … you know that,” Fran tried to reassure Carol. She couldn’t break down now when her daughter needed her to be strong. “We just have to pray and have faith. We can’t expect Daryl to remain strong and fight for his life if we can’t do the same.” Francine shuddered. “My poor sweet boy. I hope Jackson Dixon roasts in hell for what he’s done to him.”

Carol pressed her face into the crook of her mother’s neck and wept silently, her shoulders shaking as she clung to her.

Francine stroked her hair, her own tears falling unchecked. “Carol, sweetheart, what happened? I thought Jackson was supposed to be gone until next week.” Carol only cried harder, everything piling up on her until she just couldn’t take it anymore. She was in the refuge of her mother’s arms now, her safe haven, and she let it spill forth, knowing Francine wouldn’t push her to explain until she was ready.

Fran looked up and caught Merle’s eye, and he nodded. She could read everything she needed to know in his dark eyes. Jackson would pay for what he’d done to their boy.

Merle took several steps back as the two women met in the middle and began weeping … again. Fucckkkk! He loved them both, but he did not take well to weeping women. He tried to block out the tears, mentally tearing down his MK17 assault rifle, before he noticed his friends hovering by the door. However, he wasn’t quite as thrilled to see the sheriff and his son coming in behind them. Damnit!

“Merle,” Walter greeted him, a somber expression in place as he reached out to shake the younger man’s hand. “Welcome home, though I wish it were under better circumstances.”

Oscar and Caesar moved to flank their commander, but Merle held up a hand, waving them back. “I suppose y’ come here t’ find out what happened. Not a good time, Sheriff.”

Rick raised a hand in hello to the two soldiers and then nodded at Mrs. Nolan who was busy
with the coffee pot before moving over to sit next to Carol. She turned and let him embrace her, listening to the platitudes he whispered into her ear.

Merle didn’t miss a thing, had been trained to be observant. Yet, as much as he’d rather be left alone to worry over his brother in peace, the officer wouldn’t be denied.

“You know I don’t want to be here, Dixon, not when Daryl’s in such bad shape. But I need a statement from you … and Carol. I went out to the house personally, questioned the locals, and nobody saw anything. Either that, or they’re too scared of Jackson to come forwards.”

Merle grinded his teeth as he turned his gaze to the man. “An’ this shit cain’t wait ‘til we know if Daryl’s gonna pull through, s’tat’ it?”

Walter nodded. “’Fraid so … while it’s still fresh in your mind.”

He didn’t see how he could get around the sheriff’s badgering, but he wasn’t looking forward to dragging Carol into the middle of it. Reluctantly, he nodded. “A’right, Grimes, but it’s gonna be my way.” He jerked his head in Carol’s direction. “That little girl’s been through enough. Y’ can have our unofficial statement so y’ can get movin’ with yer investigation, but anythin’ else is gonna have t’ wait. Y’ get me?”

“Appreciate your … willingness to co-operate,” Walter shot back with a grin.

Merle snorted and moved over to where the family had gathered and knelt in front of Carol. “Hey, lil’ sister, how y’ holding up?”

Carol huffed a bitter laugh. “Well, I’m not hysterical and no one’s suggested I be sedated, so all things considered, I’d say pretty well.” Her eyes swung to Rick as he squeezed her hand still wrapped tightly in her own. “I suppose your dad needs a statement, huh?”

Rick winced and sent her an apologetic look. “Yeah. I was at the station to pick him up when the call from your mom came in. We got out to the house and it looked like a tornado had swept through there. We heard over the radio that Daryl had been brought to the hospital.”

Carol looked down towards her shoes, her heart ramping up with nervous agitation. “Did … um, anyone … see anything?”

“If they did, they weren’t saying anything.”

Once more, she returned her attention to Merle. “I … I don’t know if I can …”

Merle mustered up a gentle smile for his brother’s girl. “Jus’ a brief statement, darlin’, then they’ll leave us alone for a while. Sheriff needs t’ start his investigation, an’ y’ don’t want t’ be responsible for any delays, now do y’?”

“Sheriff Grimes, would you … ah … would you allow Mom and Merle to stay with me?” Carol asked hesitantly. “If I’m going to be forced to go through all that again, I’d really like to only have to do it once.”

Merle glowered at Rick’s father, daring him to deny Carol’s request. It was reasonable, after all, to want them at her side for moral support. The man smiled warmly at his son’s friend. Rick was extremely close to Carol and Daryl, and he couldn’t ever remember his boy being so distraught as when that call had come through. “Since this is an unofficial statement, I don’t see why not.”

Walter ushered them over to a table in the corner and had them sit while he pulled a small
tape recorder from the pocket of his vest. Rick, Oscar and Martinez hovered nearby, but neither Carol nor Merle protested their eavesdropping. He pressed the record button and began. “Unofficial statement concerning the alleged assault of Daryl Dixon by his father, Jackson Dixon. Please state your names.”

“Carol Ann Mason.”

“Merle Wayne Dixon,” he said, still glaring at the sheriff. His icy blue gaze warmed as he turned to look at Carol. “Why don’t y’ go first, darlin’, since you were at th’ house when Jackson got there.”

Carol took in a shuddering breath and nodded, knowing this would help Daryl in the long run. She stared at the little recorder as Francine squeezed her hand reassuringly. “I … um, we … Daryl and I … we went to Jackson’s house after Daryl got off work, around eight fifteen, I guess.”

“Why were you there?” Walter asked.

“Daryl had moved most of his things out of the house. He’d turned eighteen on Wednesday, and … he was going to live with Merle at their grandpa’s cabin. But the hope chest Emma left him … we couldn’t lift it, so Merle was going to help him when he got in tonight. It was the only thing he had left of her, and didn’t feel as if he could leave it.”

Walter smiled gently, and motioned for her to continue when she lifted her teary eyes in his direction.

“We removed the contents so it wouldn’t be so heavy to carry, and found some disturbing information. Emma had taken out a life insurance policy before her death, naming Daryl the sole beneficiary. Upon her death, his guardian would receive a stipend for Daryl’s care and well-being … Jackson … until his eighteenth birthday,” she explained, noticing how stiff Merle became next to her. He was seething mad, though he hid his feelings well.

“Try to stick to the facts, Carol,” Walter admonished.

“I’m sure she wouldn’t have mentioned it, Walter, if it weren’t pertinent to the story,” Francine snapped. She wrapped her arm around Carol’s shoulders in a protective embrace, a lioness in defense of her cub.

“My apologies, Carol, please continue.”

“Daryl was upset, said he would look into it later.” She turned to Merle, her eyes widening with panic. “You got the duffel bag from the house, right?” At his nod, she visibly relaxed. “We heard a car door, and we went into the living room to open the front door … but it wasn’t Merle. It should’ve been Merle, but it was Jackson. He was … off. His eyes were glassy and his speech was slurred, as if he were under the influence of something.”

“Merle, was your father known for indulging in either drugs or alcohol?” Walter asked, already knowing the answer.

“Both,” he gritted out through clenched teeth.

“But he wasn’t supposed to be there,” Carol said, her fingers tightening on her mother’s hand. “Daryl never would have brought me there if he’d thought there was a chance Jackson would come home early. When Daryl questioned him, Jackson said he’d gotten fired. He said he wouldn’t need to work anymore once Daryl claimed the bulk of the life insurance policy. He said Daryl couldn’t leave.” Carol closed her eyes, her breath hitching. “They argued, and Daryl sent me to get
the bag he’d packed. Jackson was adamant that Daryl stay, and … “A little sob tore from her throat as her gaze swung to Merle, tears streaming over her ashen cheeks. “H-He confessed to murdering Emma. “He said they f-fought, and … and he strangled her. He said he started the fire, to cover it up.”

Merle paled. “Christ!” he whispered, his suspicions confirmed. He’d always believed Jackson had been responsible, but to hear Carol … to know the bastard had deliberately told Daryl … NOW, just to hurt him. The seed of darkness which lived within him grew into a sapling, the death he’d planned for his old man sprouting into something far more sinister than he’d ever been willing to even contemplate.

“I’m sorry, Merle,” Carol sobbed, wrapping her arms around him. “I didn’t want to be the one to tell you.”

“Not yer fault, lil’ sister. Ain’t nowhere near bein’ yer fault.” He pressed a soft kiss to her brow and urged her to continue.

“He … He grabbed me, which only enraged Daryl. He threw himself at Jackson, and I fell when he let me go. By the time I could get to my feet, Jackson had Daryl pressed against the wall, holding him there with his hand around Daryl’s throat. I d-didn’t know what to do … I picked up a beer bottle off the coffee table and hit Jackson over the head. Daryl got free, but Jackson only staggered a bit and he … he hit me.” Carol raised her hand and gingerly felt along her cheekbone. “It made me dizzy, and I fell to the floor. Somehow, Daryl knelt by me, telling me I needed to get up, we needed to get out. He wanted me to call Merle … to find out where he was. He helped me to my feet and shoved me out the door. H-He was right behind me!” she said, her hand fisting against her breastbone as she tried not to hyperventilate. “Daryl should have been safe! But Jackson grabbed him, pulled him back inside … he slammed and locked the door so I couldn’t g-go back in! I didn’t know what to do … I always know what to do, and there I was fucking useless while Daryl was fighting for his life!”

“That’s enough!” Francine fairly snarled at the sheriff as she pulled Carol against her chest. “I’m not going to let you put her through any more of this, Walter.”

Merle shot out of his seat, his hands planted against the table, making the coffee in the cups spill over onto the surface. “Y’ fuckin’ happy now, Grimes!? Franny, take Carol t’ th’ restroom so she can wash her face. I got this.”

“Merle, it wasn’t my intention to upset her –”

“Well, y’ did, jackass,” Merle growled, resuming his seat. “She’s fuckin’ raw an’ scared. I ain’t lettin’ y’ upset her no more, so you’ll jus’ have t’ take my word for th’ rest o’ it.”

The sheriff agreed, swiping a hand over his face, his mind a jumble in light of what he’d discovered. “Alright, Merle, tell us what happened.”

He took the fresh cup off black coffee from Oscar as he brought it over and took a sip, glaring at Walter over the rim. “She called me … hysterical, I might add. Told me what was goin’ on. I told her I was on m’ way, an’ t’ call her parents.”

“Why didn’t she call the station first?”

“Hell, man, I don’t know! She was terrified, and we’re used t’ takin’ care o’ our own shit. She was doin’ what Daryl told her t’ do.” Merle’s eyes narrowed. “I got there maybe five minutes
after she called, busted through th’ damn door t’ find m’ old man kicking th’ shit out o’ m’ brother. Had m’ boys with me, Martinez an’ Oscar,” he said, waving a hand in their direction. “We made a grab for Jackson, but he’s a slippery fucker. Ran out th’ door an’ into th’ woods behind th’ house. Sent m’ friends after ‘im, but if Jackson don’t want t’ be found, there ain’t a tracker in Georgia gonna be able t’ find ‘im.”

“That would account for no one seeing where he might have gone.”

“What? Y’ expected ‘im t’ run down th’ road shoutin’ about what he’d done?!” Merle scoffed. “I sure as fuck ain’t lookin’ for his ass. He nearly killed m’ brother. The bastard can rot as far as I care, jus’ so long as he stays th’ hell away from m’ fam’ly.”

Merle cursed inwardly as he leaned back in his chair. When he was finally done with Jackson Dixon, hell would look like a Sunday picnic.

Chapter End Notes

A/n: Please send reviews, tissues and visine. I’m a mess.
William was literally pressed against the observation window, anxiously peering down into the operating theatre. He couldn’t count on two hands how many times he’d performed the same procedure without a thought. Yet, it hadn’t been his son on the table then. His eyes flitted from the monitors to the staff to Everett as he made the incision and began. He could only imagine what the surgeon would find … and no, he couldn’t stop his clinical brain from running through every scenario.

That had been hours ago, and still he waited. Someone had come in with a fresh pot of coffee, but the cup he’d poured for himself had long ago grown cold. He paced, he sat, he pressed against the window, the worry he held for Daryl encompassing his entire being. His eyes burned with exhaustion and unshed tears, but he didn’t dare close them. It wasn’t a fear Everett would close and not wake him to let him know. No, he needed to be there for his son -Now – as he hadn’t been before.

He needed Francine, he thought, glaring down at the cellphone clutched in his hand. It rang only once before her sweet voice was coming through the speaker. “Hey, sweetheart,” he greeted her, his own voice rough and raspy from disuse.


“Still in surgery. Everything has run smoothly so far, but … Everett wouldn’t let me scrub in. He said I was more a liability than a help,” he replied numbly. “I know he’s right, but damnit … I should be down there with Daryl.”

“Don’t you think Carol and I wish the same … to be with him? Everett’s right. Now tell me … how are you, my love?”

He huffed a bitter laugh and pressed his brow against the window, his eyes locked on Daryl’s pale features. “How the hell do you think I’m doing, Franny? I’m a fucking wreck … I need you. I need to know he’s going to be ok … that you and Carol and Merle are ok.”

Her sigh was heavy as it whispered over the phone, though only her husband, one who knew her heart and soul after so many years of marriage, could hear the undertones of anxiety. “We’re holding up as best as can be expected. Right now, Carol is stretched out on the couch in the waiting room with her head resting on Maggie’s lap. She, Glenn and Lori came in just a few minutes ago and they’re camped out around her. Rick’s gone for snacks, hoping if Merle has something to eat, he’ll stop pacing and glaring at the nurses.” He could hear the click of her heels as she left the waiting area and ventured out into the hall. “Will … Walter was here.”

William raked a hand through his dark hair and briefly closed his eyes. “I figured he would be. I’d asked you to call him, remember?”

“Now I wish I hadn’t listened. He demanded an unofficial statement from both Merle and Carol.”

“Why … Franny, what aren’t you telling me?” he demanded. He blanched as she filled him
in on what he’d missed, his lips parting on a gasp of horror. The life insurance policy, Jackson’s confession about Emma’s murder … it was all too much.

Francine choked back a sob. “It’s no wonder Jackson fought so hard to hold onto Daryl. He wanted the money. And tonight, he was willing to kill him to get it.” Her voice grew hard. “We didn’t try hard enough to save him, William.”

“You think I don’t know that, Francine!? Every time we mentioned sending child services to that house, Daryl would have a full-blown anxiety attack,” he hissed, remembering the way the boy would shake and withdraw into himself, hiding in a dark corner or under the dining room table where Carol was the only one able to soothe him and bring him back. He would beg and plead with William not to do anything, the fear very real in him. He knew how much Daryl loved them, loved being with them in their home, yet he flat out refused to let them help him get away from Jackson. “I’m lucky I didn’t go to jail when I ordered the paternity test without Jackson’s consent.”

“It was necessary, William.”

“Didn’t matter, though, did it? It only gave us proof the bastard was indeed Daryl’s father. No matter what we did, it was never enough!” He swiped a hand over his face, clearing it of sweat and tears as he met Everett’s eyes through the glass. “Everyone has suffered for Jackson’s greed. Now it’s his turn to pay. I’ll be damned if he touches our boy again, even if I have to camp out at that cabin in the woods with him and watch him every blasted second.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Francine said, and he could hear the unmistakable confidence in her voice. “The police are out there searching for him now, but … I have a feeling they won’t find him.”

“Thank god for that.” He perked up as Everett left the operating theatre and headed for the scrub room to wash his hands. “I have to go, Fran. I promise I’ll call as soon as there’s news. I love you. You know that, right?”

“Of course, darling,” she whispered reverently. “As I love you.”

* * *

“Daddy!” Carol cried, bolting from her place on the hard sofa where she’d been lying. Her mother had ordered her to rest, and to be honest, she’d been too tired to disobey. It did her little good since she’d been unable to close her eyes. Her thoughts had been consumed with what might be happening to Daryl just down the hall. She knew the risks of any surgery, and she was terrified. Her obsession with TV medical dramas hadn’t helped in the least.

William caught her, his grip nearly painful as he clung to her. Francine wrapped her arms around them both and buried her face in her husband’s neck. “Will?” she asked, and he could hear the fear, feel her pain as her hand tightened into a fist against his scrub top.

Carol leaned back, taking in his somber expression, her face crumpling in agony. “No! Daddy, n-no! Please,” she wailed. Her body trembling as she gave in to the tears coursing down her face.

“Carol, no … no, honey. Daryl’s going to be fine,” he was quick to assure her.
Everett stepped forward and shook Merle’s hand before laying a comforting hand on Carol’s shoulder. “He’s going to be fine, Carol.”

Merle took in a deep breath, his hands on his hips as he let his head fall back in relief. It was the first time he’d been able to breathe easy since he’d gotten that phone call from Carol. “How bad was it, Doc?” he asked, leveling William’s friend with a steely gaze. He knew it would take time for Daryl to heal, and he wanted to know what they could expect.

“It could have been worse, especially from what I can tell from the bruising. We had to take his spleen, but there were no complications. I also set his clavicle and we’ll have to bind his right arm to his chest so it will heal properly. They’re closing him now, and getting him cleaned up to transfer him to recovery.”

“When can we see him?” Francine asked, anxious to see how he’d pulled through with her own eyes.

“Not for a while, I’m afraid,” Everett said gently. “I want to observe him for a few hours before we get him settled in the ICU.”

“ICU? Why are you bringing him there?!” Carol asked, her wide-eyed gaze filled with horror.

William ran a soothing hand along her back, trying to comfort her. “It’s standard procedure, Carol. He needs to be monitored closely and we want to make sure he’s not going to develop an infection. Just for a day or two. If he does well, he’ll be moved to a room.”

Merle’s lips set into a grim line. He wanted to see his brother now, without having to wait until morning for visiting hours. “So…” he drawled, sucking his teeth in that annoying way which set Carol’s own teeth on edge. “We ain’t gonna be able t’ see him ‘til tomorrow?”

Everett grinned. “I can get you back there for a few minutes once he’s settled, but I have to warn you … he’s heavily sedated. My best advice would be to go home, grab a shower and try to get some rest.” One look at Carol, and he knew he was wasting his breath.

“Thanks, Doc,” Merle said, “but I think we’ll just hang around for a while.”

Francine left Carol to her father and turned to the group of teenagers who hovered nearby. “You heard the man,” she sighed, a tight smile making the faint lines around her eyes and mouth stand out. “The four of you need to go home and rest. Your parents are probably worried sick about you.”

Four heads gave a negative shake in unison. “We need to stay for Carol,” Lori chimed in.

Carol’s gaze swung around and she regarded her friends with a small smile, thankful for their support. “I’m not leaving the hospital until Daryl does. Y’all can’t stay up here the entire time.”

“Then we’ll take shifts,” Maggie said stubbornly.

“Yeah, we want to be here for you and Daryl,” Glenn added, grimacing down at the coffee cup in his hands. “At least when can make sure you have decent coffee.”

Rick nodded. “Whatever you need, Carol, we’re here for you.”

“Thanks, guys … you don’t know what that means to me … and to Daryl.” She turned back to her father, her four friends already putting their heads together as they argued over who would
take the first shift with her. Everett had already gone back to the OR, and Merle was speaking softly to his companions. “Daddy, please go back … to the recovery room … and be with him. I know they won’t let me back there, and … I don’t want him to wake up alone. He’s been th-through so much, and he’s going to be scared, and I can’t be there, and … please.”

William held her tightly, meeting his wife’s watery gaze over Carol’s shoulder. “I … I promise,” he murmured thickly. “I won’t let our boy be alone.” Dr. Mason kissed his girls, and with one last reassuring glance, strode back down the hall to the surgical areas to uphold his vow.

* * *

The recovery ward was silent aside from the soft beeping of the monitor registering Daryl’s vitals, and the low whispers of the nurses at the other end of the room. William pulled the curtains closed to give his boy a little privacy and wheeled a stool over so he could sit down next to the bed. Daryl should be waking soon, the anesthesia having had time to wear off, but every patient was different. He feared the trauma his boy had gone through might deter him from wanting to wake.

William sat down and lowered the railing on the left side of the bed, lifting Daryl’s hand in his. He brought it to his lips and brushed a light kiss to the boy’s knuckles before enveloping it completely in both of his hands. He rested his elbows on the side of the bed as he surveyed Daryl’s pale features, a lone tear escaping the corner of his eye to trail over his cheek.

“It’s just you and me now, son,” he whispered, the sound deafening in the silence. “Franny and Carol send their love.” He sighed heavily as his son didn’t so much as twitch at the sound of their names. Daryl’s head rested against the stark white pillow, and had it not been for the bruising around his eye and the cut on his lip, William could almost pretend he was sleeping. There were finger marks around his throat, and William grinded his teeth, a surge of unadulterated loathing welling up inside him towards the man who’d dared hurt his boy. His right arm lay across his chest, bound there with a compression bandage to hold it immobile, and a dressing covered what would be another scar in the weeks to come.

William’s chest pained him with the need to cry, to release a torrent of tears and anguish to mark his suffering. He bowed his head and gave in, the salty wetness dripping from his lashes to splash against Daryl’s hand. “I’m so sorry, son. This is all my fault,” he wept. “If only I’d tried harder, fought longer. I just wanted you to be safe … happy … and I failed miserably. I love you so much, Daryl. I couldn’t love you more if you were my own flesh and blood. And I couldn’t even protect y-you,” he cried brokenly, his shoulders heaving beneath the weight of his sobs.

“D-Dad … “ It was barely more than a whisper, but accompanied by a faster beeping from the monitor, and William’s head shot up, his gaze zeroing in on Daryl’s open eyes.

“Son! Oh, thank god,” he breathed, relief making him weak.

“Not … not your … fault.” His raspy voice trailed away as he tried to move his right arm, and his eyes widened in panic. “Wh-What?!” He shifted, trying to free himself and a bark of agony tore from his throat, pain shooting relentlessly throughout his entire body.

William bounded to his feet, his large hands curling over Daryl’s shoulders as he shouted for the nurse to call Everett. “Easy … easy, or you’re going to tear your stitches. You’re safe … you’re safe.”
“Wh-What happened … C-Carol …”

Nurse Parker hurried around the curtain, a syringe in hand and an understanding smile on her face as she rounded the bed to inject two mg of Dilaudid into his IV. It was a strong pain medication equivalent to Morphine, and would take mere moments to relieve the worst of it. “There, now, dear. That should help you relax.” She turned to Dr. Mason. “Dr. Nolan will be down to assess Mr. Dixon in an hour. Can I get you anything while you sit with him?”

William declined her offer and tucked the blanket up around Daryl’s chest as she took her leave.

Daryl fought against the effects of the medication even as he felt its calming affect wash through him. “Carol? Where …”

The doctor smiled. “She’s just fine. She’s with Merle and Fran and your group of friends … waiting for the chance to come see you.”

His fingers plucked at the blanket, searching for William’s hand until he could weakly grip his fingers. “D-Dad …” He couldn’t stand to see the man in so much pain, wallowing in guilt for something far beyond his control. “Don’t.”

William broke down, a keening moan ripping from his throat as he raised his free hand up to cover his mouth. “Yes, son?”

“H-Heard y’ … what y’ said,” he slurred, struggling to keep his eyes from closing again. “Ain’t your f-fault. S’mine.”

William stared down at him, shaking his head, aghast to hear his boy take the blame. “No, son, no it –”

Daryl squeezed his hand, a tear rolling from the corner of his eye to trail away into his hair. “Yeah … it is. Couldn’t let y’ … take me from him. Said he’d –” he coughed, followed by a groan, the movement sending a fresh surge of pain to his side. “He said he’d kill y’ an’ make it look like an accident. I … I couldn’t let him take y’ from Carol … from m-me. Didn’t want her t-t’ have t’ grow up without y’ … like I had t’ with m’ mama.”

William’s eyes grew dark as he stared unseeing at the curtain, rage filling his being and seeping from his pores. What he wouldn’t give to lay hands on that monster for five minutes with a bag of sharp surgical implements. “He’s gone, son. He can’t hurt you anymore … not as long as there’s a breath left within me. I promise.”

Daryl closed his eyes, his head sinking deeper into the soft pillow, but he didn’t let go of William’s hand. “W-Want Carol,” he breathed, the pain medication winning the battle over his willingness to stay alert.

“Rest … rest,” William crooned softly, much as he’d done with Daryl and Carol had been younger and in need of comfort. “She’ll be with you soon.”

Daryl’s eyes cracked barely a slit to regard the man who’d been more of a father to him than Jackson ever could have dreamed. He felt safe … and loved. “Dad … stay with me. Please … don’t leave me here by m’ self.”

William settled back on the stool next to the bed, uncaring who saw the tears streaming over his face. “I will, son, I’ll stay. Just sleep for a bit and heal. I’m not going anywhere.”
Carol stood next to her father, arms crossed over her chest as he introduced her to the nurse in the ICU ward who would be taking care of Daryl for the rest of the night. Her eyes flickered from the pretty redhead to the window where she could peer into Daryl’s room. William nudged her when she seemed to zone out. “Sorry, what?” she asked, embarrassed to have been caught woolgathering.

“Carol Ann, this is Annie.” She stared at the woman, who must have been in her late twenties, closer to Merle’s age than her own. Her light brown eyes sparkled with humor and compassion. Carol found she could probably like this woman if it weren’t for the fact Annie was going to be looking after Daryl instead of her. She knew it was ridiculous to be jealous of a nurse … a hospital employee who was paid to care for him. But it stung to know this Annie person would be there if Daryl called out in the night rather than her.

She stuck her hand out, realizing she needed to act her age instead of throwing a tantrum as she really wanted to do. Carol decided to blame her attitude on belated effects of the trauma they’d suffered that night and move on. “Hi, nice to meet you,” she said, mustering up a small smile for the woman. At least her mother and Merle could go in to see him first and leave the remainder of their short visit to Carol.

Annie returned it with one of her own. “I’m so sorry you’re going through this, Carol, but you can be assured Daryl will receive the best care possible. Can you tell me a little about him, any special needs he might require?”

Carol’s gaze returned to the window where she could see her mother hovering over him. “He doesn’t like the dark,” she whispered. “Moonlight is best, not artificial, so if you could leave the blinds open a little for him … And he has nightmares sometimes. A soft word or a touch to his arm will soothe him if you catch it early. They’ll probably be worse now.” She turned her steady gaze back to the nurse. “I’m not leaving … I’ll be in the waiting room if Daryl needs me for anything. Make sure he knows I’m not far. You don’t want to witness one of his anxiety attacks. If that happens, you have to come and get me immediately.”

“That seems simple enough,” Annie replied gently, sympathetic to Carol’s feelings. Her compassion towards family as well as the patient made her a staff favorite. She pointed to the desk outside the window. “This is mine. I’ll be able to see him at all times, Carol. If he needs anything at all, I’m here.”

William curled his arm around his daughter’s stiff shoulders. “Annie is the best at what she does, Carol. Do you feel better now that you’ve spoken with her?”

“A little,” she murmured with a nod.

The nurse pulled a little card from within her pocket and scribbled on it before handing it to Carol. “This is my cellphone number, Carol. If you need something, or you just want to check on him, don’t hesitate to call me, ok?”

* * *
Daryl woke to see his brother standing beside his bed and immediately closed them again as a wave of dizziness passed over him. He groaned, feeling as if he’d been hit by a train … twice!

“‘Bout time yer ugly ass woke up,” Merle teased from where he sat on the stool next to Daryl’s bed.

The youngest Dixon cracked his eyes open just a bit, reveling in the sight of his older brother perched at his bedside. The times he’d been able to spend with Merle in the last ten years had been few and far between, and now he’d finally come home to one giant mess. “Yeah … well y’ ain’t winnin’ no beauty pageants yourself there, brother,” he shot back. He averted his gaze, the fingers of his left hand plucking at the blanket, guilt stabbing at his chest to see the concern so evident in his brother’s gaze. “’M sorry, Merle. Didn’t mean for y’ t’ come back t’ this shit storm –“

Merle’s hand covered his, grip firm as he leaned forward. “Don’t y’ even start that shit, baby brother. Ain’t none o’ this yer fault.”

Daryl coughed, and Merle let him go to reach for the pitcher of ice water on the table next to the bed. He poured a small measure and lifted it so Daryl could drink from the straw. “H-He wasn’t s’posed t’ be there.”

“Yeah, well, when has he ever done what he says?” Merle sneered.

“Jus’ wanted Mama’s hope chest.”

“I know … don’t worry about it. I sent Oscar and Martinez for it ‘bout an hour ago. Told ‘em t’ bring it t’ th’ cabin so it’ll be there when y’ get out o’ here. Th’ duffel bag too.”

The events of the evening thundered through his mind with every beat of his heart and tears gathered in his eyes as he looked at his brother. “M-Merle … he … he killed Mama. He fuckin’ admitted it!” he hissed, pain stabbing at his every nerve ending. The price of his lucidity was a need for more pain medication, but he fought against it.

Oh, hell no! He had barely been able to deal with Francine and Carol’s weeping earlier. There was no way he’d survive it if his brother broke down. Merle rose to his feet and leaned over the bed, his face close to his brother’s, a hand moving to rest in the center of Daryl’s chest to calm him. “Deep breath. Y’ can’t get upset right now, brother. Yer body needs time t’ heal. Y’ leave that bastard t’ me, y’ hear?”

Daryl nodded, almost afraid of what he saw in Merle’s eyes. He’d never seen such a sinister look there before, and he shuddered, hoping never to be on the receiving end of his brother’s temper. “Wh-Where is he?”

Merle continued to rub that spot on Daryl’s breastbone until his breathing returned to normal. “How should I know?” he said, his voice deceptively calm. “The bastard ran off, remember?”

Daryl snorted. He may not remember much after the door had burst open and his brother had stormed in, but he knew for a fact Merle would never have let Jackson get away. Merle patted Daryl’s cheek gently before his hand stilled against his face, drawing his gaze back to him. “I will promise y’ this, lil’ brother … he will never hurt y’ again.”

Merle had seen and done things in his military career – probably more before he’d been forced to join – but he trusted him. He knew Merle didn’t make promises unless he was absolutely certain he could keep them. “Jus’ … whatever y’ plannin’, Merle, don’t get yer ass caught. Jus’ got
y’ back.”

The eldest Dixon grinned and backed away, shoving his hands deep into the pockets of his BDU pants. “Ain’t goin’ nowhere, brother. Wanna sit back an’ watch y’ flounder yer way through this thing y’ got goin’ with Carol Ann,” he joked, waggling his eyebrows.

Daryl groaned and rolled his eyes, wishing he had the strength to throw his pillow at him.

* * *

Daryl hardly heard the goodnight Merle tossed over his shoulder, his smoky blue gaze focused on his girl hovering near the door. “Angel …” His lips parted and his voice was deep and husky with relief as she nearly sprinted across the cool linoleum to his bedside. He cursed silently because he wasn’t able to open both arms to her. The moment he touched her, Carol fell apart, huge tears spilling from her lashes as she stood beside the bed. “C’mere, Car … c’mon.”

His arm closed around her as she leaned over and buried her face against his throat. “D-Daryl … oh, baby, I was so scared. You almost died,” she wept, her wails bringing the nurse to peer curiously into the room. He waved her away and began to rub soothing circles on Carol’s back. “I-I thought I was g-going to lose you.”

Daryl pressed a kiss to her brow and caressed her nape, trying to soothe away some of her tension. “Y’ shoulda known that wasn’t gonna happen, Carol Ann.”

“Daryl –“

“Promised I was never gonna leave y’,” he said, smiling when she lifted her gaze to his. “Have I ever broken a promise t’ y’?”

Carol shook her head. “No. But this isn’t something you could control.”

His hand moved upwards, his fingers delving into her silky curls, his gaze as serious as she’d ever seen it. “Ain’t leavin’ y’, Angel.” He urged her forward just a bit and nipped lightly at her lips until she smiled. Only then did he show her he meant it, deepening the kiss until she forgot about her tears and melted against him. “Love y’.”

“I love you too, Daryl, so much,” she breathed, settling her head back against his shoulder.

Daryl frowned as he stared at the bruise marring her cheekbone. “M sorry,” he whispered, withdrawing his arm so he could brush the back of his knuckles over her soft skin. “Sorry I couldn’t protect y’.”

Carol trailed her fingers from temple to jaw, over and over again as she shook her head. “You stood up to him, baby. You did protect me; you got me out, sacrificing yourself in the process.” She leaned in and brushed her lips to his, mindful of his split lip. “You saved me.”

“You stood up to him, baby. You did protect me; you got me out, sacrificing yourself in the process.” She leaned in and brushed her lips to his, mindful of his split lip. “You saved me.”

“Shoulda done more,” he scoffed, wrapping his arm around her again and pulling her close. “Shoulda been quicker t’ get between y’.”

“Stop,” she chided gently. “It’s over and he’s gone and you will heal … for the last time. Merle said he won’t let Jackson near you again. And I trust him to keep that promise.” She settled
back into his embrace and held him for far longer than her position was willing.

“Dad said y’ cain’t stay with me, said it was against hospital policy or some shit like that. They’re keepin’ me kinda doped up, so I’m not sure,” he sighed. “Don’t wanna be alone. Want y’ here with me.”

Carol moved to sit on the stool, unable to hold the position she’d been in any longer. She was as limber as the next person, but her body could bend only so far. Yet, she still clung to his hand as if it were her lifeline. “It’s only for tonight if you do well. They just want to keep an eye on you to make sure you don’t develop an infection.”

“Y’ gonna go home with Mom and Dad?” he asked, stifling a huge yawn.

“No, I’m going to camp out on the couch in the ICU waiting area. Maggie’s going to stay with me.”

His eyes narrowed on her. “Y’ ain’t gonna get no sleep out there.”

“And I’m not leaving you!” she snapped, feeling instantly remorseful. The night had taken a toll on her, and it was seeping through loud and clear. “I want to be close if you need me.” She feathered her fingers over the back of his hand before pressing a kiss to his knuckles. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be so short with you.”

Annie shot her an apologetic smile as she came into the room.

“Is it time for me to go?” Carol asked, her grip on his fingers tightening.

The nurse smiled as she recorded Daryl’s vitals and checked his bandages. “No, you have time,” she said before turning to look at Daryl. “So, Mr. Dixon, how would you rate your pain on a scale of one to ten?”

“Oh … maybe a forty right now,” he snarked, winking at Carol. “Feel like I been in a train wreck.” He was teasing, but she could clearly see the lines of pain and the tension in his jaw as he clenched his teeth. He was hurting badly and trying to hide it from her, not wanting her to worry.

“I can imagine so. Surgery is no fun,” Annie agreed with him, moving around Carol to push the meds through his IV.

William leaned against the doorjamb, his wife pressed into his side, watching as his children interacted with the nurse. After his talk with Merle, Daryl seemed to be in good spirits, even better once Carol had joined him. It lifted the dark despair from William’s heart to see them together once more.

Francine leaned up on her toes and kissed his cheek. “They’re going to be fine now, darling.”

“I know,” he whispered. He peered down at the woman he’d loved since he was sixteen years old and sighed with contentment. “Franny … he called me dad tonight.”

“He’s finally accepted us, Will. Just a few days ago, he started calling me mom.”

“It was his fault,” he growled lowly, where only Fran could hear him. “It was Jackson … he threatened Daryl if we somehow gained custody of him. He told our sweet boy he’d kill me. And he believed it! Daryl said he couldn’t stand the thought of losing me, of you and Carol losing me.”
“What?!” Francine hissed. “He was eight when Emma died! Oh, god, he was so impressionable. Of course, he was going to take Jackson at his word. Our poor boy, to have to live with that hanging over his head … and he never said anything.”

“He was afraid. Now that he’s of age, he can be himself. He doesn’t have to hide his feelings anymore.” William’s arms tightened around Francine as he buried his face in her hair. “He’s free.”

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The dew on the grass glittered in the pre-dawn light as he made his way through the trees. The sounds and smells of the forest would normally soothe him, but not that morning. No, there was nothing pleasant about the familiar path he traveled, his thoughts still miles away in the hospital room where he’d left his family, his baby brother. Daryl … he was the reason Merle had tried so hard to change. The boy saw him as a hero, fighting for his country, doing the right thing. He came from a long line of Dixon assholes, his granddad having been the one exception. Over the years, Merle had filled Daryl’s head with stories of how the two of them were going to make their name mean something other than trash. It would be respected rather than reviled. He’d tried so hard to make Daryl believe it could happen, Merle had begun to believe it himself.

Now there was just one loose end …

The blinds were still in place after all these years; he couldn’t believe it, the brush thicker here deeper into the woods. His granddad had spent more time here than at the cabin, honing his craft and guarding his still. No one knew of the cellar. It was code, a cover for his illegal activities. Merle and Daryl had seen it more as their secret hideout away from their daddy and his abuse. Later, Oscar and Martinez had joined them in their fun. The thick stone walls inside protected them from nature in the dank underground bunker, and at some point, Norman had even excavated a tunnel which would lead them away if they were ever discovered by the law. Which was why it had been the perfect place to hide Jackson and carry out his end.

Merle pushed his way through the blind and around the brambles guarding the entrance, but the hinges didn’t even squeak as he moved the brush aside and yanked on the trap door. The sound of his boots on the stone stairs made a faint echo, his eyes adjusting to the dim light of a lone lantern which waited below.

Martinez nodded at his former commander and took his leave. He wouldn’t be far, Merle was certain, but he was glad all the same. He wanted to have a little chat with their prisoner, and a bit of privacy was necessary.

Jackson jerked his head up, his face covered in dried blood from the punishment he’d received at Merle’s hands before he’d been dragged away. He cursed against the gag in his mouth and pulled against the ropes binding him to his chair, hate burning hotly in his dark eyes.

A slow smile made its way over Merle’s face as he leaned into the light, shadows dancing across his features, making him look like the monster he was about to become. “Hello, Daddy.”
Chapter End Notes

A/n: Another emotional chapter. My muse is a sadistic harpy … and so is Geek bc she encourages her. I really hope y’all are still reading, bc I still have a ways to go with this story. Thank you to all who have reviewed and continued to support me. *love and hugs* Please review!
Merle ignored his prisoner and set the styrofoam container with his breakfast onto the pock-marked card table before taking a seat in one of the mismatched chairs. He hid a grin as he opened the box and the smell of bacon, eggs, grits and hash browns wafted up to meet his nose. He could hear Jackson’s stomach growl from across the room. He was halfway through his meal before he glanced over at his father, not having realized how hungry he’d been. But due to the previous evening’s events, he’d had nothing to eat aside from a few bags of chips and a candy bar Glenn had procured from the vending machines.

He could imagine his old man was hungry, thirsty, and not feeling so great now that the drugs in his system were wearing off. “Have a restful night, Daddy?” he asked casually, watching the man’s eyes burn with hatred for his eldest son. The sound of the older man’s ragged breathing was barely discernible amidst the noise Oscar was making towards the back of the bunker. The steady chip, tap of a chisel and hammer against the stone wall. He was sure Jackson would piss himself if he had any idea as to what the future held for him.

Merle feigned a conciliatory tone as he closed the box, guzzled half a bottle of water and then slapped his hands against his thighs. “What th’ hell am I thinkin'? Can’t expect y’ t’ hold a conversation trussed up as y’ are.” He pushed up from the table and slowly made his way over to his father, taking his time so as to prolong the man’s discomfort.

Jackson let out a steady stream of profanities once the gag was removed, along with a demand to be untied. “I’ma fuckin’ kill yer sorry ass!” he grunted, again struggling against his bonds. “Y’ think ain’t nobody gonna know what y’ done?”

“But see, that’s th’ thing … no one knows or cares. Sheriff thinks y’ run off on foot t’ escape prosecution fer what y’ did t’ Daryl.”

“Somebody’ll ask questions,” Jackson growled.

“Who … yer buddies down at th’ bar? Yer pusher?” Merle smirked, staring at him for a long moment before retrieving the bottle of water from the table and holding it to the man’s lips. “Pfft,” he scoffed. “I ain’t afraid o’ you, ol’ man. I seen shit over there that would turn yer hair white an’ make y’ shit yer pants … if yer mind could even handle it. Yer pathetic an’ weak compared t’ them over there.” He leaned forward, his face inches from his father’s, his eyes darkening with the horrors he’d witnessed. “They could teach y’ a thing or two about bein’ a true monster.”

Jackson drank greedily, glaring when Merle pulled the bottle away. He snorted as Merle moved around him, circling him like a hawk, waiting to move in for the kill. “Think y’ can jus’ torture an’ kill me? Y’ ain’t got it in y’, boy!” he sneered. “Ain’t neither one o’ my boys ever had it in ‘em t’ commit murder.”

Merle’s fists clenched at his sides with the need to pummel the man into the earth, but he was practicing restraint. “Thought we’d jus’ have a chat first, s’all.” He laughed, a disturbing sound in the stillness, devoid of mirth. “Y’ see, I been gone a long time … need y’ t’ fill me in on what I missed. Want t’ see if yer side matches up t’ th’ tale lil’ brother’s been tellin’ me.”

Jackson’s lip curled in disgust as he looked up at his son. “What? Poor baby Dixon run off
t’ tattle on his big bad daddy? Shoulda finished his worthless ass las’ night.”

Merle backhanded him across the face, the force sending the chair onto its hind legs as it teetered precariously. “Y’ damn near did, y’ fucker! He’s layin’ in th’ hospital right now,“ he growled. “But y’ know what?! He ain’t broken. No matter what you’ve done t’ him, y’ ain’t never been able t’ break him. He ain’t like th’ rest o’ us, ain’t some bad seed like you.”

“Still a Dixon, boy. That ain’t never gonna change. He’ll never have no one love him, an’ those who do decide t’ have somethin’ t’ do with him ain’t never gonna see him as nothin’ but trash.”

Merle punched him for good measure, making his broken nose bleed again as Jackson’s curses filled the bunker. “Don’t talk about ‘im like that. Yer wrong anyway. His fam’ly - his real fam’ly – they’re right there by his side, an’ his friends … an’ let’s not leave out ‘is girl. Carol Ann’s th’ best thing ever happened t’ that boy.” He cocked his head to the side, regarding Jackson’s face as it mottled with rage. “Ain’t y’ never wondered why y’ couldn’t break ‘im?”

“They don’t care ‘bout ‘im. It’s pity, nothin’ more.”

“Yeahhh … keep tellin’ yerself that.” Again, Merle circled around the chair, his teeth gnashing. He had always wondered why Jackson hated his sons so much. “Mama used t’ tell us y’ was different … before granddad died. Said y’ was happy an’ hardworkin’ … never lifted a hand t’ her, an’ wouldn’t dream o’ hittin’ me. What happened t’ y’?”

“I ain’t gotta tell y’ shit, boy. This ain’t church, Merle; I ain’t gonna make no grand confession t’ th’ likes o’ you.”

Merle smacked him in the back of the head, just because he wanted to. “Might be th’ las’ chance y’ get, fucker,” he sneered. “I doubt he’d listen t’ a piece o’ shit like you, but y’ never know. God is forgiving.”

Jackson snorted. “Fuck you!”

Merle shuddered at that tone, remembering clearly the nights Jackson had flown into a rage and taken it out on him or his brother. He was slipping, lack of sleep and having to watch his brother fight for his life, taking its toll. He needed out … now. He’d known it would take more than one session with the bastard to break him. He took a step back, hiding his inner turmoil behind a grim smile. “Well, maybe you’ll want t’ talk later … after you’ve had time t’ think on it.”

“What?! Where y’ goin’ boy?! Y’ cain’t jus’ leave me here … wherever here is.”

“Don’t worry … y’ won’t be alone. An’ if yer lucky, I might bring y’ somethin’ t’ eat, but I wouldn’t count on it.” It was blessed relief when he replaced the gag and could hear no more than a few feeble grunts from his captive.

He turned the lamp down to the lowest setting and found his way by muscle memory alone to where Oscar worked diligently on the wall. “Y’ a’right, sergeant? Need a break?”

“Naw … I’m good. Martinez will be back soon t’ take over for a while.” He gestured to the wall with the chisel gripped tightly in his left hand. “This’ll be finished tomorrow.”

Merle nodded. “Good … leaves me time t’ get some answers. I’m gonna catch a few hours’ sleep an’ then head over t’ th’ hospital t’ check on Daryl. But I’ll be back before sundown.”

“Sounds good, Cap … tell Daryl we’re thinking about him.” He glanced down the passage to the front room, one dark brow arching. “You sure you ok, Merle?”
Merle straightened his shoulders, cursing his slip in front of his friend. He’d always led them around as children, their bond only growing stronger when they’d gone into the Army and become part of a covert unit. He trusted Oscar and Martinez with his life, and … sometimes his sanity. “Yeah, jus’ need a break s’all.”

Oscar smirked, knowing an evasive tactic when he saw one. “Take all the time you need. That bastard ain’t going nowhere.”

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William fought back a yawn as he got off the elevator on the second floor. He glanced into the surgery waiting room as he passed to find it already full – glad he wasn’t on the rotation that day – and moved on towards the ICU wing. He felt like the walking dead. A shower, two hours of sleep and a hurried breakfast had been all he’d had time for that morning before heading to the hospital. Francine had still been asleep when he’d left, confident he would be there for the kids until she could get herself together. Jackson’s actions the night before hadn’t only affected Daryl, but the entire network of family and friends who loved the boy.

He softened his tread as he neared the ICU waiting area, noting the muted lighting and absence of sound. He could only hope Carol had tried to get a little rest. He wasn’t surprised to see his daughter sprawled out on the sofa, her slender arms wrapped around Maggie to keep the girl from toppling backwards onto the floor, but he was confused to see Lori on the sofa adjacent to them. The last he’d heard, only the Greene girl had planned to stay.

Lori put her phone away – having been occupied with a game – and hurried over to him before he could wake the other girls. “Hi, Dr. Mason. Have you been in to see Daryl yet?” she asked, her eyes anxious.

“I was just on my way to see him, but I wanted to check in on Carol first. Did she get any sleep at all?” he replied in hushed tones.

Lori shook her head. “Not really. She tossed and turned until Maggie stretched out beside her, the added comfort, y’know?”

William nodded sympathetically. “She doesn’t sleep well without Daryl. They’ve been like that since they were children … more so now.” He didn’t need to elaborate. Their friends had stood by for the better part of two years wondering when the two of them would finally get together. He smiled gently at his daughter’s friend. “It was nice of you and Maggie to stay with Carol last night. Thank you.”

“Oh, we all stayed, Dr. Mason,” she said with a dismissive wave of her hand. “They should be back soon. Glenn needed to drop his mom’s car off at home, and they had to pick Rick’s up at his place. Then I believe they’ll be going to get breakfast for us all because Rick said no one should have to eat hospital cafeteria food.” She chanced a glance at her sleeping friends. “Should I wake Carol?”

“No, that’s not necessary, dear. Visiting hours aren’t for another hour … let her sleep.”

“Do you think we’ll be able to see Daryl this morning?” she asked, unclear on the hospital’s policy for visiting the ICU.
William rubbed at the tension radiating from the top of his spine. “I don’t see why not. He’s not critical. Everett and I just thought we’d keep him under observation.” It took all his will power to shake off a yawn. He had promised Everett he’d look in on his patients this morning after he’d seen his son, and he didn’t see how he was going to make it. “Tell Carol she can come on back when she wakes up, and then the rest of you can visit … two at a time. He’s mending, but I don’t want him excited.”

He left the girls in the waiting area and made his way into the unit, greeting the morning staff as he headed first to the coffee pot for a jolt of caffeine, and then to the desk outside Daryl’s room to have a look at his chart for any notes Annie might have documented overnight. He nodded to David as the man sat down at the desk, glad he would be taking care of Daryl that day.

“Morning, Dr. Mason,” he greeted.

“Good morning, David.” William flipped through the chart, frowning. “Did Annie say anything about your new patient which isn’t in the chart? Did he get any rest?”

David arched a brow and groaned. “That boy of yours is a pistol.”

“Is he now?” William returned, trying not to laugh at the comical expression on the young man’s face. “Would you care to elaborate?”

“I don’t mean any disrespect, Dr. Mason, but Mr. Dixon is not a happy camper. His vitals are good, but he’s been yelling for you for the past hour. He wasn’t at all excited about the foley, yelled at the lab tech that he wasn’t a pin cushion, and refuses to speak to anyone aside from you. Annie suggested to him that she could call Carol in, but he was quite adamant about letting her sleep. Frankly, doc, I’m afraid he’s going to try to get out of bed the first chance he gets and make a run for it.”

William pressed his lips together to stifle a laugh. Where Daryl normally came across as shy and reserved to strangers, there were instances when he’d been afraid and unsure and lashed out. Apparently, this was one of those times. “Anything else, David?”

“Yes. I just hung another unit of blood, fluids and the antibiotics Dr. Nolan ordered. Mr. Dixon complained about the IV lines, but conceded they were necessary. I am concerned, however. He’s refusing his pain meds,” the nurse added.

William downed the last dregs of coffee in his cup and patted the man on the shoulder. “I’ll handle it. Oh, and call the florist shop downstairs and have some flowers sent up for Annie when she comes in tonight. I know Daryl … I know his moods. I’m sure he didn’t mean anything by his behavior, but I don’t want her to think it was something she’d done.”

Daryl tore his gaze away from the view outside his window as William walked in and shut the door behind him. Relief to have a member of his family so close, flooded through him and the tension in his shoulders eased, but it didn’t last. Shame at his behavior was quickly to follow. “Dad –”

“None of that now,” William admonished gently as he moved to Daryl’s bedside and took a seat on the stool. “You think you’re the first patient to let his anxiety with being trapped in a bed turn him into a bear?”

Daryl glanced up at him from beneath his lashes before his gaze returned to his left hand where it plucked at the blanket. “You’re like Carol … y’ always put stuff in th’ nicest terms when y’ should be callin’ me an asshole,” he grumbled.
William covered Daryl’s hand with his own, a sign he wasn’t angry. “As long as I’ve known you, your injuries have never been so severe either Carol or I couldn’t patch you up. You’ve never had to come to the hospital. It’s only natural to be afraid, son. Actually, I’m surprised you’re doing so well surrounded by strangers.”

Daryl lifted his right hand where it rested against his chest, staring at the IV in his hand just below the bandage over his busted knuckles. “Don’t like needles, an’ they seem t’ want t’ stick me all th’ time. Some lady came in earlier an’ stuck me three times before she could take m’ blood.” He waved a hand at the unit hanging from the IV pole. “She took so much they had t’ give some back.”

William chuckled. “They’re still replacing what you lost during surgery.”

“I feel like Frankenstein’s monster,” he sighed. He met William’s gaze and flushed as red as a tomato. “An’ there’s … uh … there’s a tube in m’ … gawd! This is so fuckin’ embarrassin’!” He covered his face with his good hand and groaned.

“Daryl, it was necessary. You’ve just had major surgery, and can’t get out of the bed … at the very least for a few days. If it bothers you that much, we could take it out and let you use a bed pan, but you have to promise you won’t try to get up.”

Daryl nodded his head fervently. “I promise, Dad. I … I just wanna go home,” he said, turning his watery gaze to face the wall.

“And how do you plan to do that if you won’t let us take care of you here first? Hm?” William brushed his thumb across the back of his boy’s hand. “We almost lost you, son,” he whispered brokenly. “I’m not going to see you released before we’re sure you’re going to continue to heal.”

“I miss Carol,” he retorted petulantly. “I ain’t never … she’s always been with me when …”

“I know, and once we move you – hopefully, this afternoon if you co-operate – she’ll be able to stay with you.”

Daryl perked up a bit at that news. “What do I have t’ do?”

“You, my boy, need to relax and get some rest. Let your body begin to heal. Take your pain meds. David said you’d refused them earlier.”

“Don’t like th’ way they mess with my head.” He turned his hand over, palm up, his fingers clutching tightly around William’s. “I … I don’t want t’ be like him. I cain’t. I can deal with a little pain.”

He knew William would be able to see through his false bravado, but he didn’t care. He wasn’t going to sit there and whine about the blistering agony his body had become.

“A little pain, huh?” William smiled knowingly. “Two of your ribs are cracked, your right clavicle is broken, your face is a mess, and you’ve just undergone surgery. You never were a good liar, son.”

Daryl snorted.

“Franny is going to take one look at you and jump on every member of my staff wanting to know why you’re suffering when they should be caring for you. And that’s not taking into consideration what she’s going to do to me.”
A laugh burst from Daryl’s chest, which morphed into a groan, his teeth clenching and eyes squinting shut against the pain. When he remembered how to breathe through it, he nodded. “A’right … I guess a little somethin’ for th’ pain would be ok. But not too much.”

William patted his hand and rose from his seat, happy he’d been able to talk sense to his son. “Not too much,” he agreed, though there was no way in hell he was going to lower the dosage at this stage. He understood Daryl’s fear when it came to mood altering substances. It was why he’d never seen Daryl have more than one or two beers at a time, and he balked at having to take something as mild as Advil for pain. He was terrified of ending up like Jackson. “I’m going to get your meds and ask David to come remove the catheter. By then, your breakfast should be here … and Carol.”

Daryl smiled for the first time since William had entered the room. “Thanks, Dad.”

William paused with his hand on the door. “Don’t thank me just yet, son. If you put one toe out of line, it’s going back in.”

Daryl watched him go, his features twisting up in disgust. He’d be good … anything to get rid of that infernal thing.

* * *

Daryl studied Carol as she fussed over his breakfast tray. Their friends had just left, and she seemed at a loss for what to do with herself. “Angel … please sit down or something. You’re makin’ me dizzy.”

“No, Daryl … that would be the pain medication David just gave you.”

He winced as she pushed the table closer to him and sat down on the edge of the bed to help him. He hated it when she was pissed at him.

“I can’t believe you went that long without your meds,” she chided, her eyes flashing hotly. “How is your body supposed to heal if it’s constantly fighting against the pain. And don’t lie and tell me you’re not suffering. I can see it written all over your face!”

Daryl gaped at her. “Cannot!”

“Can to!”

“Cain’t!”

“Daryl …” she fairly growled. “You can barely talk to me without clenching your teeth. Do you really think I don’t know you well enough to tell the slightest change in your moods?” She wouldn’t look at him, concentrating on pouring grape and cranberry juice into one cup, combining them to make it more palatable for him. “I’ll bet you haven’t slept either.”

He took the cup from her and drank, eyeing her over the rim. “No, not really. Got a lot on m’ mind.” He ducked his head sheepishly. “An’ … I hate it here.”

Carol softened, her features relaxing into a sympathetic pose. “Baby, no one likes to be in the hospital, but Daddy and Everett aren’t going to release you if you don’t follow the protocol and try to get better.”
“I already had this talk with Dad, thanks. I promised him I wouldn’t be an asshole anymore about my care, ‘right?” Daryl wrinkled his nose at the cup of broth she pushed towards him next. “What th’ hell is that?”

Carol took a sip and tried not to wrinkle her nose. “Beef broth.”

“I ain’t drinkin’ that. What’s wrong with th’ people ‘round here thinkin’ broth is a breakfast food?” he grumbled. “What else we got? Where’s m’ eggs? Bacon? I need meat, woman!”

She snorted, but couldn’t hide the amusement dancing in her eyes. “You’re on a liquid diet. Standard procedure after surgery.” She uncovered a fruit sorbet and picked up the spoon, eyeing him hesitantly. “Do you want help?”

“Y’ ain’t gotta feed me,” he grumbled, opening the hand bound against his chest and wiggling his fingers at her. He figured he could hold it and use his good arm to wield the spoon. She arched a dubious brow at him, but nevertheless complied. His hands trembled, but he managed to get a bite into his mouth without dropping it all over himself. The frozen strawberry treat was like ambrosia against his tongue, and he didn’t hesitate to finish it all.

Still, his stomach growled. “Look … at least you have red jello,” she quipped, handing it over.

Daryl made a face at the jiggly substance. “This is in no way a decent substitute for bacon an’ eggs.”

“I’ll talk to Daddy and see if we can’t get you some real food for lunch, but I’m not making any promises.” Carol fidgeted with the edge of his blanket as he ate. “Mom had that big order to deliver today, but she should be here in a few hours. I asked her to bring some pajama bottoms for you so you could change when you’re finally moved to a normal room.”

Daryl’s eyes narrowed on her as he handed the bowl back. “That’s good. Don’t like layin’ here with m’ ass hangin’ out. What about you? Y’ gonna go home an’ get some rest?” He didn’t much care for the dark circles beneath her eyes.

“Daddy brought me a bag this morning.” She pressed her fingers to his lips as he opened his mouth to protest. “I’m not leaving this hospital until you do, Dixon. No arguments!”

His hand covered hers, holding it in place so he could kiss her fingertips before moving it down to rest against his chest. “Y’ gotta take care of yourself, Angel,” he whispered, his eyelids at half-mast. “Gawd, I cain’t stand this … not bein’ with y’ an’ worryin’ y’ won’t eat or sleep because everythin’ is so fucked up. I’m sorry –“

“Stop,” she scolded before he could work himself up. “None of this is your fault. The only thing you need to worry about right now is getting better.” Carol got up and moved the table away from the bed, and busied herself straightening his blankets. “Now, is there anything you need? Anything at all I can do for you?”

She was evading. He could see it in the way she fidgeted, and how she wouldn’t hold his gaze. “Yeah … y’ can come wedge yourself in by me. M’ ass is asleep an’ I cain’t turn over.”

Carol hooked a thumb over her shoulder, pointing to the window. “The nurses won’t like it.”

Daryl glared icy blue daggers at the window where he could see the ICU nurses going over charts and dispensing medications for their patients. “I give absolutely no fucks, Carol Ann. I … I need you right now, not them.” He knew he was being an ass by using her need to care for him
against her, but it would benefit her as much as him. If she climbed into bed with him, he would rest easier, and she might be able to relax enough to get some sleep of her own. “Please?”

She bit her lip, her gaze flitting between the window and the man she loved. Giving in, she marched to the window and let the blinds down. “We’re going to get in trouble.”

“No, we’re not.”

“They’re going to come in here and find us all snuggled up and cozy and call my dad.”

Daryl’s voice dropped to that low graved tone he adopted when he was close to sleep, sending a shiver down her spine as he whispered, “Please, Angel?”

“Oh, now you’re just playing dirty, Dixon,” she admonished as she made her way to the bed.

“Whatever it takes,” he grinned.

Carol surveyed the bed, speculating on what would make him most comfortable. She went to the left side, and helped him roll enough to wedge a pillow under his butt before rounding the bed and lowering the rail so she could sit on his right. But she was firm in her refusal to lie down. She curled her arm around his shoulders and he burrowed his face against her bosom with a contented sigh. “Better?”

“Gawd, yes,” he moaned, his eyes closing with exhaustion.

“Daryl?”

“Hmm?”

Her fingers carded through his hair, and she could feel him melting against her. She almost hated to disturb his languorous state. “Sheriff Grimes questioned me and Merle last night while you were in surgery. He wanted an unofficial statement about what happened so he could start his investigation.”

Daryl stiffened, his eyes opening barely a crack as he looked up at her. “What’d y’ tell him?”

“The truth. I told him everything I remembered, except … “

“Except where Jackson really is,” he finished for her.

Carol shrugged, urging his head back against her. “I don’t know where he is, and frankly, I don’t want to know. But I wasn’t about to tell the sheriff Jackson hadn’t left the house under his own steam.”

Daryl sighed, closing his eyes again. “He’ll prob’ly be comin’ around here, wantin’ t’ ask me questions next.”

“Yeah … what are you going to tell him?”

“Whatever I can t’ protect m’ brother.”
Chapter 22

Merle hated hospitals, he thought as he stepped off the elevator onto the second floor and made his way to the ICU. He couldn’t wait for his brother to be moved to a regular room so he wouldn’t have to observe the intensive care unit’s regulated visiting hours. Due to having to deal with Jackson and the rather long nap he’d taken, he’d missed the first window of opportunity to see Daryl. He glanced down at his watch to make sure it was after one p.m. He wasn’t going to miss another chance to see him.

He gave the nurse a stiff nod as he passed him, opening the door as quietly as possible. One side of his mouth lifted as he took in Carol wrapped around his brother, the soft sound of Daryl’s snores muffled in the crook of her neck. He’d never thought he’d see the day his baby brother would be so comfortable with a woman, the awkward little fucker. Another reason he’d found to be indebted to the girl. Francine shifted in the chair by the window, and his gaze swung to her, his smile widening.

She hopped up to give him a hug before she studied his worn weathered features. “You’re not taking care of yourself, Merle. Am I going to have to come out to the cabin and see that you do?”

“Y’ do that … anytime y’ like, mom,” he said with a wink. “I’ll get better. I’m fit … even if I’m a little thin.”

Francine hummed low in her throat. “We’ll have to see about fattening you up,” she teased. She raised a hand, her thumb brushing against the hollow of his cheek. He hadn’t been so gaunt since the last time he’d come home, but that hadn’t been his doing then. Being held captive by insurgents who had little care for his dignity or humanity had done that to him. Her auburn brows drew together. “How are you really?”

Merle leaned into her touch, his lips curling into a bittersweet smile against her palm. He circled around her and flopped heavily into the chair, pulling her down sideways to perch on his knees. He supposed he should be lucky there was even one chair with all the medical equipment which took up most of the space in the small room. And he wasn’t going to take her seat without offering her another. “Tired … really tired. All th’ time I been spendin’ in transport, th’ paperwork in D.C., and then th’ bus ride home only t’ see m’ brother like that,” he nodded towards the bed, a darkness settling over his features. “Jus’ need time, I guess.”

“You know William and I are here for you, Merle. It’s going to be so nice having you home.”

Daryl whimpered in his sleep, his good hand reaching out in search of Carol, curling about her ribs. Merle winced, knowing the nightmares which could plague someone’s soul. He moved to help Francine off his lap so he could go to his brother, to offer what comfort he could give, but she laid a restraining hand on his arm. “No … watch. He’s ok.”

Carol snuffled softly and pressed a kiss to Daryl’s hair, her right hand rising to stroke his cheek. “Shh, it’s alright … I’m here … “ she whispered, her words slightly slurred.
Merle’s eyes widened as Daryl settled, his breathing becoming slow and even once more and the tension which had tightened his shoulders, easing away. “She … She didn’t even wake up?”

Francine chuckled. “They have a very close bond, Merle. It’s unlike anything I’ve seen before. I suppose you would call them soulmates. They’ve always been like this,” she said, her cheeks tinting a lovely pink as she ducked her head. “I’ve spent quite a bit of time watching my kids sleep.”

Merle settled back into the chair and ran a hand over the stubble on his chin. “He really does love her, doesn’t he?” he asked more of himself than her.

She couldn’t help but answer, a dreamy quality to her voice. “As much as she loves him.”

William came in, his brows rising as he glanced at the kids before his gaze found his wife. “How long have they been like that?” he asked in surprise.

Francine shrugged. “I’m not sure. David said she came in this morning, but didn’t leave at the end of visiting hours. And Daryl’s lunch tray is untouched, so I’m thinking they fell asleep and no one had the heart to disturb them.”

“Well, I’ve got good news … Everett and I discussed this, and if there’s no sign of infection, we’re going to move him up to the third floor.” Francine beamed at Merle at the news, his own face alight with relief. “You can stay if you’d like. It won’t take but a few moments to change his bandage.”

Francine declined. “No, I’ll leave you to your doctoring thing and give the kids a call to let them know what’s going on. Otherwise, they’ll be piled up in a booth over at the bakery, sulking. Rick was cursing Jackson’s name this morning because he fouled up their plans for today.”

Merle watched her leave, his brows furrowed. “What plans?”

William grimaced. “Daryl wanted to have a cook out at the cabin, to thank everyone for helping to celebrate his birthday and he wanted to mark your homecoming with charred meat.” He set the tray – containing a myriad of wound care supplies – on the bed, his eyes darkening menacingly. “I’m sure there will be ample opportunity to do it once he’s recovered.”

“There shouldn’t be a fuckin’ need for ‘im t’ recover,” Merle hissed, doing his best to keep his voice low.

“I agree,” William replied. “Thankfully, we won’t have to worry about a repeat of this.”

“No, we won’t.”

“Merle?” Daryl asked sleepily as he opened his eyes to find them standing next to the bed. “Dad, what’s going on?”

William patted him on the leg to reassure him. “Nothing for you to worry about, son. I just want to have a look at your wound, make sure it hasn’t become infected. Is that alright with you?”

Merle shoved his hands into his pockets and rocked back on his heels with a smile. “Yeah, they wanna move y’ t’ a different room if yer wound looks good, lil’ brother. I think we’d all be grateful for that.”

Daryl yawned and gave a tentative stretch as William removed the pillow under his behind and urged him to lie flat. “Sounds good. Hopefully, I can get some real food, ‘cause that stuff they
brought me for breakfast was jus’ plain horrible.”

Carol blinked awake at the sound of Daryl’s voice, and stared at her father in wide-eyed horror. As much as she might have wanted to shoot up out of the bed, she eased herself away from Daryl gently, careful not to jostle him too much. “Oh! Daddy, I’m sorry … I didn’t mean to fall asleep … I –”

William looked up at her with an indulgent smile. “You did nothing wrong, Carol Ann. In fact, you were simply comforting my most troublesome patient.” Daryl blushed, causing Merle to snicker. “You got him to eat and sleep, and that is very important to his recovery.”

“But visiting hours …”

“Were superseded by the needs of the patient,” he explained. “And apparently, the rest did you some good,” he said, turning back to Daryl, “because the color is already returning to your cheeks.”

Merle moved around the bed to stand next to Carol, nudging her in the ribs. “Jus’ cain’t stay away from th’ boy, huh?” he teased with a waggle of his brows.

Daryl’s eyes flashed menacingly as he whipped his head around to glare at his brother. “Leave my girl alone, Merle. She don’t need that shit right now,” he growled. Merle just grinned.

“Alright,” William interrupted, “we don’t need you getting upset right now. Merle was only teasing.” He took the syringe David had prepared and held it up for his son to see. “I’m going to give you something for pain before we have a look, so just try to relax.”

Daryl watched as his father pushed the meds through the IV line, inhaling sharply. “Gawd, I can smell it. It’s weird. Is it s’posed t’ be like that?”

William chuckled as his son seemed to melt back against the bed, the medication having the desired effect. “I’ve had patients tell me that before. Nothing to worry about; just relax, my boy.”

Carol pointed at Daryl’s side as William pulled the blankets back and arranged his hospital gown to preserve his dignity. “Do you want us to leave while you do that, Daddy?”

“No, that’s not necessary. Actually,” he said, trying to be gentle as he pulled at the tape securing the dressing, “it would be good for you to watch. Once he’s home, you’ll need to know how to care for him.”

Daryl hissed through his teeth as the cool latex of William’s gloves came in contact with his warm skin, and he flinched, instinctively leaning towards Carol. She moved closer, her fingers delving into his soft hair. “It’s ok, baby. Take a deep breath. Daddy won’t be longer than he absolutely has to be.”

Merle winced as he leaned over to get a better look at the site of the incision, his brother’s flesh held together by surgical staples. He was just as happy as William to see it wasn’t oozing or red. His eyes drifted over Daryl’s pale skin at the few faded scars littering his torso before settling on one which was bright pink near the site where he’d been cut. “What’s that?” he asked, unable to look away from what had once been a two-inch gash. “How’d that happen?”

Carol tensed beside him, though she didn’t look away from Daryl. “Jackson,” was all she said, her voice low, filled with loathing for the man.

He clenched his teeth so hard, the muscle in his jaw ticked. “He did this?” he asked, his
voice accusing as he looked down into an identical pair of icy blue eyes. “An’ y’ jus’ forgot t’ tell me … s’that it?”

“Merle … it wasn’t that bad … an’ I didn’t want y’ t’ worry, ok? Dad an’ Carol patched me up. Wasn’t a big deal, nothin’ I ain’t used to,” Daryl stammered beneath his brother’s knowing stare.

Carol laid a hand on Merle’s arm, her eyes sympathetic. “He didn’t keep it from you to hurt you, Merle. He was trying to protect you.”

“It ain’t his job t’ protect me!” he barked, brushing a hand over his close-cropped hair. “I shoulda been here!”

“See! This is why I didn’t tell y’, Merle. Out in th’ field, y’ cain’t afford t’ get distracted. I’m FINE!” Daryl said stubbornly before William pressed on the end of the incision gently and made him groan in pain.

“Yeah, brother, I can see jus’ how fine y’ are! If I’da been there, y’ wouldn’t have another fuckin’ scar, y’ wouldn’t be layin’ in a goddamned hospital bed with little metal things holding y’ together!”

“Boys, that’s enough,” William scolded, the Dixon brothers clamping their mouths shut. “You can argue about each other’s need to protect one another after Daryl is released from the hospital.” He sighed. “Daryl, Merle … we all know how much you love each other. There’s no need to prove it.”

“M’ sorry I didn’t tell y’.”

“Well, don’t let it happen again,” Merle grumbled, conceding the point and putting it to rest. But he couldn’t fight off the darkness welling within him. How much more had Daryl not told him over the years so he wouldn’t worry? True, it would have distracted him in the field, but Daryl was his baby brother, his family. What if Jackson had succeeded in destroying the boy before Merle had gotten the chance to come home? Damnit! “I’ma go … leave y’ t’ Dad’s tender lovin’ care an’ all.”


“Got some things t’ do s’all. Don’tcha worry, lil’ brother, I’ll be back tonight. Y’ gonna be moved outta th’ ICU, so it’ll be easier t’ sneak in.”

William chuckled as he applied a new dressing to Daryl’s wound and settled his gown back into place. “I know if anyone can slip past the nurses, it’ll be you, son. And if you can’t manage to be stealthy enough and are caught … well, there’s always the Dixon charm.”

Carol caught up with Merle at the elevator, pretending he wasn’t ignoring her as she called to him. Her fingers curled over his wrist as he reached out to stop him from pressing the down button. He instantly stiffened, his icy gaze darting down to her. He wouldn’t hurt her for the world, but he couldn’t help the tensing of his muscles beneath her hand.

“What is it, lil’ sister? Y’ should be in there with Daryl instead o’ chasin’ after me,” he said,
trying to keep his tone light and teasing. He failed.

“Daryl’s fine,” she murmured, looking back in the direction from which she’d come before leveling him with her worried gaze. She hated to leave him, but she was concerned over the sad state of his brother. “He’s got Daddy to keep him occupied for now. I’m more worried about you.”

“There ain’t nothin’ t’ worry about, darlin’.”

“Merle Dixon, I know you. I can tell when you’re upset no matter how well you try to hide it.” Carol removed her hand from his arm and crossed hers over her chest. “He’s never shown you his scars, has he? You saw them, and … you just couldn’t get out of that room fast enough.”

Scars … as in more than one. Sonofabitch! “He … uh … he’s got more than what I just saw?” he faltered, the lump of emotion in his throat nearly choking him as he thought of the marks he carried on his own body. “What th’ fuck y’all been hidin’ from me, Carol Ann, in his insane desire t’ protect me, huh?” he hissed, his teeth slamming together with a click as he clenched his jaw. “He ain’t said shit about scars!”

Her cheeks burst aflame in embarrassment. “Maybe I shouldn’t have said anything.”

Merle took a step into her personal space, looming over her threateningly. He knew the little spitfire wasn’t afraid of him, but he wasn’t above intimidating her a little. “Maybe not. Don’t really give two fucks what y’ think right now. Y’ shoulda told me before! I made sure t’ stay in contact with th’ both o’ ya! How many times could y’ have told me?!”

“And what could you have done!?” she seethed just as rabidly as he had, her eyes flashing fire at him. “We’ve all done whatever we could to protect him, care for him … love him. But only to the point he would allow. It’s a fucked up situation, I’ll admit, but –”

Her voice trailed away as the elevator doors opened and a couple stepped out, turning left in search of surgery waiting.

“Look, Merle … Jackson got in Daryl’s head, manipulated him into keeping silent until … well, until he couldn’t. There were a few times he couldn’t hide his wounds, times when he came to me for help. He didn’t keep it a secret just to hurt you, so forget your infernal pride and suck it up.” She brushed fresh tears from her eyes, her gaze dipping towards her boots.

“How bad?” he growled. If he were honest, he wanted details. The more facts he had, the easier it would be to mete out the proper punishment to the monster who’d tormented his brother and killed his mother.

Carol bit her lip in indecision, still refusing to look at him. “It could’ve been worse.”

“Carol …”

“There are six on his back,” she finally relented. “The first time he came to me there were two, crisscrossing his left shoulder blade. The second time … god, Merle, it was a mess. There were two open gashes beneath his right shoulder and one low on his back … it looked like Jackson had lashed him and then dragged him over asphalt. He wouldn’t tell me how it happened. It’s a miracle he even made it to my house that last time.” She was openly crying now, and she didn’t resist as he pulled her into his arms and tucked her against his chest. “It was storming, and he was burning with fever … and bleeding … and he crawled all the way up the trellis to my room before he just collapsed onto my lap. Jackson had been upset because Daryl was trying to sleep off a nasty cold instead of coming down to the bar to give him a ride home. It didn’t matter he’d only been
fourteen at the time and wasn’t allowed to drive yet.”

Merle pressed his face into her auburn curls and fought back tears of his own. “I’ll bet he woke up long enough t’ make y’ promise not t’ take ‘im t’ th’ hospital though.”

Carol nodded, sniffling loudly. “Yeah, said he didn’t have insurance, and didn’t want Jackson to find out. Daddy helped me patch him up, and he hid out at our place for a week before he was well enough to go back to school. Not that Jackson even noticed he was missing, mind you. It was about that time Daddy bought him some health insurance … in case there was ever a need, y’know?”

Merle set her back from him and dried her tears. “He still shoulda told me.”

“Please don’t be too hard on him, Merle. You don’t know how worried he’s been about you coming home healthy and whole. He was afraid … afraid if he told you what he was going through – more than what you already suspected – he’d somehow put you in danger.”

He reached out and punched the button on the panel, calling the elevator up to the second floor. “Y’ don’t worry ‘bout nothin’, lil’ darlin’. I’ll take care of this.”

“Merle, please …”

Merle smiled tightly, trying to conceal the darkness in his eyes. “Take care o’ my brother, Carol, an’ leave th’ rest t’ me.” He stepped onto the elevator as the doors opened. “Trust me.”

*. *.*

Merle had spent the rest of the afternoon at the cabin, moving restlessly from room to room as his rage had grown. When he’d come in that morning to catch a few hours of sleep, he’d been stunned to see the change to his home. If Daryl decided he no longer wanted to be a veterinarian, he could make a killing in the construction business. They boy had a natural talent for woodworking, apparently. He also suspected Francine had had a hand in filling the cabin with furniture and appliances he knew neither he nor Daryl could afford on their own. He’d shaken his head, thinking of the money he’d saved. Ten years of scrimping, saving every dime of his wages, some of which he’d wired to Daryl from time to time to make sure his brother wasn’t doing without, the rest going into his bank account.

All he’d ever wanted, his one dream, had been to own his own business and get his brother away from their abusive father. Fate was a fickle bitch, he’d come to learn. He was filled with recriminations and the what ifs paraded through his mind at an alarming speed. He blamed himself for what his brother had endured. He’d known what would happen when he’d joined the army. No matter how much he wished he could lie to himself, he knew he couldn’t. He’d been so fucking stupid. Jackson had probably started in on Daryl the moment Merle had climbed onto the bus for boot. And now Daryl bore scars – both mental and physical – much like Merle himself did.

Now, as he sat staring at his mother’s portrait where it hung over the hearth, he made her a promise. Daryl, her sweet baby boy … he would never suffer another day at Jackson’s hands. An eye for an eye, and if Merle had his way, Jackson would suffer the torment of the damned.

Merle didn’t know how long he’d sat there lost in thought, but the shadows in the living room had deepened, and he knew it was close to dusk. It never boded well when he let himself
dwell on memories, and the ones which plagued him were worse than most men would be able to endure. Memories of pain, of war, torture and the screams of men who’d been under his command, innocent women and children forced to suffer the indignities of men in a position of power. It was too much, and a hollow aggrieved bellow of outrage tore from his throat as he pushed himself up from the sofa and stormed from the cabin, only taking the time to strap his hunting knife to his thigh.

The temperature had dropped, making each step he took through the forest sound like a gunshot, but even without the aid of a flashlight in the deep shadows, he could easily find his way. This was his home, and he could traverse amidst the foliage with his eyes closed, so stealthily, it was highly unlikely anyone could detect his movements. He wouldn’t allow his rage to make him careless. If anything, it would make him more cautious. A soldier’s will to remain in control at all times; anything less … well, he’d learned the hard way, hadn’t he?

Martinez stepped through the trees as Merle entered the overgrown clearing where the cellar was, his eyes narrowing as he took in his former commander and dearest friend. “I was just coming to get you. Oscar just got back with dinner. Y’ hungry, hermano?”

Merle growled in response, his hands clenched into fists, his eyes glowing like twin coals of hatred, and it was only because Martinez knew him so well that he knew his friend was ready to snap.

Caesar reached out and planted a restraining hand in the center of Merle’s chest. “Dixon, I can’t let you go down there like this. The bastard is gonna see how out of control you are, and try to get in your head.” He let go as some of the tension eased from Merle’s shoulders. “You can’t be Merle down there. You can’t be his son. You have to be Captain Dixon, protector, avenger.”

Merle turned away and scrubbed both hands over his face, his voice low in the stillness of the woods. “But is that who I am? Am I really doin’ th’ right thing … or is it jus’ my rage talkin’? I want t’ end him so badly, an’ jus’ when I think I’m ready, I remember how he used t’ be … before Daryl came along. I remember how hard he worked, how much he loved Mama … me.”

Caesar plunged his hands deep into his pockets and tilted his head to the side as he regarded his friend. “But that ain’t who he is now, is it? You said you wanted to get to the bottom of it, find out why he became such a monster. After what he’s done, he’s nothing better than the terrorists we been fighting for a decade. Don’t start doubting yourself now. Stick with the facts and act accordingly.”

Merle met the other man’s gaze as Martinez opened the door, pushing it wide, giving him the choice. He had no other. Regardless, Jackson was going to die. It was only the answers his father chose to give which would determine how.

His footsteps echoed against the stone walls as he proceeded down the stairs, the faint thud of the door closing and Caesar’s own light tread following. Oscar was just taking the boxes from the heavy brown bag and laying them out on the table as they entered the main room, and without looking, he could feel his father’s gaze upon him, watching every move his son made.

He forced a smile to his face and clapped his hands together, rubbing them in anticipation as he blatantly ignored his father and began opening the boxes. “Hot damn, Oscar! How’d y’ know I was in th’ mood for Chinese food? Didn’t happen t’ get any sesame chicken an’ shrimp lo mein, didja? Baby brother’s stuck up at th’ hospital eatin’ cafeteria food, an’ I wouldn’t wish that on m’ worst enemy.”

Oscar chuckled, the sound barely loud enough to mask the growling of Jackson’s stomach. “I did, indeed. Figured you were going to want to sneak him some real food,” he said, spooning a
helping of sunflower chicken onto his plate. “How’s he doing today, anyway?”

Merle added pork fried rice, kung pao crawfish, Mongolian beef and a few eggrolls to his own plate and took a big bite before shrugging. “Y’ know how stubborn th’ boy is. Gave th’ nurses a run fer their money this mornin’, but after Dad had a talk with ‘im, he settled down. They’re s’posed t’ move ‘im to a private room this evenin’.”

“Takes after you in that respect, I’d wager,” Martinez grinned as he chewed on his eggroll. “I’ll bet Ms. Fran and Carol ain’t left his side.”

“Y’ know them two. ‘Specially Carol Ann,” he said, chancing a glance at Jackson from the corner of his eye. The bastard looked positively livid. Good! Serves the fucker right. He could just imagine him being all butt hurt over Merle’s use of the word dad when referring to William. “She’s a protective lil’ thing. She was all curled up around him on th’ bed when I went t’ visit earlier.”

“I’m glad he’s got a good woman in his life,” Caesar murmured, still shoveling his food into his mouth at top speed.

Oscar groaned as he pushed his plate away. “Man, that sure beat the hell out of a MRE hunkered down by a sand dune. I think I still got sand in the crack of my ass, even after all this time.”

Merle, finished with his own meal, settled back in his chair and finally leveled a look at Jackson, but it was his friends to whom he spoke. “Y’all got th’ stuff I asked for?”

Martinez let the easy banter between the three of them trail into the ether, his face becoming hard as stone. He hooked a thumb over his shoulder, pointing to the far corner. “Most of what you want is there, the heavier stuff is down the passage. I sent Nero for it,” he said, mentioning his youngest brother. “Had to promise him a job at the garage, though. Conniving little shit.”

“Speaking of which,” Oscar interrupted. “You all ready to meet with Jim Monday morning?”

“Yeah, then afterwards, I need t’ meet with Mr. Harrison in Peachtree t’ finalize th’ paperwork.”

Martinez chuckled, unable to stop himself from ribbing his friend. “Mr. Harrison, huh? Think you’ll run into Andrea while you’re there? I know you ain’t called her since you been back.”

Merle scowled at him. “No, I ain’t called, an’ when I drove by her place, it was closed up tight.”

“A lot could’ve changed in three years, Merle,” Oscar commented, clearing the table and setting aside the leftovers for Merle to bring to Daryl later.

Merle pushed himself away from the table. Andrea Harrison was a sore subject for him. His high school sweetheart had been less than thrilled with his forced entry into the military. Hell, he’s lucky she even deigned to speak to him when he’d come home on medical leave three years ago. She’d made it clear she was tired of waiting on him to get his life together and come home for good. But if anyone knew where he’d be able to find her, it would be her father and sister. If he couldn’t get the information out of one or the other, he’d just have to find her on his own. It would have to wait, however. He had to concentrate on the shit storm life had dealt him first.

“Tell Nero you’ll have an answer for ‘im by th’ end of th’ week,” was all he said as he moved to go through the supplies. It was a clear dismissal, and his friends didn’t hesitate to leave.
He knew they wouldn’t be far.

He brought a jar of peanut butter and a loaf of bread over to the table before stepping over to Jackson and removing the gag. “‘Sup, Daddy?” he sneered, turning to the task of making a sandwich.

The eldest Dixon spit onto the dirt floor as he glared at his son. “What th’ fuck, Merle?!” he rasped in a broken croak. “Y’ cain’t jus’ leave me down here forever … no food or water. Even y’ ain’t that cruel. When I get outta here –“

Merle’s laughter cut him off. “When y’ get outta here? Pfft,” he scoffed. “Y’ ain’t goin’ nowhere, ol’ man. Consider this yer new home.” He stepped back before the man and held out the sandwich, careful of his fingers as Jackson leaned forward and took a huge bite, his hunger more demanding than preserving his pride. When he was done, Merle offered him water.

“An’ jus’ why is that, boy? Still wantin’ yer revenge?”

“Nah, jus’ answers fer today,” Merle said, pulling a chair over and sitting down to face his father. “See, yer goin’ t’ die. There ain’t no escapin’ that little fact. The question is … d’you want it quick an’ painful or slow an’ lingerin’. Choice is yers.” He leaned forward, resting his elbows against his knees, his eyes filled with hate. “Now let’s begin, shall we …”

Chapter End Notes

A/n: Filler alert. Sometimes I make my own self sick. I’m a stickler for details, not wanting to leave anything out, and I feel as if the story is just creeping along. There will definitely be some plot development in the next chapter if you stick with me :D. Thanks so much for reading and reviewing. You don’t know what it means to me.
“Why d’you hate m’ brother so much?” It was the first question Merle could think to ask, the one foremost in his mind. He’d never been able to understand his father’s hatred towards his younger sibling … frankly, because it didn’t make sense. Daryl had been such a loving child, and had grown into a fine young adult … no thanks to their bastard father. Jackson’s hatred for him was bewildering at best.

Jackson snorted. “Ain’t never said I hated ‘im.”

“Actions speak louder than words. I ain’t never seen y’ look at th’ boy with anythin’ but loathin’. I wanna know why,” Merle insisted, unable to sit still. He abandoned the chair in which he sat and paced restlessly as he waited for answers. Answers he was sure to have to drag from his father one by one.

“What’s in it fer me? Some decent food would be a good start,” Jackson sneered, leaning back in the hard metal chair as far as his bonds would allow. “We both know y’ ain’t got it in y’ t’ kill me. So … jus’ how badly y’ want answers, boy?”

Merle laughed with derision, the sound bitter and mirthless as it reverberated against the stone walls. “S’that right?” He pulled the knife from the scabbard at his thigh and held it to Jackson’s throat, the tip digging into the flesh above his adam’s apple. “Y’ think y’ know me, ol’ man? I ain’t that kid who had t’ be dragged onto that bus leavin’ for boot camp. Y’ don’t know what they did t’ me in th’ service o’ my country. They made me a man, a killer … someone who knows how t’ get th’ job done. I seen shit that’d turn yer hair white, and that’s only if yer mind didn’t go first.”

Jackson’s lips formed an ‘o’ of mocking glee as his eyes widened. “Ooooh, I’m so fuckin’ scared. Big bad soldier boy threatenin’ his daddy.”

Merle gnashed his teeth, seeing he was going to have his work cut out for him. His father might be full of false bravado, but he couldn’t quite disguise the tremors in his hands. Though that could be withdrawals from whatever drugs he’d been taking rather than fear. He took pleasure in seeing the thin trickle of blood make its way to pool in the hollow of Jackson’s throat as he backed away, wiping the blood from the tip of his knife and replacing it in its sheath.

He pulled a pair of fingerless leather gloves from the pocket of his BDU jacket and donned them, a smirk curling up one side of his mouth. He shed the jacket as well, not wanting to get blood all over his favorite piece of clothing. It still held the silver bars of his rank he’d worked so hard to earn.

“Y’ should be scared o’ me, but we all know what a stupid fucker y’ are.” His hand shot out, connecting with Jackson’s broken nose before the man could even think to blink. Merle ignored his
yowl of pain and simply smiled. “Went through a lot over there. Hell, I lost count o’ how many insurgents I killed. But I remember every single innocent man, woman, an’ child I saved. War changed me from th’ inside out, an’ I don’t regret bein’ forced into th’ army.”

Jackson scowled at him, but his curiosity won out over his hatred. He jerked his head, blood dripping down his chin and tears over his cheeks, nodding towards the thin scars on the insides of his son’s forearms. “Th’ hell happen t’ yer arms, boy? Looks like they was self-inflicted. Don’t tell me you’re one o’ them pansies with cripplin’ depression an’ decided to off yerself.”

Merle’s eyes hardened further into impenetrable ice, and he hit him again, this time catching Jackson with a right hook. “No, asshole.” This was almost better than therapy, Merle thought. “I was captured. Martinez was wounded, an’ I was tryin’ t’ get ‘im out. I ain’t never left a man behind, an’ I sure as hell wasn’t leavin’ him.”

Jackson spat onto the dirt floor, his teeth bared in a snarl. “Y’ always was thick as thieves with that spic. Shoulda let th’ ragheads have ‘im. Good riddance. You’d be better off without ‘im doggin’ yer footsteps.”

Merle tempered the next blow, this one to Jackson’s midsection, though just barely. “Y’ shut yer fuckin’ hole about Paco,” he bellowed, his control slipping. “I owe him my life many times over by now. I was in that hell for almost two weeks before Martinez an’ th’ rest o’ my team found me.” He sucked in a sharp breath, his hands fistsing at his sides. “Th’ videos what got leaked t’ th’ press years back ’bout how they treat POWs … that ain’t shit to what I went through in that prison.”

“Least y’ got t’ keep yer head, boy,” Jackson said, eyeing his son. “Those soldiers couldn’t say th’ same, now could they?”

Merle shrugged, refusing to let his father see how much it upset him to talk about his time in captivity, but now that he’d begun, he couldn’t seem to stop. His intent had been to humble Jackson Dixon, but now it was as if a weight were lifting from his soul. “I have t’ give it to ‘em … they’re pros when it comes t’ torture. They’re not happy until they completely strip yer humanity from y’. There’s no question t’ them breakin’ y’, jus’ how long it’ll take.”

Jackson swallowed audibly as he watched his son drag the chair back over to sit before him. Merle had been right … this wasn’t the boy who’d left on a greyhound ten years ago. “What’s wrong with y’, Merle Wayne? Yer a Dixon, for fuck’s sake! Man up!”

“Think they give two fucks what my goddamn name is?! What I wouldn’t give t’ hand y’ over t’ them sadistic motherfuckers right now. I ain’t done shit t’ y’ … yet. But them over there are firm believers in an eye for an eye … an’ then some.” He held out his arms, the light from the lantern catching on the thin scars. “It kinda made ‘em mad because they couldn’t beat or starve information outta me. No, they had t’ get creative. They cut me open …” he shivered, the memory the same one which plagued his dreams and haunted his mind. “Not much, but jus’ deep enough to get into the meat o’ me. At first I thought they were jus’ tryin’ t’ render m’ hands useless. Not likely I could escape if they were no good t’ me, but no.” His eyes were cold and emotionless as he leaned close to Jackson’s face. “They dumped maggots on me an’ let th’ fuckers start eatin’ away at me. Least that’s what I thought at first. Doc told me maggots only eat dead flesh, so who knows why they really did it.”

Merle was happy to see he’d finally cracked Jackson’s stoic, sneering mask, horror written all over the older man’s face. “Th’ fuck?” he breathed, unable to manage more than that.

“They wanted t’ break me, wanted me t’ spill all my secrets, but they didn’t get the chance. My team got t’ me in time.” Merle wasn’t going to tell his old man that he’d nearly lost his mind.
Martinez had gotten to him first, having gone against orders to remain put at base camp. The entire team was lucky they hadn’t been court-martialed for insubordination. There he’d been, strapped to that table, screaming his head off as he felt those buggers wiggling in his arms while the firefight had shaken the underground facility. Martinez stumbling into the room, relief written all over his face to have found Merle still alive. He’d taken one look at his commander and the condition he was in before promptly throwing up. The entire team had been lauded for their bravery and cunning in bringing Merle home, but if they hadn’t succeeded, it would’ve easily been the brig for them all. The six of them had all been sent home on medical leave though Merle had been the only one who’d needed it. “Franny wasn’t happy when I got sent home to recover.”

“Pfft,” Jackson scoffed. “Y’ think t’ do th’ same t’ me because o’ some bullshit y’ think I done y’? Don’t see how yer fancy friends would like t’ know that side o’ y’.”

“Naw … even I ain’t that much of a monster. See, I don’t want y’ t’ lose yer mind. When I’m done with y’, I want y’ to be sane as y’ are now,” he hissed menacingly. “I want y’ t’ think on what y’ did t’ yer fam’ly … want it t’ be yer last thoughts before yer cast into hell’s pit for all eternity.”

“Y’ ain’t gonna break me, boy!”

“We’ll see. Now tell me why y’ hate m’ brother so much.”

Jackson struggled against his bonds, lowering his eyes to the floor. “Lemme go an’ I’ll tell y’ what y’ want.”

“THIS AIN’T A NEGOTIATION!” Merle roared. The hunting knife cleared its sheath so quickly it was a blur, embedding the point through the top of Jackson’s hand. “NOW TELL ME WHAT I WANNA KNOW!”

“It’s b-because o’ D-Drew, a’right!” he panted, turning his gaze on his son, a look so filled with panic, it staggered Merle. His control gave way to utter bewilderment, and he pulled the knife from Jackson’s bleeding hand to put it away … for now at least.

“Who th’ fuck is Drew?”

* * *

“How’d I manage t’ get a private room?” Daryl asked as David locked the wheels on his bed and he was able to get a good look at his new temporary digs. There was a TV mounted to the wall, a private bathroom, a decent view of the grounds through the window, and when Carol opened the armoire to stow their bags, he glimpsed a microwave and mini fridge.

Francine flounced into the room, having heard the surprise in his voice. “Because if you were in a semi-private room, Carol wouldn’t be allowed to stay with you overnight, dear, and William wants you to feel somewhat happy about your accommodations. A happy patient is less likely to try to bust out in the middle of the night,” she teased, straightening the blankets covering him from neck to toes. “Are you still cold, darling?”

Daryl fought back a yawn and shook his head. “Nah, I’m good, Mom. A little hungry, though.”

David fiddled with the IV pole and punched in the correct specifications on the machine.
attached to it as he hung a new bag of saline. “Tara’s on it,” he informed them. “She’s going to be your nurse tonight. Dr. Mason upgraded you to a soft diet instead of the liquids and she’s ordering you a tray before she comes in to see you.”

Carol flopped down on the sofa with a groan. “Ugh … cafeteria food is the absolute worst.”

Francine sat down next to her daughter and nudged her with an elbow. “Carol Ann, don’t make it worse than it already is.”

“But he’s starving, Mom. You know how Daryl eats. How’s he ever going to get his strength back if they don’t feed him something he can actually get down?” she argued.

Daryl flipped through a list David had given him detailing his new diet, frowning down at the contents. “It says here I can have hot cereals, oatmeal, soups, applesauce, smoothies, mashed potatoes, scrambled eggs, custard, cottage cheese … It’s not that bad, I guess.”

Carol snorted. “Anything from Piccadilly,” she snarked.

“Oh, damn, don’t make me laugh,” Daryl groaned. He knew how much she hated that place with the geriatric crowd who always seemed to hold up the line. The only time she ever wanted to go there was when she had a craving for their egg custard.

Francine hid a smile behind a stern look aimed towards her daughter. “Well, it’s better than what he had for breakfast and lunch.”

“He didn’t eat lunch.”

“My point exactly.”

Daryl shook his head at the pair. “Mom, soup does actually sound kinda good. Some chicken noodle from that little chicken joint down the street,” he said, shooting her a puppy-eyed stare. He could usually get anything he wanted when he looked at Francine in such a way.

Carol’s lips curled up into a grin. “Yeah, Mom, that place has the best everything. And their soup is almost as good as yours. Please? Would you go get us something from there for dinner?”

Francine looked from one to the other and her heart melted. “What am I going to do with the two of you?” she murmured.

Daryl leaned back against his pillow and cast her a lopsided grin. “Feed us?”

She pushed herself back to her feet and reached for her purse on the end of the bed. “Very well. I can’t have my kids wasting away to nothing up at this hospital, now can I? Is there anything else you want from home while I’m out? I could run by and get it.”

Carol got up from her seat and went to the armoire to rummage through their bags. It held all the essentials, clothes, toiletries, their phone chargers. “Can you bring my tablet, Mom? My laptop is at the cabin, and I don’t want you to have to go all the way out there to get it.”

Francine leaned over and pressed a kiss to Daryl’s brow, brushing his fringe of bangs back from his forehead. “And you?”

He shook his head. “Jus’ food!”

She chuckled and made her way to the door as Carol walked around the bed and perched on
his right. He scooted into her arms the moment she settled. “Why y’ need your tablet?” he mumbled, enjoying the feeling of her fingers in his hair.

“I have an idea for school.”

“Yeah?” he asked, his eyes closing.

“Mhmm … but I need to talk to Maggie first.” His brow furrowed, his eyes darting up to her, giving her his full attention as she continued. “It’s not going to do either of us any good to miss school. It will be detrimental to our records, especially since we’re only allowed five unexcused absences per semester.”

“Car, I’m sure Dad will write me a note.”

“I was talking about me, love. It’s a given you’ll be excused,” she smiled, trailing her fingers over his cheek.

“Y’ ain’t missin’ school because o’ me,” he protested.

“Of course, I am. I’m not leaving you to the mercy of the hospital staff while I go to school. I won’t be able to concentrate knowing you’re here all by yourself.”

Daryl groaned, realizing he wasn’t in the physical shape to argue with her … and win. “So, what’re y’ plannin’?”

“Ok, just hear me out. Then you can tell me how brilliant I am for even thinking of this –“

Daryl snorted. Yes, he thought she was brilliant … and beautiful and kind and a myriad of other adjectives, but he didn’t want her getting the big head.

“Hey!” she admonished, which quickly morphed into a giggle as he traced her throat with the tip of his nose. “Anyway, first hour is study hall; no worries there. Maggie and our friends are in second hour World History and third hour Chem II.”

“Yeah, but we have Trig fourth hour and Biology II fifth hour, and they don’t.”

“They also have sixth hour English IV with us, so that one is covered too.”

Daryl sighed. “Still don’t know where y’ going with this, Carol Ann. Y’ want Mags t’ grab our assignments or somethin’?” He scowled down at his useless right arm still bound to his chest with the compression bandage. “Not that I’m a be able t’ do a whole lot o’ writin’ for a while.”

Carol caressed his arm through the bandage. “It’s going to be fine. I’ll help you … you know that. But my idea is more than just having Maggie collect our assignments and bring them here. She can use her phone to face time. If she can set it on our teacher’s desk for each class, we can participate in the lesson just as we always do. And if we’re really lucky, we won’t get marked absent.”

“Which is why y’ want your tablet. What about fourth and fifth hour?”

“I figured she could pass on her phone to Ty or Sasha.”

“Y’ think she’d do it?” he asked hopefully. If he were going to get a scholarship, it was imperative to keep his grades up.

“I’m hoping. I’ll call her in the morning after she gets back from church with her family,”
Carol said thoughtfully, biting her lip. “Then all we’d need is for Mom to call Mr. Hovarth and get approval. What do you think?”

Daryl’s eyes drooped as he rested his head against her shoulder and nuzzled his face against her throat. “I think you’re brilliant,” he said around a huge yawn. “And that I need a nap. Those pain meds make me sleepy.”

Carol pressed a kiss to his temple before she reached over him to grab the remote for the TV. “Then rest, baby, I’m not going anywhere. You have plenty of time before Mom gets back.”

“Mhmm,” he hummed, letting sleep take him away, warm and content in her arms.

* * *

Jackson cursed as that name slipped from his tongue after so many years, leaving a vile bitter taste in his mouth. He stared at Merle standing before him – really looked – his son’s arms crossed over his chest as he waited for answers. His hand throbbed, the feeling of that knife stabbing into his hand, bones breaking, the sight of his blood oozing from the fresh wound. It all worked to turn his stomach as he battled against the pain. This was not the boy he’d raised to fear his father, no. This stranger before him was a ruthless cold-blooded killer out for revenge, and Jackson shuddered.

“Who. Is. Drew?” Merle asked again, succinctly, his eyes as frigid as a fjord. When Jackson didn’t answer quickly enough, Merle backhanded him, the soldier he’d been once again in charge of the situation.

Jackson’s head turned with the blow. He wasn’t used to being on the receiving end of such punishment, and he found he didn’t care for it one bit. His need to hold his silence warred with the thought of more pain. And pain was indeed good motivation. “M’ brother,” he croaked, his voice trembling as he gnashed his teeth against the agony in his hand.

Nostrils flared, Merle scoffed, “Bullshit! If I had an uncle, I’da known about ‘im before this.”

“’S th’ truth! He was younger than me. Died afore y’ was born.”

Merle narrowed his eyes and pursed his lips as he scrutinized his father, searching for lies. “We was always with Granddad, an’ he ain’t never mentioned another son. No pictures, not a word, no evidence at all there was another Dixon.”

“Daddy didn’t want no reminders, boy. Not after what happened.”

Merle ran a hand over his face and leaned a shoulder against the stone wall, his features cast in shadow. He didn’t want Jackson to be able to read his emotions. “What’s all this got t’ do with m’ brother?”

The silence ticked between them, and Jackson felt as if he had a pendulum axe hanging above his head, time running out, the reaper at the door. “It’s got ever’thin’ t’ do with Daryl,” he said, tossing his head to get the hair out of his eyes as he searched for any easing in his son’s posture. He found none. “Drew was such a lil’ suck up asshole. Had t’ be better than me at ever’thin’. He didn’t act like a Dixon, that was fer damn sure. An’ Daddy loved ‘im best.”
“For fuck’s sake! Y’ gonna sit there an’ tell me y’ was jealous?” Merle groaned, shaking his head.

“Y’ wanna hear this or not, boy?”

Merle rolled his eyes, but waved a hand, nevertheless, for Jackson to continue his tale.

“He was damned near perfect,” Jackson spat. “Perfect grades, volunteer work, got all th’ girls in school, an’ Daddy was so fuckin’ proud. Didn’t matter that I could hunt an’ fish an’ provide for us, or the fact I was bustin’ my ass workin’ an’ bringin’ in money. Hell, no! All Daddy could see was how goddamn perfect Drew was. I couldn’t stand it!” His eyes took on a faraway gleam as his face reddened with outrage. “Little fucker followed me ever’where though. Had some kinda hero worship goin’ on or somethin’. I hated him so much.”

Merle shifted his weight, the rustle of fabric drawing Jackson’s attention back to him, but he didn’t utter a word, too intrigued by the man’s story.

“Drew was ‘bout fifteen, I guess, when he decided he wanted t’ learn how t’ hunt. I didn’t want him hornin’ in on my pride. Huntin’ was m’ escape from havin’ t’ look at ‘im when shit got t’ be too much. Wasn’t a weapon made I couldn’t handle. But Daddy made me take him out; told me he wanted Drew t’ learn.” He snorted. “I had no choice. First buck th’ lil’ bastard bagged was bigger than any I’d ever killed. Kinda like fate wanted t’ rub m’ nose in th’ fact Drew would always be better than me.”

Merle suppressed a shudder, the room feeling colder the more Jackson revealed. “Y’ killed ‘im … didn’t y’?”

A sadistic smile curled the man’s lips, the madness within his eyes showing itself for the first time. “Y’ damn right I did! Ain’t nobody ought t’ have t’ live in somebody’s shadow like that. ‘Bout a year after Daddy made me teach Drew t’ hunt … it was cold, I’d just gotten over a nasty flu bug, but Drew wanted t’ go. An’ whatever he wanted, he got. But I’d had enough. I was tired o’ playin’ fuckboy for his ass. Told Daddy it was a huntin’ accident.”

Merle pushed off the wall, running a hand through his close-cropped hair in disbelief. He’d always known his father was a mean bastard, but he’d never thought him capable of murder. He knew differently now. First his mother and now this … “He believed y’?”

Jackson snorted. “Course not, but he ain’t had proof it wasn’t accidental. I took Drew’s orange vest off ‘is body an’ buried it deep in th’ woods. Told Daddy and th’ law I thought he was a deer. Ol’ Grimes didn’t want t’ believe it either, but wasn’t nothin’ he could do without evidence or witnesses.” His lip curled up into a sneer. “Daddy, well, he never trusted me after that.”

“He was your fuckin’ brother! How ~”

“Because I hated th’ little shit! Ain’t y’ been listenin’?” Jackson said, cutting him off.

Merle schooled his features and turned away from him, stalking over to the corner where the supplies were kept and grabbing a beer from one of the bags. He didn’t trust himself with hard liquor, not after he’d worked so hard to turn his life around. He frowned down at his shaking hand and cursed silently, upending the bottle against his lips. Was there no end to his father’s evil? Was there not a speck of remorse to be found within him? He didn’t turn, unable to bear the sight of Jackson Dixon. “What’s all this got t’ do with m’ brother?” he asked quietly, not trusting his voice not to quake with emotion.
“It’s got everythin’ t’ do with Daryl. That boy’s th’ spit an’ image of Drew Dixon!” Jackson bellowed, his rage apparent. “At first I thought I was imaginin’ shit. It wasn’t until he was four that he started lookin’ so much like m’ brother. Fate fucked me, Merle! I killed Drew, an’ here comes Daryl t’ take ‘is place!”

Merle stormed across th’ space separating them, livid as he gripped the bottle and brought it down to shatter across Jackson’s cheekbone. “Y’ stupid mutherfucker … it wasn’t his fault! He ain’t had a say in who he looked like! He was jus’ a little kid, for fuck’s sake. Y’ couldn’t live with what y’ done, so Daryl had t’ suffer for it, s’that it? Goddamn it!”

Jackson spit out a molar and worked his jaw, his face ablaze with fresh pain. “Yer granddad loved ‘im too. Once again, I had t’ fight fer his affection. It was bullshit! Then when th’ ol’ bastard died, what did he do? Left ever’thin’ he owned t’ you two wasted fucks! Th’ cabin, th’ money, his legacy. Shoulda been mine! Without th’ money he gave me every month, I could barely support m’ fam’ly.”

“So, it drove y’ mad. Whatever th’ fuck, man!” Merle roared. “Boo fuckin’ hoo! Life ain’t fair. Y’ jus’ gotta suck it up an’ do th’ best y’ can. Yer fuckin’ pathetic!” He paced, the walls closing in on him as he fought for breath, the feeling of being caged working against him. He’d fought with claustrophobia since his captivity, but now wasn’t the time to have a panic attack. There were still too many questions unanswered, and it took every ounce of concentration he possessed to close himself off from the emotions battling against him. “An’ what about Mama? She loved y’ … always loved yer selfish ass, even when y’ made a practice o’ beatin’ th’ shit outta her.”

“She was gonna leave me! I couldn’t jus’ let her go, take m’ kid, an’ leave me th’ laughin’stock o’ this fuckin’ town!”

Merle gnashed his teeth, leaning over to peer directly into his father’s steely dark eyes. “So, y’ killed her too. I mean what was another murder t’ y’? Y’ killed her an’ burned up th’ evidence. Then y’ only kept m’ brother around for th’ money. Right?”

Jackson chortled gleefully as he watched Merle slowly lose the iron grasp on his control. “What else good was he, huh? He’s Drew made over … makes me sick. Might as well reap th’ benefits o’ keepin’ ‘im around. Lil’ fuck ain’t good fer nothin’ else.”

Merle stumbled back, realizing he would have lost Daryl if it hadn’t been for the money. Jackson would have had no qualms about killing him too. And Merle had been a world away, unable to help his baby brother. Guilt, pain, sorrow … they flooded him one after the other. His fault! He should’ve been there to protect his family.

His hands fluttered over his pockets, searching for the full pack of cigarettes he’d bought that morning, needing an outlet. Yet, what he encountered was his zippo and the small can of fuel he used to fill it. He pulled the fuel from his pocket and stared down at it, the soldier in him ready to torture the cause of his anguish. His emotions shut down, his pain falling to the wayside to make room for the killer he’d become. There was a reason his team was feared. They knew how to get the job done, knew how to get answers and deal with terrorists. He was no longer Merle, brother, son, friend. He was Captain Dixon.

Jackson eyed him warily, trying to inch his way back in his chair as his son opened the can and dumped it over his injured hand, a yowl of pain escaping his wide mouth. “Th’ fuck y’ doin’, boy?!”

“Givin’ y’ a taste o’ yer own medicine,” Merle sneered, a second before he struck the flint on his zippo and touched it to Jackson’s hand. He smiled as Jackson screamed, an unholy sound which
filled Merle’s soul with satisfaction.

Martinez rushed down the stone stairs, his Beretta clasped in his hand, the sound of Jackson’s screams having wafted up to where he and Oscar had been keeping watch. “Merle, what the fuck, man?!” he yelled, pulling Merle back while Oscar doused Jackson with foam from the fire extinguisher. “Y’ want someone to hear and come to investigate. This wasn’t the plan, hermano.”

“I’m done,” Merle replied, his cold eyes meeting with each of his friends. “We end this tonight.”

“You sure?” Martinez asked. He knew the plan, but he’d still had his doubts his friend would carry through.

Merle didn’t answer, but his next words left no doubt in their minds of his certainty. “Get. Him. Ready.”

Caesar’s eyes were cold as he watched Merle stalk into the passageway before turning them on Jackson. The man had passed out from the pain and would be dead weight, but it was nothing they couldn’t handle. Justice would be meted out, and the fear Daryl had lived with for over a decade would finally be put to rest.

*.*.*

Jackson opened his eyes, pain riddling his body and making him groan around the gag in his mouth. He was wedged against the wall, his body upright, tears blinding him from his charred hand and the myriad other wounds his son had inflicted on his body. It took him a long moment to become aware of just where he was, his eyes focusing on the two soldiers Merle had once commanded. His eyes widened in terror as he took in their task. Brick by brick, Martinez laid, Oscar following it with a thick layer of mortar.

He screamed against the gag, his gaze meeting Merle’s icy stare where he stood behind his friends, arms crossed over his chest, his face a cold blank mask. The three men ignored his muffled pleas, focused on sealing his tomb. It was then he remembered his son’s words … “I want y’ t’ think on what y’ did t’ yer fam’ly … want it t’ be yer last thoughts before yer cast into hell’s pit for all eternity.” He struggled against his bonds, desperate to break free, to claw his way out of his manmade tomb if necessary, but they were secure. There would be no escape.

The last brick slid into place, cutting off his view of Merle, and Jackson knew true terror. He would pay for his sins. Drew … Emma … Daryl … Merle … his father. Every wrong he’d ever done them would be avenged. Darkness overwhelmed him, the sound of silence thunderous in his ears. He’d claimed his son wouldn’t be capable of killing him, but being right was little comfort when he was destined to die of hunger and thirst, alone, abandoned. An end of the monster he’d become. Already he could hear the cries of the damned, those soulless demons come to welcome him to hell.
A/n: Yeah, he’s done. I might’ve gotten a little carried away, but there was no redeeming Jackson. My mind is a frightening place at times. I hope it wasn’t too unrealistic, but I could see Merle taking his revenge. Merle went through a lot, and his head is not in a good place. Anyway, I hope you liked Jackson’s fate. PLEASE! Let me know what you think.
The emergency room was crowded – nothing new for a Saturday night in the mid-sized Georgia town of Peachtree City – as Merle slipped through the automatic doors and made his way towards the corridor which would lead into the hospital proper. It was the closest entrance to the only parking spot he’d been able to find, and he didn’t really care if he had to walk a bit further. He needed to see his brother … now.

He kept his hands fisted at his sides, tremors still zinging along his nerve endings, making him twitch. It had been a long time since he’d been unable to control his body. He was used to death, gore, carnage … But you’ve never killed someone close t’ y’ before, that niggling voice chortled from the back of his mind. He growled low in the back of his throat as he stabbed viciously at the button for the elevator. Jackson Dixon had been a monster, no better than those who had held Merle hostage in Afghanistan, he told himself. He hadn’t had any qualms about killing those bastards … But none o’ those had been yer father.

Merle shuddered as he stepped onto the elevator and pushed the button for the third floor. His boys had been worried when they’d left the cellar and sealed it behind them, Oscar welding the door shut on either end. If by some chance Jackson could somehow manage to burst through the brickwork, he would never be able to get out the only two exits. It was no longer a refuge for Merle or Daryl, but rather Jackson’s tomb … never to be revisited again.

He checked the text again on his phone to make sure he had the right room number and knocked softly on the door in case his brother was asleep. The kid had been through enough in the past two days, and needed his rest. The barked call to ‘come in’ was a bit surprising. It wasn’t that late, only eight-thirty, he confirmed as he looked down at his watch, but with the heavy dose of pain medication Daryl was on, there had been a good possibility he’d be asleep.

A shiver crawled up his spine as his gaze slithered over his brother’s visitor. “Well, Sheriff Grimes … Come t’ update us on th’ search for m’ daddy?” he asked coolly as he entered the room. “Find ‘im yet?”

Walter’s fingers tapped against his waist, his thumbs hooked into the belt loops on his pants. “Not yet, Merle. I just wanted to come by and see for myself how Daryl was doing. My own boy is driving me crazy trying to help with the search,” he said in an amiable tone. “S’that right?”

Merle’s gaze shifted to where Carol sat on the edge of the bed, spooning soup into Daryl’s mouth before taking a bite of her own. “Sheriff Grimes said our friends are helping, Merle. Rick and Glenn are actively searching – along with the entire football team – and Maggie and Lori set up a command post with a few of our workers from the bakery, trying to keep them all hydrated and fed.”

“Y’all have some really good friends,” Walter grinned. “They all want to see Jackson brought to justice for what he did to you, Daryl.”
Daryl swallowed another mouthful of savory chicken noodle, the warmth spreading through him, sating his hunger and making him feel better from the inside out. “Y’ wastin’ tax payer’s dollars searchin’ for that bastard,” he mumbled acidly. It was no secret he held no love for the man. “If Jackson don’t wanna be found, ain’t no amount o’ lookin’ gonna do y’ any good. Y’ ain’t gonna find him.”

Merle inched around Walter where the sheriff stood at the end of the bed, and took a seat on the sofa, setting his bag down on the shelf next to the window. He wished the man would have come to him with his questions and left his little brother alone. “Daryl’s right … Jackson’s gonna make a run for it now he knows how bad ‘e fucked up.”

“Can either of you think of somewhere he might’ve gone? Friends who might shelter him?”

Daryl reached up to smooth the crease resting between Carol’s brows, his lips quirking up as he tried to get her to return his smile. “Hey … s’wrong? Y’ ok?”

Carol swirled her spoon idly in the container of soup, unable to put her worries aside. “I don’t like the thought of him out there, Daryl, just waiting to come after you again,” she answered, playing her part. There was no way Jackson would escape Merle’s wrath.

Walter frowned at the anxiety in her voice. “Which is why any information you could provide would be helpful, even if you think it’s trivial.”

Daryl sighed and threw his good arm behind his head, moving around a bit to get more comfortable. Or as comfortable as he could be after a severe beating, major surgery and the fact he was stuck in a hospital bed. “Jackson ain’t got friends. He’s got enablers, pushers, an’ people he works with. Worked … he told me he got fired yesterday. It’s th’ reason he came home when he wasn’t due back ‘til Monday or Tuesday.” He gave the sheriff a list of names he could try, but he knew it was useless. It took everything in him not to glance over at his brother. He couldn’t take the chance he’d give something away. “Check with them. Y’ can usually find them at the bar out on route six. Take backup though. Rough crowd, lots o’ drugs an’ shit. Not a safe place … ‘specially for a cop.”

Walter nodded. “Yeah, I know the place. I’ve been trying to get it shut down for years.” He turned to Merle, one brow raised. “Merle, can you think of anyone he’d go to for help?”

The elder Dixon brother shrugged. “Cain’t say as I do, Sheriff. It’s been a good ten years since I seen m’ daddy … ‘til yesterday when I got back.”

The sheriff tapped his little notepad against his opposite hand, trying to get a read on Merle. He might be suspicious of Merle having had a hand in Jackson’s disappearance, but he didn’t have any proof of foul play. “Thanks, boys. I appreciate your cooperation in this matter. I’m going to do everything I can to bring him in, so he can be prosecuted for his crimes.”

Carol whirled around, the delicate bones in her neck cracking as she turned her fiery gaze on Rick’s father. It wasn’t her friend’s parent staring back at her now, but rather the officer of the law who was determined to bring Jackson Dixon to justice. “And what good will that do, Sheriff Grimes? What will our justice system do to him? He’ll probably get a slap on the wrist. If he does go to trial and is found guilty, what would be the sentence? Ten years? Fifteen? Then he’ll be out there again just waiting to have his revenge on the boys.”

“Calm yer tits there, sugar. They gotta find ‘im first,” Merle said, his ice blue eyes warning her to watch what she said in front of the sheriff. “Then we’ll see what happens.” He stood up and shook Walter’s hand. “Keep us posted, Sheriff.”
Walter arched a brow, staring at the bandage covering Merle’s knuckles. “Hurt yourself, Dixon? Mind if I ask what happened?”

Daryl moved to sit up, wanting a better look, but Carol pressed a hand to his shoulder with a slight shake of her head. Merle shrugged. “Well, they was already sore from me punchin’ m’ daddy in th’ nose yesterday, but I was workin’ on m’ bike, and th’ wrench slipped. Cut ‘em open, but they’re not bad enough t’ warrant a trip t’ th’ emergency room.”

The sheriff met Merle’s gaze, studying him carefully, finally nodding his head as he let his hand go. “Best not let it get infected,” he said before turning to the two teenagers. “Y’all need anything, don’t hesitate to call the house or the station.”

“Thanks, Sheriff,” Daryl said, his expression still wary as he looked between his brother and the officer. “Tell Rick I’ll call him tomorrow.”

Merle dropped back down onto the sofa and huffed out a sigh the moment the door closed behind the man. He let his eyes come to rest upon Daryl, making him grin at the boy’s narrowed eyes and thin lips pressed into a line of disdain. “What?”

“You’re a cocky bastard, Merle,” Daryl growled. “Are y’ tryin’ t’ get arrested? I doubt you’d get th’ option t’ go back into th’ service if y’ was brought up on a murder charge!”

“I ain’t gonna get arrested, dammit!” his brother scoffed, a smirk curling his lips up on one side.

Daryl grumbled under his breath before finally asking, “What’s in th’ bag?”

Merle grinned, reaching behind him. “Me an’ th’ boys had Chinese fer dinner. Thought y’ might want some real food instead o’ th’ crap they’re servin’ up here.”

Carol yanked the bag from his hand. “Merle, Daddy and Everett have him on a soft diet for now. He cannot have Chinese takeout.” She ignored Daryl’s groan and moved off the bed to store the food in the mini fridge.

“C’mon, Carol Ann, that’s not fair,” the elder Dixon whined petulantly. “Y’ know it’s his favorite, an’ if y’ leave it t’ these yahoos up here, baby brother’s gonna starve. Can’t he at least have th’ soup?”

Daryl perked up, his brows disappearing beneath his shaggy bangs. “Soup? What kind? Y’ know I don’t like hot an’ sour.”

“Egg drop,” Merle answered, glaring at Carol for denying Daryl something he wanted. “Give ‘im th’ soup, woman!”

Daryl shot her a puppy-eyed look, his eyes wide and hopeful, and she groaned. “Do you even have room for something else after two large bowls of chicken noodle?” Of course, Francine had bought the large size. She knew from firsthand experience how much food Daryl could put away even when he was sick.

“Please, Angel,” he cajoled. “I’m still feelin’ a bit empty.”

“Why y’ askin’ her? Y’ pussy-whipped or somethin’? Gawd, I never thought I’d see th’ day a Dixon –“

“Shut th’ fuck up, Merle!” Daryl hissed, tossing a pillow at him.
“But seriously, c’mon! An’ I bet y’ ain’t even hittin’ it.”

“Goddamn it, Merle!”

“Stop picking on your brother,” she chided. Carol caved and popped the soup container into the microwave. She leaned back against the edge of the armoire and crossed her arms over her chest, one brow arched in Merle’s direction. He felt a little scared – though he wouldn’t admit it – to see the wicked grin turn up her lips. “Have you talked to Andrea since you’ve been home, Merle?”

_Fuck!_

“Yeah, Merle,” Daryl snickered. “How’s Blondie?”

Merle’s lip curled back in a sneer and he flipped them both the finger. “Fuck y’all both!”

Carol giggled as she pulled the soup from the microwave and tested the temperature before resuming her seat next to Daryl to spoon feed him. “Perhaps he just hasn’t been able to get in touch with her yet, baby. She hasn’t lived in Senoia in two and a half years, after all.”

Daryl blatantly ignored his brother, focusing on Carol’s teasing banter. “Yup … haven’t really seen her much since she moved. Ain’t she livin’ here in Peachtree?”

“That’s what Amy said,” Carol replied, ladling another bite between Daryl’s parted lips. “She’s working at her father’s law firm. Something about wanting to start her life instead of sitting back to see what would happen.”

Merle didn’t move, ears pricked as he listened, jealously hoarding every word. Andrea was tired of waiting for him. He’d known it would happen, suspected it when she’d stopped writing to him and refused to accept his calls. There was nothing he’d been able to do about it, stuck overseas as he’d been. Now there was no reason not to seek her out … except for his own pride. He was going to need a good attorney to help with the paperwork for the purchase of the garage. Perhaps it would give him a chance to talk to her …

He waited until Daryl finished his soup before seeking his brother’s attention. “Ain’t either one o’ y’all’s business what goes on with Blondie, y’ hear?”

Carol reached out to take his hand in hers, giving it an affectionate squeeze. “Don’t be like that, Merle. We just want you to be happy, and Andrea does make you happy when the two of you aren’t fighting. You’ve been in love with her for as long as I’ve known you. Don’t tell me you’re not going to try to see her now that you’re home for good.”

Daryl nodded in agreement. “Ain’t gonna hurt none t’ talk t’ her.”

Merle shifted uncomfortably in his seat, refusing to discuss the matter with them. “Jus’ because you two idiots finally admitted yer feelings for each other, don’t mean ever’thin’ is sunshine and rainbows fer th’ rest o’ us poor schmucks.”

Carol and Daryl shared a look, silently communicating with one another. Daryl cleared his throat and cocked his head to the side, observing Merle from beneath his lashes. “So … how’ve y’ been?” he asked, effectively changing the subject. “Kinda late for y’ t’ be hangin’ out with me at th’ hospital. Thought you’d be piled up on th’ sofa, havin’ a beer with Oscar an’ Caesar.”

His eyes were cold and hard as they met his little brother’s gaze. “Been kinda busy.”

Daryl tensed. “Oh, yeah? Would it happen t’ have anything t’ do with our mutual
Carol’s head bobbed as she tried to catch the double meaning behind those words, looking from one sibling to the other.

“Y’ could say that. Y’ could also say th’ fucker ain’t our problem anymore … nobody’s problem,” Merle murmured, venom lacing his tone.

Daryl laid his head back on his pillow and closed his eyes, a heavy sigh escaping his parted lips. “I jus’ … I jus’ wish it wouldn’t have had t’ be you,” he breathed, his chest heavy with pain for his brother.

Merle leaned forward, resting his forearms against his knees, his chin lowered towards his chest. “Couldn’t’ve been nobody else, baby brother. It’s m’ job t’ protect y’. Hopefully, what I did makes up for me not bein’ there for y’ like I shoulda been.”

Daryl reached out with his good arm and clasped his hand firmly around Merle’s. “Merle … man, ain’t your fault what he did. Y’ were young an’ stupid, ok? You’re lucky y’ had a choice between th’ army an’ jail. Y’ made mistakes, but you’ve spent th’ last ten years changin’ for th’ better. Y’ ain’t like him!” He winced as his side twinged, and he lowered his voice. “Y’ could never be like him.”

“You know he’s right, Merle. You’re a good man,” Carol insisted, brushing at the moisture which had collected in her eyes. “I’m proud to call you family.”

“Gawd! When th’ hell you jackasses got t’ be so damn mushy? Wantin’ t’ share feelin’s an’ shit!? Next thing y’ know, we’ll be on fuckin’ Dr. Phil!” he groused. “I gotta go. Shit’s getting’ too deep in here.”

Daryl snorted, rolling his eyes as a little giggle wormed its way out of Carol. “Get used t’ it,” Daryl said. “Mom an’ Carol believe in positive reinforcement.”

Merle leaned over and pressed his brow to Daryl’s, the closest either of them would probably ever get to embracing. “Shut up, y’ little fucker.” He pulled away and glanced between his brother and Carol. “I’m goin’ home … if y’all need anythin’, jus’ call. I mean it.”

He left them, winking at the nurses he passed on his way out. He had no doubt Daryl was in good hands. He hadn’t told them about Jackson’s confession, nor any of what Merle had done to attain it. Daryl had enough to plague his mind for years to come. He wouldn’t add to it. As he made his way out to his bike, he could rest assured his brother was safe, free from the torment Jackson Dixon had put him through. Daryl had a chance now, and so did Merle. It was time to put the past behind them and focus on the future … a future where the Dixon name would mean something.

*.*.*

Sunday morning dawned entirely too early. Daryl groaned as the bright, overhead light was turned on, blinding him. He pulled the blanket up over both his and Carol’s heads, not wanting that infernal vampire from the lab to disturb his girl. Carol simply snuffled where her nose was buried against the nape of his neck.
“Good morning, Mr. Dixon,” the woman said softly, wheeling her squeaky cart closer to the bed.

Daryl mumbled incoherently and stuck his left arm out from beneath the blanket. Maybe the bloodthirsty wench could manage his blood draw this morning with only one needle stick. Doubtful, but he could hope.

Tara sauntered into the room just as the needle pierced his skin. He could hear the soft tread of her sneakers on the cold linoleum. She carried with her another bag of IV antibiotics and one of saline, he noticed as he pulled the blanket away from his face to glare at her. “Mornin’,” she greeted in a chipper tone which set his teeth on edge.

“Would y’ keep it down,” he hissed. “If y’ wake up my girl, I ain’t gonna be responsible for what happens to y’.”

Tara huffed a short laugh. “Empty threats, Dixon.”

The nurse he’d gotten to know last night wasn’t all bad, but she was cheeky as all fuck. Before he could work himself up, he felt Carol’s slender fingers sneak beneath his hospital gown to caress the skin below his navel. “Shh,” she breathed, her breath warm on his nape. “Don’t take your bad mood out on your poor nurse.”

His tension eased, and he sank back against the pillow with a heavy sigh. “Tired of getting stuck an’ woke up before th’ buttcrack o’ dawn. An’ I don’t like them disturbin’ you either,” Daryl grumbled.

Tara pulled the blanket back further, so she was able to check the IV in Daryl’s hand, causing Carol to wince over the excessively bright light. “Come on, now. Today is going to be a good day,” Tara said cheerfully, smiling down at him. “Can you rate your pain for me?”

“I’m good,” Daryl replied, though the small grimace briefly twisting his mouth didn’t go unnoticed by either woman.

“Try again, Dixon.”

“Daryl,” Carol murmured, a cajoling note in her voice. “Be honest with her.”

Daryl sighed, looking from his girl back to his nurse. “About a seven, I guess.”

Tara hung the new bags of medicine and fluids before taking his vitals. “You haven’t called the nurses station requesting pain meds in over eight hours, and you’re allowed a new dose every three.” She pulled the stethoscope from her ears and smiled. “You must have a high tolerance for pain.”

Carol smiled at the nurse. “He’s always been tough … and stubborn.”

Daryl yawned and rubbed his nose as Tara pushed the medicine through his IV line. “Time is it?”

“Just after four. This should help you sleep a few more hours until your day nurse comes in at seven. Doctor Mason and Doctor Nolan should be starting rounds about the time they start breakfast, and I’m sure they’ll be able to answer any questions or concerns you might have.”

“Yeah … like when the hell I can get outta here.”
Tara chuckled, meeting Carol’s gaze. “You’ve got your hands full with this one, don’t you?”

Daryl’s eyes were already drooping, so Carol made sure to keep her voice low. “Yeah, but he’s worth it.”

“There anything you need?” Tara asked, gathering her things as she got ready to continue her rounds. Carol simply shook her head. Tara patted her leg as she passed. “Just press the call button if you change your mind.”

Daryl reached beneath the blanket and blindly searched for her hand where it rested on his right hip. He pulled it to settle low on his stomach, seeking more of the caress she’d offered him earlier to soothe him. “I wanna go home, Car. I wanna be in our bed,” he mumbled sleepily.

Carol snuggled closer, trailing her fingers through the smattering of hair above the waistband of his sleeping pants. “I know … I do too, but you have to heal. Daddy won’t keep you here longer than necessary.” She giggled and dropped a tender kiss just below his ear. “Then you’ll just have to deal with Mom and her Florence Nightingale routine. You’re gonna love that.”

“I miss Mom,” he said around another yawn. “An’ it ain’t like she hasn’t played th’ part of my nurse before.”

Carol closed her eyes. “Sleep, baby … while you can. Sleep and heal.”

* * *

“Th’ fuck?!” Daryl breathed as he stared in horror at his nurse and the little orderly standing behind her. “Oh, hell no!”

Hadin’t he been through enough already? It wasn’t even lunchtime yet. He’d had to somehow stomach a bowl of runny oatmeal, suffer through Everett’s poking and prodding, and a short walk down the hallway outside his room flanked by two male nurses which had left him weak and shaky. That had been a mental kick in the ass. It seemed as if every step he’d taken had sent a jarring stab of pain through his side, each one more agonizing than the one before. Surely, he’d been hurt worse in the past, Jackson’s fists never easy to elude, but he couldn’t seem to shake it off as he had in the past. William had tried to explain it was because Daryl’d had an organ removed … which was apparently not a good thing.

Daryl was really trying his damnedest to cooperate and be a decent patient, but all he wanted was to go home. Francine had been by that morning to coddle him a little before going off to check on things at the bakery. Hershel and Maggie had visited after early morning church services, the old vet assuring Daryl he would still have a job when he’d healed enough to return to work … which had brought him untold relief. He did hate leaving Hershel in a bind, but Shawn had rearranged his schedule to accommodate Daryl’s absence, at least for the next several weeks.

Doctor Nolan proclaimed Daryl to be on the mend already, lowering the dosage of antibiotics, but leaving his pain medications the same for a few more days when he’d reassess his needs. Daryl had to admit the strong narcotic helped him sleep and greatly minimized the pain in his battle-worn body, but he still hated them, afraid of addiction and becoming like his father. If he could go home, they’d have to do away with the IV push and give him an oral. Then it would be his decision as to whether or not he would take it.
And now this … Seriously?

The nurse – tiny little termagant that she was, named Coco – arched one raven’s wing brow in his direction as she pursed her lips. “I don’t see how you could object to a sponge bath, Mr. Dixon. God only knows what sort of vile things you tracked in here with you, but you do realize you’ve been through surgery where bacteria can spread despite precautionary measures. Not to mention, you’ve been sweating from the exertion and pain, and quite frankly … you smell. I really don’t see how this sweet girl of yours can stand to be near you.”

Daryl glanced down at his bandaged arm, cursing the fact he couldn’t stubbornly cross his arms over his chest and give the woman his best death glare. “I ain’t lettin’ none o’ y’all see me naked. Hell, no!”

“I assure you it won’t take long, and then your bed can be changed with nice clean sheets. You’ll rest much better,” Nurse Coco insisted, going on as if he hadn’t spoken. “And believe me, dearie, you have nothing I haven’t seen before.”

“I doubt that very much,” Carol said quietly. The nurse frowned, but she was determined to follow through with her job. However, Carol wasn’t about to allow anyone to touch Daryl and send him off into a full-scale panic attack. One look into his panicked, pleading blues and her resolve doubled. “Don’t think we don’t appreciate your help, ma’am, but I’m sure Daryl would much prefer I help him.”

“Miss Mason –“

Carol waved a dismissive hand. “It will be fine. I’m sure you can lend a hand helping Daryl into the bathroom, and I can take it from there.”

“As you wish, dear;” Coco finally acceded. Sometimes, it was just easier to give in to the patient’s family than argue, and she could see this was one of those instances. But she had to admit, Doctor Mason’s daughter was rather clever. Before she lifted a finger to help Daryl out of the bed, she sent an orderly down to the cafeteria to fetch her some saran wrap, and a nurse to bring her a roll of surgical tape.

By the time they had Daryl settled on a chair in the huge shower, his arm unwrapped of the compression gauze, Carol’s helpers had returned. The nurse watched avidly as Carol fitted a double-layered square of the plastic wrap over Daryl’s bandages covering his incision site and taped it in place, preventing it from getting wet. Carol shrugged, averting her gaze from the nurse’s scrutiny. “I’ve had to do this before,” she offered.

Daryl slumped back in the chair, happy he’d be able to have a full shower instead of a simple sponge bath. Now, at least, he’d be able to get the last of the blood out of his hair. He sat still as Coco took away the bandages and left him alone with Carol. “Y’ think I’m a big pain in th’ ass baby, don’t’cha?”

“No,” Carol replied softly, reaching out to turn on the water and adjust the temperature. “No one likes to be in the hospital, but I can imagine it’s a little worse for you.” Her fingers curled beneath his chin, lifting his head to meet her eyes. “I won’t let them touch you more than necessary, Daryl. I promise.”

He leaned forward, pressing his face against her soft belly and closing his eyes. “Y’ always make everythin’ better, Angel … always.”

She sighed. “You do realize I get to see you naked now, right?” she giggled.
He raised the hem of her shirt, so he would be pressed directly to her skin. “Y’ could get naked with me,” he suggested, dropping a hot open-mouthed kiss below her bellybutton. “We could shower together.”

Carol smiled indulgently. “As much as I would love to shower with you, Daryl, I just don’t think it would be a good idea to get naked with you right now. You’re in enough pain already. Do you really want to have to deal with a raging hard on too … if you could even get it up in your condition?”

“That’s a low fuckin’ blow, Carol Ann,” he growled as she took the shower wand in hand and wet his hair. He moaned as the hot water seared his scalp and rushed over his back. He couldn’t ever remember a shower feeling so damn good before.

“Feel good, baby? I’m going to try to hurry so you won’t have to sit for too long. I know you’re in pain,” Carol assured him, squeezing a generous amount of shampoo into her hand before working it into his shaggy locks.

“Take your time,” he sighed, his face still pressed to her belly. Daryl fingered the edge of her top, now drenched from the spray. “You’re gettin’ all wet.”

_In more ways than one, love._ “Don’t worry about me. I brought a change of clothes in here, so I could have a shower after I was done with you.”

The hard spray of the shower, her soothing touch, and the soft scrape of the washcloth over his skin worked well to ease the tension from his body. Even having to hold his arm in place over his chest, while she worked, didn’t detract from his enjoyment. “Mmm, can I watch?”

“Daryl!”

He snorted, the sound catching in his throat as her nimble fingers wandered lower. His shaky legs protested as he rose to his feet, giving her better access to his lower half, but it was worth it to have her hands on him. His brow pressed against hers as her hand splayed over his taut ass, and he groaned. “Y’ don’t know what you’re doin’ t’ me, Angel,” he whispered. He glanced down at his cock and grinned despite the blush rising up his neck all the way to the tips of his ears. “Guess y’ were wrong about that, huh?”

Carol brought her soapy hand around and trailed her fingers over his erection. “Jesus!” she groaned, her eyes widening. “How’s it ever … “ Her words trailed away – at a loss as to how she could finish that statement without wishing the floor to open up and swallow her whole – and she blushed so deeply, it rivaled his own.

Daryl’s head dropped to her shoulder as her fingers tightened, giving him a gentle squeeze. His side was throbbing, and his arm felt as if there were thousands of tiny knives piercing his skin, but damnit all to hell if he’d ask her to stop. His hand covered hers, exerting just the right pressure before he showed her how to move. “This a’right?”

“Daryl …”

Carol trembled against him, the desire to please him warring with her need to finish up his shower and see him back to his bed. His good hand gripped hers, his face nestled in her neck, prickles of wanton heat spreading through her. This was so wrong, she lamented silently. If her father found out – please dear CHRIST don’t let her daddy find out – he wouldn’t trust her to take care of Daryl when he was released from the hospital. Daryl was hurt; he needed her. She should NOT be molesting him in the shower!
A firm knock on the door, however; took the choice out of her hands. Daryl jerked back, his eyes wide with panic, and Carol forgot everything else as she reached out to steady him.

“Is everything all right in there, Miss Mason? Do you need any help?” the nurse called, her voice carrying beyond the barrier.

“E-Everything’s fine. I’m just rinsing him now,” Carol replied, her voice unsteady.

“Just call out if you need a hand.”

Carol snorted out a laugh, unable to help herself. Between the woman’s innocuous offer and Daryl’s horrified expression, it was unavoidable. She was still laughing as she cut the water and briskly rubbed a towel over his head to dry his hair.

“I ain’t sorry, y’know,” he said lowly as she helped him into a clean pair of boxer briefs and his sleeping pants. There was no point in putting a hospital gown on him when his bandage would have to be checked and the compression wrap put back in place. “That … uhm … that y’ touched me. You’re it for me, Angel. My body, m’ heart, hell … my very soul; all of it’s yours.”

Carol wanted so badly to hug him after such a declaration, but she didn’t want to wet his clean clothes. Instead, she cradled his face in her hands, - leaning over to meet him where he sat upon the closed toilet lid – and kissed him softly. “I’ve been yours for over a decade, Daryl Dixon, and I always will be.”

Chapter End Notes

A/n: So, I’m back to working on my WIPs! Well, at least this one. HTPHTL is just being difficult and contrary AF, but I’m going to try to do it next. I really wish I could lock myself in my office/room until January 1st, but that doesn’t seem likely. I hope all of you enjoyed the chapter! Thank you to all my readers who sent messages asking for more of this story, and a huge shoutout to my darling betas: Geektaire and BettyBubble. Love you all and happy reading!
Daryl eased himself from his hospital bed, inwardly cursing a blue streak, and tucked the blanket around Carol’s shoulder, relieved he hadn’t woken her. He just couldn’t lie abed any longer. His ass was asleep, pins and needles stabbing at him now he’d gained an upright position. He wasn’t used to being inactive, especially for such a long period of time. Being sick with a cold or the flu was bad enough, but this was ten times worse. He took an unsteady step, using the footrest of the bed to help maintain his balance. If he held onto something with his good arm, he should be able to at least manage the short walk down to the nurse’s station and back … hopefully, before Carol woke.

He’d convinced Tara earlier to only give him a half dose of his pain meds, and his head was somewhat clearer than it had been for the past two days. He needed to be focused when they put Carol’s plan into play to ‘attend’ school. Daryl smiled, once again marveling over the cleverness of his girl. He froze halfway between the nurse’s station and the door to his room, lifting his gaze to meet William’s stern countenance. Busted!

“Is there a reason you’re out of bed, son?” his father asked as he walked down the hall to meet him.

Daryl grinned sheepishly and shrugged as William’s supporting arm slipped around his waist. “I cain’t stand t’ be in th’ bed all th’ time, Dad. An’ I was kinda thirsty,” he admitted.

“You have a call button, Daryl. If you need something, the nurses will get it for you. And do I need to remind you of your recent surgery? You need to allow yourself time to heal,” William admonished gently, leading him towards the hive of activity in the center of the hall. “You’re very lucky it was I who caught you instead of your mother.”

The boy chuffed a laugh. “Nah … Mom’s not supposed t’ be here ‘til breakfast. She’s bringing m’ favorite cinnamon roll oatmeal.”

William shook his head, all too familiar with Francine’s penchant for spoiling the children with their favorite foods. He slipped behind the desk, nodding to the nurses, and dug through the refrigerator where the juice and cold snacks were kept. He pulled one box of each … pineapple, orange, cranberry and grape … which should tide Daryl over until breakfast where he could have a cup of coffee and some chocolate milk. His boy grinned and shoved them into the pockets of his robe. William resumed his position of support at Daryl’s side to walk him back to his room, taking note of the frown now marring his brow.

“Something on your mind, son? You know you can ask me anything … so long as it’s not a request to go home. You need to stay at least a few more days. I want to make sure there are no complications.”

Daryl heaved out a great sigh of frustration, thankful he’d always been able to talk to Carol’s dad. “I was … uhm … wondering if maybe you’d look over the papers I found in my mama’s hope chest with th’ attorney. The life insurance policy?” he asked. “Thing is … I don’t know when I’ma be able t’ meet with him – stuck in here as I am – an’ Carol says you’re friends with Mr. Harrison,
an’ could maybe get th’ ball rollin’ for when I’m released.”

William smiled at his son, pleased Daryl trusted him enough to handle this for him. “I suppose I could see if Donald was free for lunch.”

Daryl winced, feeling some of his earlier strength flagging. He leaned a little heavier into William’s side, but he didn’t flinch away from his touch. The level of love and trust he held for the man wouldn’t allow for it. “Thanks, Dad. There’s jus’ so much I wanna do with that money … helping Merle out with th’ garage – if he’ll let me – putting some away for college, an’ I wanna do somethin’ special for my girl.”

Hearing a small shriek coming from Daryl’s room, William chuckled. “Speaking of your girl, I think she just woke up and noticed you’d gone.”

“Aww, hell,” Daryl groaned.

Carol came barreling out of the room at a brisk trot only to come up short upon seeing Daryl with her father. “Daryl! I woke up and you weren’t there! Why are you out here? Daddy, what’s going on?!”

“Sweetheart, calm down,” William soothed, reaching out to draw his daughter against his left side. “Daryl just wanted to stretch his legs a bit.”

Daryl ducked his head when he saw the worry in her gaze, peering up at her through his fringe of bangs. “Sorry, Angel. Didn’t mean t’ worry y’ none.”

Carol slipped between her father and Daryl and helped to guide him back to his room. “I suppose you thought you’d be back before I woke up, hm? It’s alright,” she murmured at his slight nod. “I just panicked a little to find you gone. I guess I’ll have to keep a closer eye on you.” A very close eye, she thought, mustering a smile for him. She wondered if she would always feel anxiety when he was away from her side after the events of the past weekend. She’d come too close to losing him.

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“How’re y’ feelin’? What’d Doc Nolan have t’ say this mornin’?” Merle asked, the phone balanced in the crook of his shoulder as he rummaged through his closet, a frown of consternation marring his still smooth brow. Daryl had done a great job of setting up Merle’s room at the cabin, but where the hell had all those clothes come from lining the racks and shelves? Judging from the fine quality of fabrics, he suspected the Mason women had had a hand in it.

“I’m a’right, I guess,” Daryl mumbled around a mouthful of oatmeal. “Doc said everythin’s lookin’ good so far, but he wants t’ keep me a couple more days jus’ t’ be sure. Might get t’ come home Wednesday.” He paused long enough for Carol to spoon another bite past his lips. “What y’ doin’ today? Y’ comin’ by here?”

Merle eyed a pair of black slacks to go with the maroon button up he held by the hanger. “Gotta meet with Jim in ‘bout an hour or so, an’ I’m meetin’ Donald Harrison at eleven. I should be able t’ swing by there t’ visit with y’ between appointments.”

“Still cain’t believe it’s finally happenin’ for y’,” Daryl said, and Merle could hear the note of
happiness in his brother’s voice. “Y’ deserve it, Merle.”

No one deserved happiness more than his baby brother, but Merle wasn’t going to argue the point with him over the phone. “’S there anythin’ y’ need ol’ Merle t’ bring y’? Clothes, snacks, books for yer nerdy ass?”

Daryl snorted. “Nah, I’m good. Mom’s been bringin’ me stuff I need. Jus’ wanted t’ check in with y’ before me an’ Carol had t’ start class.” He’d already filled his brother in on Carol’s plans to attend class ‘electronically’.

“A’right, boy, y’ let me know if y’ need anythin’ an’ I’ll see y’ later this mornin’.”

“Merle?” Daryl asked quickly before his brother could disconnect the call. “Y’ gonna try t’ see Andrea after your meetin’ with her father?”

The eldest Dixon flushed hotly as he heard the teasing note in Daryl’s voice and the throaty chuckle Carol let out in the background. “Bye, asshole!”

Merle rolled his eyes and tossed his phone on the bed. It was a crappy flip phone, one he planned to replace after his meeting with Jim. There were several things he wanted to look into now that he was back for good. He quickly dressed, pulling on a black leather vest over his dress shirt. He stared pensively at his reflection, hardly recognizing himself in such nice clothes after spending so many years wearing his military uniform. They were necessary, however. He wanted to make a good impression.

So much was riding on his purchase of the garage and making it successful. He could understand Jim wanting to sell, wanting to retire. The man had barely been making a go of his business since the other garage had opened in town, and wanted to cut his losses, but Merle had a plan to bring it back, offering mechanic services, but also building and repairing motorcycles. It was a passion of his, had been since he’d been a teenager, and he was hoping to make a name for himself. He needed to put all his focus into the venture, but he couldn’t help but let his mind wander to Andrea Harrison.

He reached for the faded leather wallet on his dresser and withdrew a worn photo from its recesses. It was of his girl, his Andrea, the date written on the back nearly obliterated due to the times he’d taken it out to gaze at her likeness over the last three years. On his last leave home due to medical issues, they’d gone to the fair a few counties over. This picture was one of five they’d taken in a cheap photo booth, but the only one he’d kept. He wondered if she still had the other four. This one was special, his girl in profile as she stared up at him, their eyes locked. There was such a look of love, pure and abiding, which still took his breath away.

Merle Dixon was not a man who had ever felt comfortable with ‘feelings’, but even he couldn’t deny he loved Andrea to the very core of his being. He hadn’t had the best role model for relationships from his parents, but he’d witnessed the love Carol’s parents held for one another, and he longed for it himself. Not that he would admit it. It had broken his heart when he’d had to resume what was left of his tour, leaving her behind again to serve his country. And this time, she hadn’t wanted to wait, afraid their luck would run out and he wouldn’t return to her at all. The letters, emails and rare calls had stopped completely, leaving him bereft without her love and support. He hadn’t even tried to move on, unable to banish her from his heart and mind.

Now that he was back for good, he wanted nothing more than to claim her once again, to start the life he’d promised her when they were still in high school. But would she want to take a chance on him again? Did she still love him? The questions swirled in his mind, causing him to break out in a cold sweat fueled by doubt and the belief that she could do so much better. How
could he expect her to love a murderer? The men he’d killed on the front lines were bad enough, but surely, she would turn away from him in fear and disgust if she found out he’d murdered his own father. And he knew he wouldn’t be able to start a life with her with secrets between them.

He slipped his wallet into his back pocket and reached for the keys to Daryl’s truck. Being at her father’s law firm where she was partnered was the perfect opportunity to slip beneath her radar and see her. She’d have no choice but to face him there at her workplace, unable to leave. What would it hurt to say hello? He scowled at his reflection once more before heading for the front door … only m’ heart.

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Merle shook Donald Harrison’s hand as he rose from his seat across the desk from the attorney. He was the proud new owner of ‘Dixon Brothers Auto Mechanics and Bike Shop’. Or at least he would be when the paperwork had been finalized and he could take possession of the premises the following Monday. Jim had made one of his sons available to show Caesar and Oscar around while he’d gone over the sale stipulations with Merle to the satisfaction of both men. His friends had stayed to acquaint themselves with the new place and go over some of the plans the three of them had made.

The new owner had made a run to the bank for the cashier’s check he’d be handing over to Donald Harrison when he began the paperwork. He’d been pleased as punch - or as happy as Merle could ever remember feeling - as he’d made his way to the hospital to visit with his brother. Daryl had been excited to see Merle’s dreams finally become a reality. He’d left there with time to spare before his next appointment.

Now with everything squared away, he found himself standing outside Andrea’s office, her secretary staring at him with her wide-eyed gaze. “Mr. Dixon, how can I help you today?”

Merle shot her a charming smile, fiddling with the pair of sunglasses he held in his hand. “I, uhm … I’d like t’ see Ms. Harrison, if she’s not too busy.” His heart was pounding a fierce tempo against his ribs, but he knew he’d never be able to live with himself if he didn’t at least try to see her again. Not to mention, he’d never hear the end of it from Daryl and Carol. Meddlesome little brats!

The little brunette checked over Andrea’s appointment calendar briefly and nodded. “She stepped out for a few moments, but if you wouldn’t mind waiting, she has some time before her next appointment.”

“Thank you kindly, darlin’, ” he said, his smile widening despite his nerves.

She showed him into Andrea’s office and brought in a fresh pot of coffee, arranging it on the low table in a small sitting area and pouring him a cup before exiting. Merle sat down with the delicate china cup – holding it tentatively as if he were afraid to break it - only to hop right back up, unable to sit still as he waited. He gazed around the room with it’s light colored wood furniture, simple, comfortable pieces spread out and accentuated by the blue and cream décor. It was inviting, a setting to put her clients at ease, he was sure. He tried to focus on anything other than the swirling memories battering against his skull. It wasn’t any easier now than it had been for the past three years. His Blondie was never far from his thoughts. High school sweethearts, they’d been, puppy love growing into something stronger, more abiding and true, the heartbreak they’d suffered when he’d been forced to join the military and the hope of being reunited to begin a life together. Did she
still love him? Did she still want to pursue their dreams?

Merle barely heard the door to the office open, but he couldn’t mistake the small gasp which fell from her lips as she stood there, her gaze transfixed upon him. He was no better, frozen in place, his eyes raking her from top to toe. He should be angry with her because of the way she’d heartlessly cut herself out of his life, but he couldn’t. He could see the tears welling in her eyes, the way her hand lifted to press tightly against her lips, and the small shiver which tripped through her body, and all he wanted was to take her in his arms.

“M-Merle? You’re … you’re really here?” she asked, her voice barely more than a whisper as she doubted her vision. It wouldn’t have been the first time she’d dreamed him up to stave off the loneliness she felt with his absence. God, how she’d missed him. It had been one of the hardest things she’d ever done, cutting him out of her life, but she’d done what she’d thought was best at the time.

“Hey, Blondie.” His smile was tenuous, still afraid she would reject him, but despite the niggling voice of his father in the back of his mind, he couldn’t bring himself to listen to it. No … his girl needed honesty from him, the same honesty written for the entire world to see across his worn features. “I’m here … for good.”

Those words seemed to break Andrea out of her stupor. She pushed herself off the closed office door and propelled herself across the room, launching herself into his open arms and weeping softly against his neck.

Merle wanted to hope her reaction was because she’d missed him, because she loved him still, but it could just as easily be that he’d taken her by surprise. In his experience, there was no way for a man to correctly interpret a woman’s tears. He smoothed a calloused hand over her platinum curls and pressed a kiss to her temple. “Yeah, I’m here. That a good thing?” he asked shakily as his other arm tightened around her waist, refusing to let her go.

She smacked his shoulder and smiled up at him through her tears. “Of course, it’s a good thing. What the hell is wrong with you?!” she scolded before nestling her head back into its previous position. “I haven’t heard news of you in so long, I feared you might be dead.”

Merle chuffed a laugh, reveling in the feel of her warm familiar body pressed so tightly to his. “Y’ know only a Dixon can kill a Dixon, woman.” He tilted her chin up to meet his gaze. “Wasn’t sure if you’d wanna see me. Th’ way we left things …”

Andrea heaved a heavy sigh and pulled away, tugging on his hand as she led him to the sofa. Her hands shook as she poured them each a cup of coffee, taking a sip as she tried to regain her composure. “I did what I thought was best,” she said in her own defense. “It was selfish and stupid, but I couldn’t sit there waiting for the day a uniform would show up at my door to tell me you’d been killed, Merle. I had to try to move on.”

His jaw clenched at the thought of her with another man. It wasn’t as if he hadn’t tried to be with another woman in the time he’d been away, but the idea of touching anyone but her had left him cold and empty. He hadn’t wanted to believe his mama when she’d told him Dixon men mated for life, thinking she just wanted to romanticize the budding relationship between him and Andrea when they’d first started seeing each other. It wasn’t until later he’d realized she was right. As far back as his line went, he couldn’t remember hearing of a divorce in his family tree. He wasn’t sure about a Dixon woman, offspring tending to be predominantly male.

“An’ did y’ … move on? Y’ married now?”
Her lower lip quivered as she set her cup down and peered up at him from beneath her lashes. “I … no, I couldn’t. I tried about a year after you had to return to Afghanistan … went on a few dates, but … Damnit, they weren’t you, Dixon. I guess there was still some part of me hoping you would come home one day … that you’d come home to me.” She buried her face in her hands, angry at herself for sounding so needy. “I’m so pathetic,” she mumbled. She was strong, independent, and successful. She’d worked hard to find herself and build a life of which she could be proud. Yet the moment she’d walked through that door to see Merle Dixon waiting for her, none of that mattered. She was still that same girl she’d been, desperately in love and yearning to be with him once more.

His icy blue eyes were intense as he stared at her, his heart fluttering madly at her admission. His life had been a mess once upon a time, and though he’d turned it around and become a man he could be proud of, he’d never thought he truly deserved happiness. To have it all tossed in his lap … it was overwhelming.

Merle scooped her up in his arms and deposited her onto his lap, securing her in his embrace as he claimed her lips with his. She didn’t hesitate to wrap her arms around his broad shoulders, clinging to him as she gave as good as she got. Having her there, secure and warm in his arms … he felt as if he’d finally, truly, come home. When she was sufficiently breathless, he leaned back barely an inch to smile. “I’ll always come home t’ y’, Blondie. Even after y’ stomped on m’ heart that last time, all I wanted was you.” He placed another kiss to the corner of her mouth and trailed his lips over the smooth line of her delicate jaw. “I bought th’ garage … got yer daddy workin’ on finalizin’ th’ papers for me. Th’ life we always talked about … a house, kids, hell, even a dog if y’ want; it can be ours.”

“Merle Dixon … are you proposing?” she asked, stunned as she cradled his face in her hands and yanked his head up, so she could stare wide-eyed at his grinning countenance.

“Not yet,” he quipped. “Ain’t gotta ring.”

“Merle!” He laughed so hard his shoulders shook and she was sure he could be heard out in the lobby. “Merle, I’m serious.”

“Don’t get yer knickers in a knot there, darlin’.” The smile slipped from his lips as his hand rose to cup her cheek, his thumb brushing lightly over her full lower lip. “Yeah … yeah, I’m serious. All I ever wanted was t’ be with y’. I wanted Daryl t’ be happy, a business of m’ own, an’ you at m’ side.” He gazed at her intently, silently willing her to accept him. “So, what say you, Blondie … y’ wanna let me back in, give us another go?”

“I do, but –“

“Jus’ so y’ know, I ain’t lettin’ y’ go again,” he cut her off.

Andrea shook her head. “I don’t want you to, but, Merle … there’s something you need to know before –“

Whatever she’d been about to say was lost in the noise and distraction of her sister barging into the office. “I swear by all that is holy … that woman was sent from the seventh circle of hell to make my life miserable!” she expounded, running a hand through her long blonde hair as she balanced her niece on her hip and dropped the small backpack on a chair. “You’ve got to find a better daycare, Andrea. Oh … uhm … hi, Merle! When did you get back to town?”

Andrea hurriedly climbed off Merle’s lap to take her daughter from Amy, cooing gently to her before addressing her sister. “What happened this time?”
“That evil hag! She called me when she couldn’t get in touch with you and told me I needed to pick Em up because that Gaudet boy bit her!” Amy lifted the toddler’s bandaged arm and thrust it into Andrea’s face to prove her point. Then she had the nerve to make it out to be Em’s fault! I’m telling you, Andrea, something has to be done! Brandy said she’d cover the rest of my shift at the bakery so I could take my niece to the doctor. He said to use Neosporin and keep it clean.”

Andrea groaned. Amy had no idea of the shit storm she was raining down on the occupants of the room. She hadn’t even dared glance at Merle since the two had arrived. Her daughter tucked her chin beneath Andrea’s chin and had no qualms about staring at the strange man sitting on her mama’s sofa.

Merle felt as if the world had come crashing to a violent halt as he gazed at the little girl. Her blonde hair wasn’t as light as her mother’s, but darker, more like Daryl’s had been at that age. But there was no denying she was a Dixon, not with that tiny beauty mark at the corner of her mouth and the same eyes he saw in the mirror every morning. She was his. Andrea had given him a daughter and hadn’t even bothered to contact him. The little girl couldn’t be more than three years old, yet the calculating gleam in her eye was reminiscent of his own. Fuckin’ hell!

“It’s fine, Amy. I’ll call her and sort it all out, jus’ take her for a minute.”

But the child was having none of it, her arms reaching out to the man who’d unconsciously drifted closer. Andrea couldn’t put it off any longer, and raised her gaze to meet Merle’s, but he only had eyes for their daughter.

“That is so weird,” Amy muttered, her brows disappearing near her hairline. “Emmarie doesn’t like strangers … any strangers.”

Merle’s hands trembled as he reached for his child, bringing her in close to his chest as she smiled up at him. “Hi there, little darlin’,” he greeted her, his voice no more than a ragged whisper, the wealth of emotion lodged in his throat holding articulate sound captive.

“Hi, Daddy.”

Chapter End Notes

A/n: Surprise! I finally updated. I’m so sorry for the wait, but my schedule (writing, editing for my group of darling caryl girls), real life … sometimes, I find it hard to balance everything. I was swamped with reviews on this story from the lovely Carol uebs (thank you so much, darling!! *hugs*), and they inspired me to get an update out to y’all. I really hope you enjoyed it! Great big buckets of love to my betas BettyBubble and Geektaire! If you haven’t read ‘Don’t Kiss’ by BettyBubble or ‘The MacDixon Series’ by Geektaire (A03) then y’all are missing out. They’re fabulous!
“You're my daddy, right?” the little one asked, big blue eyes wide and inquisitive, and Merle sought Andrea with his gaze, a mixture of fear and trepidation lurking in his stare. Andrea stood stiffly, hand over her mouth to stifle a sob, a lone tear trailing over her ashen face, simply nodding, confirming what he already knew in his heart.

He ducked his head, so he could catch his little daughter’s gaze. “Yeah, sweetheart, that’s me,” he replied in a quivering whisper. Emmarie looked at him with curiosity and hesitated only briefly before she sloppily kissed his grizzled cheek, and Merle could feel the beginning sting of tears prick his lids. He blinked rapidly as she grinned at him and plucked at his collar. “An’ jus’ how d’you know I’m yer daddy, munchkin?” he asked, his voice raspy with emotion.

“'Cause Mommy told me,” she said simply as if that statement explained it all. He supposed to a three-year-old, her mother’s word was law. She pointed to the desk, tugging on his collar until he brought her around the massive oak structure. There on the polished surface were two picture frames. One held a picture of Emmarie, the other contained the remaining four pictures from the photo booth he and Andrea had taken together at the fair. “See? Mommy told me all about you. Your name is Merle and you’re a soldier who has to be away to protect our county, and –“

“Country, sweet pea,” Andrea corrected, a shaky smile on her lips.

His daughter smacked her forehead with her little hand. “That’s right. She told me one day my daddy would be finished fighting and come home to us. And now you’re finally here,” she breathed with all the awe she could muster. “Mommy said when you got home I could finally get to meet my uncle Daryl too – Mommy says I look like him - but not my grandpa because he’s not nice and I wouldn’t like him.”

Merle cut his eyes towards his woman, surprised at just how much Andrea had shared with their daughter. “S’that right?”

Her blonde curls bounced as she nodded sagely. “Are you really back now, Daddy? You don’t have to fight no more and can be with me and Mommy?”

He shook his head and had to clear his throat before he could answer. “No, baby girl, I don’t have to fight no more. Em … Emma …”

“Emmarie,” she provided with a giggle. “My name is Emma Marie Harrison, but my auntie Amy shortened it because she thought it fit me better. Mommy named me after my grandmas.” She suddenly looked unsure. “D-D’you like it?”

“Yeah … I really do, darlin’. It’s perfect.” His eyes caught Andrea’s as his daughter nestled her head into the crook of his neck and yawned. “We need t’ talk, Andrea … now.”

She swallowed audibly and looked to her sister. “Amy, could you take her to get a snack in the lobby, please.”

It didn’t take a genius to feel the heated tension in the air, Merle’s anger a tangible thing.
Amy shrugged her brows and moved forward to take her niece, worried for her sister and how she was going to get out of this one. Emmarie, however, proved difficult, her little hands fisted in Merle’s collar as Amy tried to take her from her father.

“NO! I wanna stay with Daddy!” she wailed. Merle was afraid he was about to witness a tantrum worthy of the name Dixon.

He smoothed a hand down her back and tightened the arm he had around her. “Shh, s’a’right, little darlin’. I ain’t goin’ nowhere. I’ll be right here talkin’ t’ yer mama when y’ get back.”

Emmarie sniffled and leaned back, looking at him with those wide teary blue eyes and he swore he would have promised her the world. “You promise?”

Merle made an ‘x’ across his chest. “Cross m’ heart.” His eyes slammed closed as she hugged him around his neck as tightly as possible, his heart wrenching with love for his little girl at her unquestioning acceptance of him.

Andrea winced at the soft click of the latch as the door closed behind Amy and Emmarie. She took a deep breath, trying to calm a little before she looked up into what she knew would be her love’s steely-eyed gaze. She peeked up at him from beneath her lashes. She’d been right. His eyes were as hard as his clenched jaw, but his furious hiss when it came was soft as a whisper.

“Did y’ know?” he seethed, stalking closer, his boots making not a sound on the carpet. “Did y’ know y’ were pregnant before I left?”

“No,” she replied, her voice catching on the single syllable. “Merle –“

“Y’ cut me outta yer life an’ then had m’ baby … alone. Not once did y’ try t’ contact me.” His chest rose and fell rapidly with every heaving breath as he tried to keep his voice down, not wanting their daughter to hear their voices raised in anger. “She’s mine, Andrea … Mine! How could y’ keep somethin’ like this t’ yerself? How? Better yet, how’d y’ keep it from Daryl? Y’ was livin’ in th’ same goddamned town! Amy works for Francine!”

Andrea raised a trembling hand up to cover her brow, pinching her temples as she quickly gathered her thoughts. “Are you prepared to listen, or would you rather yell at me?” She was more than familiar with Merle Dixon’s temper. He was a blustering asshole when he was in a rage, but he’d never lifted a hand to her. He was nothing like his vile father, and she knew it. As hot-tempered as he could be, she had no reason to fear him.

Merle dropped down into a chair positioned in front of her desk and buried his face in his hands, scrubbing them back and forth before he leaned back and gave her his full attention. “G’on an’ tell me. Ain’t nothin’ could surprise me more right now.”

She poured him a glass of iced water from the pitcher on her desk and then sat down in the chair next to him. “I never meant to hurt you, Merle. Letting you go was the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do.”

He sighed and took a sip from his glass. “Y’ were tryin’ t’ protect yerself. I know that, Blondie. Y’ thought y’ was gonna lose me t’ a bullet or worse … I get it. I still had every intention of comin’ back for y’. It don’t explain why y’ didn’t tell me about my kid.”

Andrea rubbed her palms up and down her thighs and huffed a bitter laugh. “Protect myself? Sometimes, I wonder if I even know how. After I watched you get on that bus – “

“Y’ watched me leave?” he asked, dumbfounded. She’d made it pretty clear she didn’t want
to have anything more to do with him if he finished out his tour, yet she’d gone down to the bus station for one last look?

“Yes, Merle,” she admitted, leaving no part of her heart hidden from him. “And then I went home and sank into a depression from which I didn’t think I’d recover. Amy told Daddy about our breakup and he tried to convince me to move home with him, to go back to school and finish my master’s degree. He didn’t want me wallowing in self-pity over a man, despite him knowing what you meant to me. He said there was no use laying in the bed, pining for you and making myself sick.” She laughed bitterly. “And boy was I sick. Daddy finally made Amy take me to the doctor. You’d been gone a month, and I’d lost weight because I didn’t want to even think of eating. Everything turned my stomach. I didn’t want to see anyone, go anywhere … I was a mess. It took seeing that first ultrasound to believe I was really having your baby.”

“How, when y’ never missed a pill?”

“Apparently, the antibiotics they’d prescribed for that UTI made them ineffective. At least that’s what Dr. Carson told me.” She shrugged. “Merle, I wanted to tell you, but then I started thinking of you over there, putting your life on the line every day, the stress and strain. You were already worried about Daryl staying here with Jackson. How could I add to that?”

Merle leaned forward, his fingers coiling around her upper arms, pulling her towards him as his eyes glinted angrily. “Because that was my baby y’ were carryin’, Andrea! I had every right t’ know. Y’ say y’ didn’t tell me because y’ were tryin’ t’ protect me. Daryl told me th’ same shit about why he didn’t want me t’ know how bad it was for him. I don’t need y’all protectin’ me, for fuck’s sake! I’m a grown ass man, not some simperin’ miss.”

“And what would you have done if you’d known, if I’d told you?”

He let go and pushed to his feet, raking a hand over his short-cropped hair. “I’da come back, an’ y’ know it.”

“Exactly … you’d have gone AWOL and been court-martialed. Your entire career would have gone to hell, and that’s not even considering the time you’d have had to serve,” she sighed. “I couldn’t do that to you.”

Merle dropped his head into his hand and gnashed his teeth, hating to admit she was right. He would have thrown it all away if he’d known about Emmarie. Hell, he’d already told Daryl he would have come back for him too. “What’d y’ do then? Franny said y’ moved away, back t’ Peachtree City with yer father.”

“I did. I packed up everything and moved home. I went back to school, but out of state to protect my secret. It nearly killed Amy to keep her big mouth shut. You know how she likes to gossip. I hid from everyone I knew from Senoaia in hopes I could keep the knowledge of your daughter from you until you came home.”

He startled slightly as she moved behind him and rested her hand at the small of his back. “You were hiding her from Jackson … weren’t y’?”

Merle pulled her around and gathered her close to his chest, wrapping his arms tightly around her, feeling her shudder. “I couldn’t let him find out … not without you here to protect her.”

He suppressed a shudder, remembering Jackson’s confession about his brother. Daryl bore the brunt of Jackson’s hate and rage because he’d favored Drew. Merle hated to think of what he’d have done to his grandchild for the same reason. He tilted her chin up, his thumb brushing over her
lower lip as his eyes hardened to shards of ice. “Bastard can’t hurt her, Blondie. He ain’t never gonna hurt anyone ever again.”

Andrea’s lips parted on a gasp as she searched his face for the truth. “Oh, god, Merle … what did you do? No, don’t tell me … wait, yes, tell me. They can’t make me testify if I’m your attorney.”

He pulled her in close again and pressed his lips to her brow. “I don’t want y’ t’ hate me. Don’t think I could stand it.”

“Tell me,” she whispered, her hands fisting in his vest. “I love you too much to ever hate you, Merle.”

Merle sighed, his hand caressing her nape as he closed his eyes, simply reveling in their embrace. She was the only one who could soothe the storm raging within him. “Came home Friday night with plans t’ meet Daryl at th’ house, t’ help him get th’ rest of his stuff t’ bring out t’ th’ cabin. Th’ ol’ bastard wasn’t s’posed t’ be there. Carol was hysterical when she called t’ tell me what was goin’ on. I got there jus’ in time t’ pull him off my brother, but Daryl nearly died from th’ beatin’ he took.”

“Oh, my god. Is he ok?”

“Still in th’ hospital. Had t’ have surgery. But I can promise y’ this … when he gets out, he ain’t got t’ worry about Jackson Dixon ever again. No one does. I made sure of it,” he hissed coldly. He brought his rough calloused hand up to caress the smooth silk of her cheek. “M’ brother, m’ baby girl, m’ woman … all safe.” He sighed heavily and set her away from him, taking a step back. “I can understand if y’ don’t want nothing t’ do with me –“

Andrea’s eyes narrowed as she planted her hands on her hips. “Goddamnit, Merle, you are such a shit! I withheld the knowledge of your daughter from you … which is pretty damn horrible. How could you think I would turn my back on your for ridding the world of the vilest man I’ve ever had the misfortune to meet? He tortured your mother, your brother … YOU! I hate that it had to be you who killed him, but I’m not sorry he’s dead.”

He threw back his head and laughed as she wound herself around him, her lips teasing at the corner of his mouth. “Still got that fire, Blondie.”

“For you,” she purred silkily.

“Come home with me … you an’ th’ munchkin. I wanna start looking at plans to build us a house on Grandad’s land. Wanna be close t’ Daryl an’ his girl, an’ I think our lil’ princess would love it out there. I can teach her t’ hunt.”

The intercom buzzed, and he groaned as her secretary’s voice resounded in the room. “Ms. Harrison, Mr. and Mrs. Peterson are here to see you.”

Merle’s lips wandered lazily over her throat. “Tell ‘em y’ have t’ reschedule,” he breathed hotly against her ear. “Y’ got plans with me.”

“I can’t. I have to meet with them today.”

He could see the regret and frustration in her eyes as he pulled away. “A’right, I understand. So, it’ll jus’ be me an’ my daughter ‘til y’ get off work. Then y’ can meet us at th’ cabin for dinner. We still got lots to … discuss.”
Andrea’s brows rose in alarm. “Merle, are you sure? I mean … I want you to spend time with Emmarie, but … well, you don’t … hell! What do you know about taking care of a three-year-old?”

He pulled her back into his arms and kissed her breathless. “Ain’t a woman alive who can resist th’ Dixon charm,” he quipped, waggling his brows.

Andrea snorted. “Yeah, I’ll remember you said that when you call me within the next two hours ready to pull your hair out.”

Merle grabbed up Emmarie’s backpack and slung it over his shoulder. “Then again, Blondie, I might surprise y’.”

He was brought up short as he opened the door and found his daughter standing there with Amy, clutching a pack of white chocolate pretzels in one hand and a small bottle of juice in the other. “Where you going, Daddy? You said you wasn’t leavin’. Are you leavin’? I don’t want you to go,” she pouted, her lower lip wobbling.

“Emmarie! That is not nice,” Andrea scolded, ready to step out of her office to greet her clients. Her daughter might resemble Daryl when he’d been younger, but that girl was all Merle.

“He just got heres, Mommy! I been waiting so so long for him,” she whined, batting those big doe eyes at Andrea, something which guaranteed she’d get her way.

Merle bit back a laugh, but he couldn’t hide a devilish smile. He reached down and lifted his little girl up into his arms. “I have t’ go, Munchkin, but y’ know what? You get t’ come with me.”

“Really?!“ She looked down at her mother’s smiling face and squealed with delight as Amy sputtered out a protest.

“You’re letting her go with Merle? Do you really think that’s such a good idea?”

“He’s her father, Amy,” Andrea addressed her sister. “It’s about time they got to know each other.”

* * *

“Daddy, I got sticky fingers,” Emmarie informed him from her child seat next to him in the truck. It had taken the better part of thirty minutes to strap the infernal contraption onto the bench seat while Amy stood back with Emmarie chuckling at his struggles. He didn’t know how Andrea had done it all alone. Of course, her sister and father had been there to help her, but his Blondie had always been fiercely independent, and he could see her trying to do it all on her own.

He glanced over at his daughter and grinned. “Yeah, Daddy was known t’ have sticky fingers at one time too. Don’tcha worry, Munchkin, I’ll get y’ all cleaned up soon as we get there.”

“Where we goin’?”

“We’re goin’ t’ see yer Uncle Daryl. He’s in th’ hospital, an’ I think meetin’ y’ would cheer him up. Would y’ like that,” he asked as he turned into the parking lot and eased into a space.
Emmarie nodded, her curls bouncing vigorously. “Mama said Uncle Daryl is nice and that I look like him. How come?”

Merle reached into her backpack and found a pack of wipes to clean her hands. “I dunno, darlin’. Sometimes fam’lies look alike because they’re all related. See, me? I look more like m’ mama, where Daryl looks more like his uncle; y’ understand?”

Emmarie tilted her head to the side and scrunched up her little nose. “Kinda like Auntie Amy looks like Mommy?”

“Exactly!” her father chortled. “Don’t worry, you’ll learn about stuff like that when y’ go t’ school.”

Merle unfastened the buckles of her child seat and took a moment to rummage inside the backpack where he stashed the wipes. There were also a few snacks, juice boxes, a doll, crayons and a coloring book. He shook his head; his woman was prepared for any emergency. There was even a change of clothes. He got out and lifted his daughter up to perch on his hip. He could have let her walk on her own beside him, but he couldn’t bring himself to do it. He enjoyed the feeling of her nestled in his arms, the knowledge that she was his and completely dependent on his care. It was the same feeling he’d had the first time his mama had let him hold Daryl. He might have missed out on the first three years of his daughter’s life, but he was there now, and he would make sure he would remain with her and her mother. Emmarie would never know the same childhood he and Daryl had been forced to endure. She would only know love and happiness … he’d make damn sure of it.

As they got off the elevator, Merle’s gut clenched as he thought of his brother’s reaction to his new niece. If he even believed the child was his. His steps slowed. He didn’t want Daryl to say anything – however innocently intended – which might upset his daughter. A calculating smirk twisted his lips as he came to a halt and looked down at Emmarie.

“What say we prank Uncle Daryl?”

“Mommy said it’s not nice,” she said, fidgeting with his collar. “She says we’re not s’posed to hurt people’s feelings.”

Merle chuckled. “I promise this prank won’t hurt his feelings, but it will rile him up. It’ll be good for ‘im, get his blood pumpin’.”

Emmarie still looked unsure. She wanted so much for her daddy to like her, she was hesitant not to play his game. “What would I have to do, Daddy?”

“Jus’ sit right here an’ look pretty, sweetheart, while Daddy does all th’ talkin’.”

“Ok.” Emmarie decided to trust him and wrapped her arms around his neck, so she could rest her head against his broad shoulder. Her mother had always told her what a wonderful man her father was, and her mommy was never wrong.

Merle continued down the corridor, pausing just out of sight of the open door to his brother’s room. Carol sat on the bed next to Daryl, her curls in wild disarray as she tapped furiously at her tablet and then jotted some notes down on the notebook balanced on her thigh. Francine had come for a visit and had brought an entire buffet judging from the number of tupperware containers she was setting out on the overbed table.

“Thanks so much, Mom. I swear they’re tryin’ t’ starve us up here. Did you bring any
cake?” Daryl asked hopefully, pulling the table in closer so he could attempt to feed himself with his left hand. “Carol, Cain’t y’ stop for five seconds t’ eat. Gawd, woman, our homework will still be there after y’ have a piece of chicken.”

“Well, aren’t you just a peach today, son,” Francine admonished lightly as she spread a cloth napkin over his lap. “And yes, I brought a piece of cake for both of you for dessert. Now eat.”

“Sorry, Mom,” he grumbled around a mouthful of chicken and broccoli rice casserole. He moaned in pleasure as his teeth sank into the savory chicken, never so happy to have been cleared to have real food again.

Carol set her homework aside and reached for a container of loaded baked potato soup. “Mom, our English essays are due tomorrow. They’re finished and just need to be printed from my laptop at Daryl’s. Could you possibly do that for me? Rick said he could pick them up and bring them to school for us to turn them in.”

It was still early, just past noon, so Francine would have plenty of time to accomplish the task. “Of course, dear. Did you need anything else?” She already had a small bag of laundry she’d be taking home with her.

The children gave a negative shake of their heads.

“And your plan for school? Is it working out as you wished?”

Daryl reached for a roll and then frowned at the butter dish, wondering how he was going to manage. “Uh … yeah. We’re only required to sit through th’ lecture part of the class, though Carol still likes t’ be Miss Know-It-All and participate in th’ group discussion.”

Carol set her soup down and took the roll from him, slathering it in butter. “Class participation counts for five percent of our grade, Daryl. Today hasn’t been so bad though, Mom. We can skip Study Hall for obvious reasons which gives Daddy and Everett time to order tests or consult or whatever else they need to do. Then we can sit for World History. Chem II is a bit iffy because we can’t participate in the lab assignments, but Ms. Atkinson assures us we can make those up later as long as we do the written work. We’re reviewing in Trig this week before we start something new on Monday. It’s all worked out great so far … still have Biology II and English to get through this afternoon.”

“So, y’ wouldn’t mind havin’ another visitor while y’ on break?” Merle asked, his face breaking out into a wide grin as he stepped through the door, happy to hear Daryl and his girl were able to keep up with their classes despite the hospital stay.

Francine moved around the end of the bed to greet him with a warm hug. “Merle, darling, how good to see you. And who is this little angel? Hi, sweetheart,” she cooed at the child, brushing a hand over her soft curls.

Emmarie smiled shyly and ducked back against her daddy’s shoulder. Daryl stared wide-eyed with shock at his brother. “Th’ hell, Merle? Where’d th’ kid come from?”

“I dunno, baby brother … there I was in th’ elevator on my way up, an’ this kid is in there an’ she jus’ latched onto me,” he said, his face conveying the most serious expression he could muster. “Figured since she stopped screamin’ when I picked her up, I’d come on up for a visit before I brought her down and turned her over to security.”

Carol made an undignified squeak of distress in the back of her throat and shrieked. “Merle!”
Daryl sputtered and abandoned his casserole, his left arm gesticulating wildly. “Fu— he cut himself off before he cursed in front on the innocent little girl. “Merle, y’ can’t jus’ be pickin’ up random kids like that. I know y’ did it over in Afghanistan when y’ was used t’ savin’ them on a daily basis, but it ain’t like that here. Y’ wanna get arrested or somethin’? Tell him, Mom!”

Francine’s sharp eyes, however, were intently studying the child’s face. “Oh, my …” she breathed, chancing a quick glance up at Merle who shot her a saucy wink. She held out her hands to take Emmarie. “Come here, sweetheart, and give Grams a hug.”

“What?!” The two on the bed gasped.

Emmarie looked up at her daddy in askance, leery of the woman, but Merle nodded his approval which seemed to be good enough for her. “It’s ok, darlin’.”

The child leaned over to hug her new grandma, but immediately pulled herself back up to hide in her daddy’s neck. “Mom, meet m’ daughter … Emma Marie Harrison, though she’ll be a Dixon soon as we can sort out the proper legalities … hopefully.”

Tears glistened in Francine’s eyes. “Emma …”

“You went to see Andrea,” Carol stated, amazed by the new turn of events. “H-How did we not know?”

Merle rounded the bed to sit on Daryl’s left, settling his little girl there on his lap. “Em, this is your Uncle Daryl.” He grinned sheepishly at his brother. “She ain’t shut up about y’ since we got in th’ truck.”

Emmarie stared unflinchingly at her uncle, taking in his various injuries. She brushed her little finger over the scabs on his knuckles. “Why you gots so many boo boos?”

Daryl cleared his throat enough to allow him to speak softly to his niece. “I … uhm … I got in an accident.” He flexed his hand for her to see. “They don’t even hurt.”

She looked up at her father and cupped a little hand around her mouth. “Daddy … I need to go potty.”

Daryl snorted as the color drained from his brother’s face at the simple request. Francine smiled knowingly and took her granddaughter from Merle. “Come with me, darling. I’ll show you where it is.”

Merle took the opportunity of her absence to fill them in. “Andrea didn’t know she was pregnant when I had to go back after my medical leave.”

Carol gaped at him. “She broke up with you, Merle, and ripped your heart out in the process,” she said in staunch defense of her friend. “The least she could have done was write a letter or pick up the phone to let you know you had a child.”

“Don’t get yer knickers in a knot, lil’ sister. It was all an act. Yer jus’ upset because she didn’t tell y’all about Emmarie.” Carol crossed her arms over her chest and pursed her lips in displeasure, but that shit didn’t work on Merle. “We had a nice long talk this mornin’. She didn’t tell me ‘cause she was tryin’ t’ protect both me an’ our girl. Me from a court martial – ‘cause y’ know if I’da known about my baby, I woulda deserted – an’ Em from Jackson. She didn’t want th’ ol’ man t’ know he had a grandbaby without me here t’ protect her. Y’ feel me?”

Daryl huffed out an exasperated sigh. “But she seems so … comfortable with y’. How
“Blondie … she had pictures of us together, an’ she showed ‘em t’ Emmarie, told her stories about me so she’d know me when I finally came home.”

Carol buttered another roll, this one for herself, and proceeded to pick it apart. “Considering you’re being allowed to spend time with your daughter … does this mean you worked things out with Andrea?”

The smile he shot Carol showed nearly every one of his teeth. “Yeah … we’re back together … for good this time. She’s meetin’ me at th’ cabin after work so we can talk things over. I want her t’ move out there with us until I can build us a place of our own.”

Daryl nodded. “Ain’t like we ain’t got th’ room. We still got that spare bedroom we been usin’ for storage. We can clean it out an’ make it fit for your kid.” He ducked his head, a smirk playing at the corner of his mouth. “I’m sure Mom’s jus’ dying t’ get t’ th’ store t’ start pickin’ things out for her bedroom.”

Merle groaned, knowing he didn’t have a chance in hell of keeping Francine from spoiling Emmarie completely rotten. “Dad needs t’ cut up her damn gold card!”

Carol snorted. “Yeah, that’s so not gonna happen.”

Daryl laid his hand on his brother’s forearm. “Happy looks good on y’, bro.”

Merle looked between him and Carol. “Yeah, on you too, baby brother … on you too.”

Chapter End Notes

A/n: Daryl will be going home from the hospital soon, and Merle has just found a little slice of happiness of his own. I do so love our Dixons to be happy. I hope you all enjoyed. Great buckets of love to my betas BettyBubble and Geektaire. Without y’all I am a big hot mess!
“Jesus, Merle! D’you have t’ hit every pothole on main street?!” Daryl cursed as pain seared the wound on his side, staples pulling. He leaned back against Carol more fully as she shifted in the middle of the seat to accommodate him, and sighed, letting her presence soothe him.

Francine shot a sympathetic look at the eldest Dixon and reached out to pat his arm. “Patience, dear,” she cooed. It had been her idea to have Merle drive her Lexus that morning instead of trying to get the kids home in Daryl’s truck or Carol’s car. The mid-size SUV was more suited to comfort than either of the other vehicles, and she’d hoped to make Daryl’s release from the hospital a little easier on him.

His gaze snapped to the rearview mirror, a dark line drawn between his brows. Not even Francine’s motherly touch could make his irritation subside. “Ain’t doin’ it on purpose, Darylina,” he snapped. “Think it’s my fault th’ goddamn town has a lazy road crew? They spend more time sittin’ on th’ backroads gettin’ high than they do workin’ in town.”

“Merle that was a long time ago,” Carol’s mother tried to reason. “The new mayor has put a stop to that.”

“Coulda fooled me,” he grumbled. It didn’t sit well with him that his brother would be in pain until they reached the cabin. Daryl had been antsy and withdrawn in turns since they’d arrived at the hospital that morning to fetch him. Something was bothering the boy, but Merle would be damned if he could figure out what. At least, they wouldn’t have to stop to fill his prescriptions at the corner drugstore since the hospital pharmacy had delivered Daryl’s medicines to his room before they’d left.

Merle slowed the Lexus to a crawl as they left the town behind. He couldn’t care less about the classes the two teens still had to attend online. As much as he wanted Daryl to succeed, the boy needed to rest. He was tempted to toss Carol’s iPad out the window, but she’d just go out and buy a new one … and she’d be pissed at him, too, which would stress Daryl further.

“M’ sorry,” Daryl mumbled from the backseat, his eyes averted to where his hand was tangled with Carol’s upon his lap. “Didn’t mean t’ snap at y’.”

Francine turned and shot Daryl a loving smile. “Don’t you worry about a thing, either of you. Carol and I will make sure you’re comfortable when we get you home.”

The rest of the drive went smoothly, fresh gravel in the driveway paving the way for a bump-free ride. Carol shot out of the backseat, hurrying around the car to help Daryl, but Merle beat her to it. He opened the door and simply grinned before he reached in and lifted his brother into his arms.

“Goddamnit, Merle! I can fuckin’ walk … put me down!”

Francine moved to Carol’s side and placed a finger beneath her chin to close it. “Oh, we’re going to have our hands full with those two, aren’t we?”

Carol winced when she heard a shout from inside. “Well, it won’t be boring, that’s for sure.”
“Go on, dear, and see about your man. I’ll be in the kitchen if you should need anything. Perhaps I can whip up something to calm them. They aren’t likely to be able to argue with their mouths full.”

She reached out and hugged her mother, clinging to her longer than necessary. “Thanks, Mom. I don’t know how I would’ve managed the last five days without you,” Carol murmured against Francine’s shoulder, her voice filled with emotion.

Francine eased back enough to see the unshed tears shining in her daughter’s eyes and felt her own smart in response. “That’s something you’ll never have to fear, my darling. Your father and I will always be here for you … for both of you.”

Carol dried her eyes and flashed her mother a bright smile before she was running for the porch. When she reached Daryl’s bedroom, he was laid out flat on his back, his face red and pinched with pain as Merle stood by, chest heaving as he glared at his brother.

“Y’ fuckin’ did that shit jus’ t’ be an asshole!” Daryl seethed through clenched teeth.

“I did not! It was all yer damn squirmin’ made me lose m’ grip,” he growled right back. “I cain’t believe you’d think I’d actually drop y’ jus’ for th’ hell of it.”

Carol slipped into the room and frowned at them both. “Merle, could you please get our bags from the car while I get Daryl settled?” she asked in a no-nonsense tone. She set her messenger bag down on the bed next to Daryl’s hip and rummaged through it for his prescription bottles, the matter settled.

Merle stomped out of the room, shutting the door behind him, and Daryl shifted his gaze to the blank screen of the TV at the foot of the bed. She didn’t say a word to him as she shook out a pain pill and one of the antibiotics Dr. Nolan insisted he take for another few days, giving him time to get his bearings.

“Could y’ … could y’ help me up?” he stammered, his cheeks tinged with pink as he asked for her aid.

“Of course,” she replied, moving instantly to his side. When she had him eased up onto the mound of pillows at his back, she fed him the pills and reached for the water bottle capped on his nightstand. “You know Merle would have helped you if you’d have only asked.”

“I …” His voice trailed away before he could utter an excuse, his tone one filled with shame.

“Daryl, what’s wrong?” she asked, moving to the foot of the bed and removing his sneakers. “Aside from the obvious, that is.”

“I cain’t stand this shit, Carol!” he hissed. “I mean, look at me! I’m trussed up like a Christmas goose, can hardly walk t’ th’ bathroom without sweatin’ an’ wantin’ t’ pass out, an’ now m’ brother thought he had t’ carry me into th’ fuckin’ house! I ain’t a fuckin’ baby!”

“Then stop acting like one,” she hissed, crossing her arms over her chest. She cursed inwardly at the hurt which flared in his eyes before he closed off and let his gaze fall from hers. She sighed heavily and moved to sit beside him, reaching out to take his good hand in hers. He resisted the touch, his body stiffening, but she refused to let it stop her as she twined their fingers. “Daryl, you almost died, love. You’re not going to heal overnight despite the progress you’ve already made.”

He peered up at her through his lashes, still petulant. “I ain’t never gonna get my strength back if I’m stuck in this bed, either,” he grumbled. He gave her hand a little squeeze. “Y’ mad at me
now, too?”

“Of course, not,” she assured him, relieved to see some of the tension bleed from his shoulders. “I’ve been there for every wound, every injury, every scrape you’ve ever had, Daryl, and each time you’ve balked at the time it takes to heal. You just need to focus on the positive.”

Daryl snorted and leaned back more heavily against his pillows. “Yeah? Well, there ain’t nothin’ positive about bein’ stuck in th’ bed for god knows how long. I’ve had enough o’ that shit since Friday.”

Carol’s eyes brightened with mischief as she leaned in to kiss the corner of his mouth. “First off, you’re home instead of confined to the hospital. You’ll be able to rest more without someone coming into your room several times a night to check your vitals or draw your blood.”

He shrugged his brows and nodded. “Got a good point there, Angel. What else?”

“Secondly,” she purred, trailing her lips along the line of his jaw and feeling him shiver, “you won’t have to wear the compression bandage anymore except at night. You have a handy dandy little brace tucked away in my bag.”

“Uh-huh,” he breathed, his eyes closing as her tongue darted out to tease the pulse point beneath his jaw sending heat spiraling through his veins. “An’ y’ get t’ be my nurse.”

“Naturally.” Carol smiled against his lips, nipping lightly as she watched his gaze turn a little glassy from the pain pill she’d given him. “You’ll feel better next week when the staples are removed and some of your strength has returned.”

Daryl tightened his left hand in her auburn mane, drawing her head back so he could taste the sweet spot beneath her ear, showing her he was stronger than she’d originally thought. “Love you, m’ Angel,” he growled lowly, his tone answering her siren’s call.

“I love you, too.”

A knock was their only warning before Francine poked her head through the door. “Dears, would you like lunch served on the front porch?” she asked, a knowing smile teasing her lips as she watched them flush with embarrassment. “I thought you might enjoy being outside, Daryl.”

Daryl perked up at the thought of food and fresh air and nodded gratefully. “That sounds great, Mom.”

“Well, hurry along before your brother eats it all. The two of you don’t have much time before your next online class.”

* * *

Daryl scowled down at the brace he wore, the compression bandage gone. This one fit over his shoulders and trapped his arm against his side, but it also protected his side where his laparotomy site still throbbed like a sick bird’s ass. William had insisted upon it, determined Daryl was given every aid to help in his healing process … but the youngest Dixon certainly didn’t have to like it.

He walked out onto the porch under his own steam, slow as all hell, wearing nothing but a pair
of sleeping pants and a long-sleeved t-shirt. He balked at everyone who wanted to help him, refusing even to let Carol change his socks. His fuckin’ socks!! He was being a petulant child, but he’d never in his life – despite the hell Jackson had put him through – not been able to take care of himself.

Merle set aside the tool catalogue from Harper’s Supply Co. he’d received in the mail as his brother sat down, Carol on his left, and smiled at Francine as she set a tray of sandwiches on the table. Carol hopped up to help her mother bring out the tray of soup bowls, leaving the brothers to stare awkwardly at one another. Daryl’s lips pressed into a firm line of displeasure, refusing to break the silence.

The elder Dixon steepled his fingers before his mouth, elbows planted on the table – for which he was sure to get slapped if Fran caught him – and sighed. “So … how’s this online schooling thing workin’ out for y’?” he asked, hoping his attempt at small talk would draw his brother out of the haze of anger in which he was mired.

Daryl’s shoulders drooped, feeling like an ass. He should be thankful his brother was home for good instead of taking his anger out on him. “It’s ok … not like bein’ there, though. But at least we ain’t gettin’ marked absent or missin’ out on our assignments.” He ducked his head, his left hand toying with the napkin beside his plate. “Merle … m’ sorry about earlier. Didn’t mean t’ be such a jackass t’ y’.”

Merle waved him off and reached for several of the little triangles … roast beef, ham, turkey, even some tuna … and piled them onto his plate. “Ain’t nothin’, lil’ brother. I remember what I was like last time I was home on medical leave. I’d say y’ owed me a taste o’ my own medicine.”

Francine and Carol brought out a stack of soup bowls and a tureen filled with homemade chicken noodle soup, preventing Daryl from addressing Merle’s memory. Yes, he had been a mess, but Daryl had never left his side no matter how mean and ornery Merle had been. He’d just needed time to heal. Much like Daryl needed time now.

“Merle, were you able to find anything in that catalogue?” Francine asked as she set her spoon down.

“S’matter o’ fact, I did,” he grinned. “Gonna run down t’ Peachtree after lunch. Think Harper’s Supply might have jus’ what I need. Prob’ly see if th’ boys wanna ride over with me.”

Francine lit up at the mention of his friends. “Let me know if they’ll be coming home with you for dinner.”

Carol leaned into Daryl’s side as Merle began a lengthy conversation with her mother about tools he’d need for the garage. She giggled when Daryl moaned at the taste of herbs and savory chicken as he took a huge bite of his soup. Being home would hopefully improve his appetite if not his mood. “How are you feeling? Is the fresh air and sunshine more to your liking than our room?”

“Much,” he mumbled over a bite of his turkey sandwich. His eyes sought hers, and she was thankful to see some of the earlier fire they’d held had receded.

“No pain?”

His eyes narrowed, wondering what sort of scheme she had up her sleeve. “Naw … why?”

Her grin widened. “I dunno … just thought you might like to have class outside this afternoon.”
Daryl nodded slowly, caught in her web of happiness, letting it bleed into him and chase away his earlier upset. “Y’ know, I’d rather be outside than anywhere … specially after bein’ cooped up for so long.”

Merle sat back in his chair at the patio table, the creak of wicker the only sound aside from birdsong, and patted his belly. “Thanks for lunch, Mom, but I gotta run. Wanna catch that sale.” He caught his brother’s eye as he rose to his feet. “Y’ need anythin’ from town, brother?”

Daryl could tell Merle was hedging, almost reluctant to leave them there while he tended to business. “Naw, I’m good.” When Merle still didn’t move to leave, Daryl shook his head. “We’ll be a’right ‘til y’ get back. I ain’t gonna have y’ stickin’ around here mother-henning me to death when y’ gotta get ready t’ open th’ shop. M’ fine!”

“A’right, Darylina, unknot yer drawers,” he sighed. He cast a telling look Francine’s way and she just nodded. “I’ll be back before Blondie gets here with m’ daughter.”

Daryl shoved another sandwich into his mouth and sat back against the cushions in his chair. *Gawd, but it’s good i’ be home.*

*.*.*

Francine eyed her daughter as she shut the oven door, the venison roast she was preparing not quite done. “Wouldn’t he prefer waiting for Merle to help him?” she asked hopefully as Carol finished off her bottle of water and leaned back against the counter.

“Mom, seriously?” Carol raised a dubious brow at her mother. “There’s no reason I can’t help Daryl with his shower. I did it in the hospital and you didn’t have a thing to say about it then. Why now? Besides, Daryl would rather hurt himself than let Merle in there with him … male pride and all that.”

Fran pinched the bridge of her nose and shook her head. “There were nurses right outside the door waiting to help him back into the bed, Carol Ann. There was no … erm … time for … uhm … hanky panky,” she stammered.

An awkward blush colored her mother’s cheek, and Carol had to bite back a laugh. “Mom … are you blushing? Oh, god … please tell me you’re not picturing us naked.”

Francine wrinkled her nose in disgust. “No! Lord, help me. I am NOT thinking of my kids naked … together … naked together in ANY respect.” She scowled when Carol laughed aloud. “Oh, stop. I’m just worried about you … both of you. Temptation and thangs.”

Carol snorted and moved to toss her bottle into the recycle bin. “Did you just say … nevermind.” She reached out and hugged her mother warmly. “Daryl is trying his best to adjust to being injured. It was horrible enough in the hospital when he was confined to the bed, but now that we’re home, I’m afraid it’s worse. He’s limited in what he can do, and it’s doing nothing but making him angry.”

“It’s not his fault!”

“I know, Mom, but that doesn’t make him feel any better.” Carol bit her lip, already nervous enough thinking about climbing into the shower again with her boyfriend. “I have to try to make
him feel better, but you don’t have to worry,” she grinned mischievously. “Dr. Nolan hasn’t cleared him for sex.”

“Carol Ann!”

“Everythin’ ok in here?” Daryl asked, taken aback by the color riding Francine’s flushed cheeks. “Y’ feelin’ ok, Mom?”

Carol hid a grin behind her hand as Francine huffed and turned back to the counter where she’d been chopping vegetables. “I’m fine, darling. Homework all done?” she asked, changing the subject.

Daryl nodded as he moved further into the kitchen and swiped a piece of bacon Francine would be adding to the salad. “Yes, ma’am. Our teachers have been emailing our assignments, so at least I can peck out th’ answers with m’ left hand on m’ laptop an’ send them back.” He reached for another strip lying on the cooling rack, knowing Fran wouldn’t have the heart to shoo him away. “Mr. Hovarth is gonna bring our tests out here tomorrow afternoon, so we won’t have t’ make th’ trip into town.”

“See, Mom, it’s all good,” Carol grinned, twining her fingers with Daryl’s and tugging him towards the bathroom. Francine had been skeptical of Carol’s plan at first, and was more than happy to have been proven wrong. Their education was important, but William would never release Daryl to go back to school before he was a hundred percent sure he was well enough … and, of course, their own stubborn child refused to leave Daryl’s side. At least this was working.

Carol was still smirking as she closed the door behind them and began digging through the small linen closet in search of towels. Daryl rubbed the back of his neck as his gaze swept over her form, unable to resist ogling the sweet curve of her backside.

He ducked his head when she turned and caught him staring. “Uhm … what had Mom all worked up?” he stammered, fiddling with the brace he wore as he tried to figure out how to take it off.

“Here, let me help …” she said softly, unfastening the velcro straps. Her eyes sparkled playfully. “She was having a meltdown about me assisting you with your shower.”

“Gawd, Car, y’ told her that?!” he whisper-shouted so Francine wouldn’t hear them through the door. He winced as the brace fell away from his body and her fingers began to gently pluck at the edges of the medical tape holding his bandage in place. “She’s gonna think –“

Carol tossed the bandage aside and helped him ease his t-shirt over his head without jostling his right arm too badly. “Let her think what she wants. We’re both of age, together and in love. It’s not like she has anything to worry about right now with you injured.”

Daryl groaned as he pushed his sleeping pants down his legs. “But …” He sucked in a sharp breath as he watched her turn on the tap and adjust the temperature. “I really don’t wanna imagine your mother thinking about us having sex, Carol Ann.”

Carol giggled as he inched closer to her, a bright red flush tinting his cheeks due to his nakedness, she was sure. She loved it when he got all flustered and tried for a stern tone … which never worked with her. “I thought it was funny,” she chuckled again with a waggle of her brows.

“Yeah,” he sighed, stepping into the shower and closing the door. “Y’ ain’t gonna think it’s so damn cute when she won’t let y’ stay here with me anymore.”
“You know she wouldn’t do that, Daryl.”

She barely caught the low sound of his grumbling as she left the room to fetch them both something to change into after their shower. Her stomach roiled with a thousand fluttery sensations as she thought of climbing into the shower with him. At the hospital, she’d preserved her modesty, showering with him while wearing a pair of shorts and a tank, but it had been more than uncomfortable wearing wet clothes.

Carol bit her lip uncertainly, her bare feet silent against the hardwood floor as she trekked back to the bathroom. They were home, in a committed relationship, and of age, right? She shouldn’t be afraid to shower with him without the barrier of clothing between them. She shook her head as she locked the door behind her and set their things down on the counter. No, it wasn’t fear, but more nerves over how Daryl would react. He was in no shape to indulge in a lengthy make out session in the shower stall, that was for damn sure.

Her fingers toyed briefly with the hem of her Henley before she scolded herself for being silly and whipped it over her head. The rest of her clothes followed quickly before she could talk herself out of it. She wanted to help him, to make sure he didn’t overdo it and strain a muscle or hurt his broken collarbone more than it already was. But there was another part of her – one much less noble and a bit selfish – which wanted to feel herself pressed flush against him with nothing between them.

Chapter End Notes

A/n: I cannot begin to apologize. I haven’t posted on this story since January, but I can’t help the hell my life has been this year. That’s it, my only excuse. I totally suck. Did I mention I also get distracted easily? Anyway … I started this chapter like three weeks ago? Maybe? And today I finally finished it and sent it to BettyBubble for edit. Had no idea it was nearly 7k. Like what?! So, I had to split it. On the plus side, I have the next chapter all ready for y’all and you won’t have to wait another 8 months for it. Really hope there’s someone out there who’s still interested enough to read.

Love to you all … my readers, those who review and my lovely ponies who kick my ass when I need motivation.

And thanks to BettyBubble and Geektaire for their time. Best betas ever!
Daryl was scrubbing his hair one-handed when she pulled the glass door open and stepped in behind him. His eyes were tightly closed to prevent any stray suds from slipping into them, and he didn’t seem to notice just how bare she was. Carol admired his strength as she watched him struggle to bathe himself. She didn’t think she’d have the same fortitude to endure it if she were ever injured in quite the same way. She waited until he’d ducked his head under the spray and rinsed the last of the shampoo from his hair before she wrapped her arms around him from behind, pressing herself against his back.

Carol couldn’t miss the very audible hiss which whooshed from his lungs, nor the droplets flying from his wet hair hitting her in the face as he jerked his head around to glimpse her over his shoulder. “Are y’ … are y’ naked? Seriously, woman?! What if your mom comes in here?!”

“Shh,” she shushed him, her fingers idly trailing over his abs to soothe him. “We need this.” Carol pressed a kiss to the top of his spine and smiled as she felt him relax into her touch. “I want to feel close to you, Daryl, in a way I haven’t before. I just …”

Daryl turned in her embrace, pulling her tightly against his body, his good arm banding around her waist. “I know,” he assured her, feeling the same as she did. “I jus’ don’t want y’ catchin’ shit from Mom because of it.”

“We’d just begun to find this intimacy before your accident,” she whispered, her lips brushing the hollow of his throat, “and we haven’t had a moment to ourselves since. It’s not just about sex. I know it’s selfish of me, but I … I need you. I need you to see me. I need you to see I’m not going to hide any part of myself from you.”

“I do, Angel,” he sighed against her lips before they covered hers in a tender kiss. He tried to convey his love for her with every brush of his lips, every sweep of his tongue, every nip to her perfect mouth until she was melting into him. “I do see you, always have … but y’ don’t have t’ do anythin’ y’ ain’t ready for either.”

Carol kissed him once more before reaching behind him for the washcloth and a bottle of body wash. “I want to be here with you or I wouldn’t have shucked my clothes and gotten in,” she assured him. She busied herself with bathing the both of them – being as gentle as she could around the staples which stood out so prominently against his injured side - but all she could think about were the ‘what ifs’.

*What if* she’d never told him she loved him? *What if* he’d died? Everything could have been taken from her … from them. She never would have had the chance to be with him like this. Daryl
was her whole world. He was so much a part of her life, her happiness. He had been for as long as she could remember. She’d planned her future around him. It just didn’t work without him. And it could have been ripped away from her in a moment of madness.

Carol didn’t snap out of her musings until she felt his finger beneath her chin, coaxing her gaze up to his. “Hey … what’s wrong? Where’d y’ go?”

“Nowhere … just thinking,” she murmured, cutting the water off and reaching for a towel.

“Stahp … it ain’t worth not one o’ your tears.” His voice was soft, filtering through her ears and directly to her heart, warming her from the inside out. “Don’t think about it anymore, Angel. It’s over an’ done.”

Carol buried her face against his throat and sniffled. “I love you … so much.”

“Love y’, too, but …”

She lifted her head, her expression worried. “But what?”

“I’m gettin’ a little cold.”

Carol snorted and reached for the towel hanging over the door, whipping it around herself. “Sorry. You know I get lost in my head sometimes.” She grinned sheepishly and stepped out of the shower before handing him a towel. “Gimme just a minute to throw some clothes on and then I’ll help you get dry.”

Daryl stepped out onto the rug and began toweling his hair. He bit his lip as he watched her dress in a pair of pink plaid sleeping pants and a matching tank, his eyes surreptitiously caressing each of her curves. He hated Jackson all the more – not so much for himself – but for putting his girl through so much anguish. He held the damp towel against his groin as she tackled him with a dry one, not wanting her to see how her tender ministrations in the shower had left him hard and aching. What had she expected, really? He’d thought he’d surely swallow his damn tongue when he’d turned to find her completely bare, his eyes feasting on her supple flesh. He’d found himself wishing for all he was worth that he could carry her off to his bed and worship her with his body.

He winced as she finished drying his back and lifted his bad arm to remove the clinging moisture from his right side, a slow hiss whistling through his teeth despite her gentle touch. She stopped, her brow furrowing as she sought his gaze, but he waved her off. Next, she’d be trying to ply him with pain pills, and he wasn’t ready to have his mind fogged again. That could wait until after dinner.

Carol went back to her task, dropping to her knees to dry his legs. The breath hitched in his chest. Gawd, I’m a sick pervert, he groaned inwardly at the sight of her knelt between his feet. He would never even suggest such a thing to her, valuing her too much to have her in such a submissive pose, but damn if it wasn’t one of the most erotic things he’d ever seen in his life. Now, he just had to figure out a way to keep her from seeing the rock-hard erection he was ineffectually trying to hide behind his towel.

Her head snapped up at the strangled sound he made deep in his throat, taking in his sloe-lidded eyes and fiery blush. Heat curled through her as his lips parted, his breath heavier, his pupils blown wide with desire. It took everything within her to bite back a moan. Her fingers slid over his hand, brushing against his white knuckles where it gripped the towel to his groin.

Carol let her left hand roam over his flank, soothing circles painting his skin as she used the
other to pry the towel from his vise-like grip. He stopped breathing altogether as she leaned in and pressed a kiss to the top of his thigh. And she didn’t stop there, her eyes sparkling with something he didn’t recognize as she peered up at him through her lashes.

Merciful fuck! He was of the firm opinion she was trying to kill him. His hand went to her shoulder as her lips feathered over the crease where his leg met his groin, his knees unsteady. “Carol…” he breathed harshly, his chest rising and falling rapidly. “What…”

His girl grinned coyly and rose to her feet, taking his hand and leading him over, pushing on his shoulders so he would sit on the closed lid of the toilet. “Relax, baby,” she whispered against his lips a moment before she kissed him silly. “Just let me make you feel good.”

Before he could protest, she was on her knees between his parted legs and her cool little fingers were wrapped around his erection. He didn’t even remember losing his fucking towel. He was gobsmacked, and could do no more than watch helplessly as she leaned in and ran her tongue up the length of his cock.

Carol arched a brow as the muscles in his legs tensed enough to lift him several inches off his seat and his hand formed a death grip on the edge of the counter next to him. “Daryl… baby, you need to relax. I’ve never done this before, so bear with me.”

“What th’ fuckkkk! Y’ ain’t gotta do this shit,” he growled as his eyes rolled back in his head. He sucked in several deep breaths, trying to maintain some semblance of control as she swirled her tongue around the head. “Gawd, woman. Fuckin’ … killin’ me … here.”

She laughed low in her throat and the sound sent another surge of white hot lust shooting straight to his groin. “I want to do this … I want to know what you taste like.” Carol straightened up, her hand still wrapped around him, claiming his mouth in a dirty kiss. “Now just … relax.”

Daryl didn’t feel the cool porcelain of the tank behind him or the faint twinges of pain in his side as the muscles in his stomach flexed. Nothing mattered but the haven of heat her mouth created as she took him inside. His head fell back on his shoulders, a moan clawing its way from his throat, and he let himself feel. The hot rasp of her tongue as it teased the head, her tongue dipping into the slit to taste the bead of moisture there, and the easy pace she set as she devoured him all preceded his descent into madness. It was raw pleasure, something he’d never thought to experience in his sorry existence.

His eyes were cracked the barest inch, forcing them to stay open so he could watch his girl. He gave into his desire, releasing the death grip he had on the counter to twine his fingers in her soft damp curls where they framed her lovely face. He knew in that moment, he could die a happy man. Fire crackled along his spine as he fought to hold on, and his hips bucked against his will as she took him in deeper, the head of his cock nudging the back of her throat.

He bit his lip until he could taste the coppery hint of blood on his tongue, fighting to hold off his release, but it was useless. He had never felt anything so good – didn’t think he ever would again – in his life, and it was more than his battered body and lust-hazed mind could take. She moved faster now, the heavenly stroke of her tongue too much.

“A-Angel … please … move! I’m gonna…”

But she refused to budge an inch. Instead, she raked her nails along his hips and buried her face flush against him, taking all of him deep into her throat. He saw stars as he went rigid — his good hand fisted in her hair - and poured himself into her.
Carol sat back and smiled. Her love was completely wrecked, and she couldn’t be happier. He was so beautiful in his pleasure, and he was hers. All was right with the world …

“Oh, fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck!” Daryl cried out, doubling over and clutching his side, both arms wrapped around his middle. “Fuck, it hurts!”

“Daryl! Oh, my god, what’s wrong?” she asked, her hands fluttering nervously about him with no clue as to how to make things better.

His face was pale, his mouth pinched with pain, and to make matters even worse, a knock sounded on the bathroom door. “Carol, is everything alright in there?!” came her mother’s worried voice whispering through the barrier.

“It’s ok, Mom … we’re fine,” she called back, her voice quavering a little as she grabbed a clean pair of boxers and tried to work them up his legs. She didn’t need Francine barging in and making Daryl even more uncomfortable.

“The fuck we are, Carol Ann,” Daryl hissed as his head dropped onto her shoulder.

“Carol was that a moan? What are the two of you doing in there?!”

She wanted the floor to open up and swallow her whole as Merle’s voice joined her mother’s. “C’mon there, darlin’, I’m sure they’re jus’ foolin’ around.”

Carol felt her face suffuse with heat at Merle’s comment, but suppressed the urge to glare at the door. “Daryl, I need you to breathe, baby … please,” she said softly, cradling his face in her hands. His face was twisted into so much pain it brought tears to her eyes, guilt coiling acidly in her belly with the knowledge it was her fault.

He nodded jerkily and tried to match his breaths to hers, but it was no use. “C-Cain’t … hurts,” he cried, his eyes swimming with tears he refused to shed. He hadn’t even hurt this badly after surgery.

More knocking sounded at the door, forcing Carol to grit her teeth. “Alright … just … do you think you can stand? I know you don’t want to have to go out there and face them naked.”

“What th’ hell is goin’ on in there, for fuck’s sake?!” Merle bellowed, the teasing tone completely absent of his usual jabbering as he heard another agonized yelp coming from inside the bathroom. “Why is th’ door locked?!”

“I would assume so they could have some privacy, dear,” Francine deadpanned as she busily texted on her phone.

“Y’ callin’ th’ fire department?” Merle frowned down at her. “I can get th’ door open without breakin’ it.”

Two frantic voices sounded on the other side. “NO!”

“Carol Ann, open th’ goddamn door!”

Daryl forced himself to breathe through the pain. “Fuckin’ h-hell!” he growled through clenched teeth. “Don’t n-need your ass in here, Merle! Ain’t y’ got somethin’ b-better t’ do besides mother me t’ death?!”

“Well, it don’t sound like yer girl’s doin’ much t’ help y’!”
“Oh, no he just didn’t!” Carol raged, taking a step towards the door, but a whimper from Daryl had her moving back to his side. “I swear, I’m going to put saltpeter in his food for a month. How dare he —“

“Carol …”

More voices joined Francine and Merle. “What’s going on?” Andrea asked as she came in and dropped her purse and Emmarie’s backpack down on the sofa. “Did someone get locked in the bathroom?”

“Daddy! Daddy!”

“Daryl’s in there with Carol an’ he’s yowlin’ like somebody’s knifin’ him in the back.”

“Oh, damn,” the blonde grimaced, making her way to his side. “Didn’t the doctor tell them no sex?”

Francine wrinkled her nose as a text alert chimed on her phone. “William’s on his way and should be here shortly.”

More pounding erupted on the door beneath Merle’s heavy fist. “I’m givin’ y’ t’ th’ count o’ three, Carol! One … two —“

The door swung open and Merle slammed his mouth shut so hard, his teeth clicked together. He could see the pain spread across his brother’s face and fury welled within him.

“Swear t’ god, Merle, y’ pick me up an’ I’ll punch y’ right in th’ dick!” Daryl hissed as he leaned heavily on Carol.

“Ungrateful little fucker!” the eldest Dixon snarled. He pushed Carol out of the way and wrapped an arm around his brother’s waist, supporting him as they made progress in slow inching steps towards the bedroom.

“Daddy!” Emmarie wailed, tugging on Merle’s pant leg. “Daddy!”

Merle bit the inside of his cheek to keep from cursing in front of his daughter. “In a minute, Em, baby. Daddy needs t’ help yer blockhead uncle t’ bed.”

Carol swatted him in the back of the head.

Francine shot her a scolding look. “Carol, he’s trying to help.”

“Stop fuckin’ coddlin’ me,” Daryl groaned, pressing his hand more firmly to his side.

Andrea chuckled from the doorway as she settled her daughter on her hip and smiled at Fran in commiseration.

Carol turned the blankets back on the bed and moved out of the way to measure out a dose of pain medication from the bottle on the nightstand. Daryl’s head had barely hit the pillow when she was at his side, shoving the pill into his mouth and handing him a bottle of water.

The front door slammed, and a quick tread sounded on the hardwood floor, alerting them to just one more person to witness his humiliation, Daryl thought irritably. Was he never to get any peace? His face flamed, and he averted his eyes from his family.

William Mason took one look at the barely concealed stress on his boy’s face and turned to
shoo everyone from the room. Francine didn’t want to go, digging her heels in. “Franny, please … let me have a look at him.”

“Fine, I suppose I’ll go finish up dinner. But I want to know what happened,” she hissed petulantly. She wasn’t used to being denied and he was sure to pay for it later.

William kissed her brow and nudged her towards the door. “As soon as I find out,” he promised.

He shut the door behind her and turned to arch a knowing brow at his kids. “Carol?”

“Hi, Daddy.”

“Don’t you ‘Hi, Daddy’ me, young lady,” he warned, moving to the bed to check Daryl’s staples. “Now what has your mother in such a panic? Judging from the matching blushes the two of you are wearing, am I to assume you were doing something you shouldn’t?”

Daryl cried out as William pressed into the muscle below his wound. “W-Was jus’ takin’ a shower.”

“Mhmm.”

“It’s true, Daddy,” Carol said defensively, crossing her arms over her chest.

William sighed as he expertly rubbed the cramp out of Daryl’s side. “Carol, I distinctly remember telling you both … NO sex.”

“We didn’t –“

“Of any kind.” William stressed.

“But –“ she tried to argue, but it was clear she wasn’t fooling her father.

William reached for his bag and removed several gauze pads to redress Daryl’s wound. “It’s the only thing which would cause him to cramp up like this.” He stared at the remorse and guilt flitting across his daughter’s face. “Sweetheart, I’m not going to lecture you on your choice to have an active sex life –“

Daryl groaned and dragged a pillow over his face.

“- with the man you love. But he needs time to heal.”

“I’m right here, y’know!” came his muffled voice from beneath the pillow.

William snatched the pillow from him and tossed it to the other side of the bed. “And you, son, need to learn to tell her no. She cannot always have her way.”

Carol hugged her father. “I’m sorry, Daddy.”

“Sorry, Dad,” came Daryl’s own grumbled apology.

William chuckled as he closed his bag and rose to his feet. “You should be. Now I have to go out there and explain things to your mother.” He gave Daryl a pointed look, wishing to save his boy any more embarrassment. “We’re going to tell her you were getting dressed and stumbled into the bathroom counter where you hit your side.”
“Mom might buy that, but Merle won’t,” Carol scoffed.

“Pfft … Merle can eat a –“

His words were cut off as Carol pressed a finger to his lips. She smiled at her father. “Thanks, Dad … we owe you one.”

Chapter End Notes

A/n: I’m so glad y’all were so happy to see an update for this story. Again, I do apologize for it taking so long. I hope you enjoyed this one as well. Next is the Sadie Hawkins dance which is going to NOT be what we’re expecting. I don’t know how long it will take me to write it, considering how busy I always am, but I WILL be working on it. Huge thanks to BettyBubble for being my little darling and editing this chapter for me. Swear I don’t know what I’d do without her.

Please remember to support your favorites by voting in the 4th Annual Caryl Fanfiction Awards on Tumblr!

End Notes

A/n: So what do y’all think? Please let me know! I’m having so much fun writing this, and I’d really love the feedback. It’s sometimes scary venturing into something new.

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