New Elysium

by Cloud_Nine

Summary

Members of the group wake up to a world from before, some things are the same but some things are different. All Rick knows is that the dead will soon be walking and this time his group will be ready.

Notes

This is pre-written to a certain extent and is the product of a long-term project I've been working on that mostly revolves around wanting badass Rick Grimes to kick ass from the start. Further, I like planning for things and this fic is perfect for that.

Sometimes I've pulled from the hundreds of other TWD fic I've read, and somethings come from my brainpan. It's hard to remember what's what.

Let me know what you think!

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

Sunday, June 17th

Rick Grimes, former sheriff’s deputy turned post-apocalyptic group leader was beyond confused. He had gone to bed in Alexandria and woke up in his home in King County.

Waking up next to his dead wife because his baby daughter was crying wasn't what Rick had been expecting. Lori was nearly two years gone but there she was, looking young and healthy, sleeping soundly beside him.

Judith sniffled again and Rick rushed to her. His beautiful daughter was so small. The baby Rick remembered was a giggly, almost two-year-old toddler but the baby in his arms was small almost newborn. Rick looked from his daughter to his wife and felt his head spin. This wasn’t possible.

“Dad?” Rick heard Carl whisper pushing open the door to Rick and Lori’s bedroom.

“Carl,” Rick called softly rocking the baby from side to side.

Carl pushed open the door and froze when he saw his father and baby sister. “What?” Carl managed to say before his eyes fell on his mother, still sleeping, just a few feet away.

“I don’t know,” Rick admitted, still whispering, his eyes never leaving his son.

Seeing Carl, who looked so young, staring at the house he grew up in like he had never seen it before was a shock. Carl looked terrified like his mother would wake up and try to take a bite out of one of them, a perfectly rational fear in the world they have obviously just come from. The boy and his father shared a look and Rick jerked his head to show he was taking Judith out of the room.

Carl nodded and turned back to his mother. The woman he put down after Judith was born. Rick turned and walked out of the open door and listened as Carl climbed into Rick and Lori’s bed sobbing softly.

“Carl, baby, what’s wrong?” Rick heard Lori ask sleepily.

“I had a bad dream,” Carl said back. “Can I stay here for a while?”

“Of course sweetheart,” Lori said. Rick could picture her running a hand through Carl’s soft hair and pulling him close, ready to chase away the bad dream. Rick closed his eyes and pressed a kiss to Judith’s soft forehead. The walkers, the quarry, the farm, the prison, Alexandria, it wasn’t a dream. It had been real.

Rick went through his morning like it was a dream. Around nine Carl and Lori wandered into the kitchen where Rick and Judy had managed to cook up some eggs and bacon. Rick felt himself smiling at the little luxuries he had right them. Milk, cheese, gas, and electricity. Rick hadn’t had milk or cheese since the Greene’s farm and he had never gotten used to the electricity in Alexandria.

“Did you do all this?” Lori asked surprised looking at the breakfast laid out on the table.

“Well, yeah,” Rick said scratching his chin. He guessed it had been awhile since Lori had seen Rick cook breakfast. In the old world, Rick hadn’t been much for cooking but in the new world you cooked or you starved to death.
“You cooked and fed Judy?” Lori asked spotting the empty bottle on the counter.

“She was hungry,” Rick said, letting his eyes fall on the now happily sleeping baby in her carrier.

“You are a good husband,” Lori said pressing a soft kiss to Rick’s cheek. “And a great daddy.”

“This is great dad!” Carl interrupted shoveling the scrambled eggs into his mouth.

“I thought you didn’t like scrambled eggs, Carl,” Lori said watching her son what had previously been his least favorite food.

“Guess I forgot,” Carl said simply eating more. Dozens of memories of life on the road where food was scarce and of eating worse things than scrambled eggs flooded the boy’s mind.

Lori gave her son and husband a look but sat down and started filling her own plate. The family ate mostly in silence. Rick was shocked when Lori mentioned getting to work, he had forgotten that Lori had worked at the small local library four days a week. His immediate thoughts when to Carl and his son having to go to school but Lori’s comment about their fishing trip calmed him down.

He remembered this morning, minus Judy. His little daughter hadn’t existed in this time before. Part of him, the part that had killed Shane, said that Shane and Lori’s affair had obviously started much earlier here, or maybe it just resulted in a baby sooner. Rick ignored that part of him and he mechanically said goodbye to his wife who was going to take Judy to work with her, as she only worked half days on Saturdays, and prepared for the fishing trip.

Father and son were silence as they packed gear. Out of habit, Rick picked up his backup weapon and handed it to his son. Carl checked the gun expertly and tucked it away. To the pair, it was the standard operating procedure but anyone who had lived through what they had it

“Dad, what are we going to do?” Carl asked fiddling with the fishing pole in his hands. Rick had insisted on at least trying to catch fish to bring back.

Rick rubbed his face and shook his head. “I don’t know Carl,” Rick said reluctantly. “I don’t have a clue how all this started.”

“Two or three months from now,” Carl said thinking hard. His mother and Shane had done their best to protect him from the truth in the beginning and his own grief from Rick being shot had painted everything, making it hard to remember. “You got shot a few weeks after Shane got back from vacation and it was a month, maybe a month and a half after that they bombed Atlanta.”

“You sure?” Rick asked having to trust his son since he had been in a coma when everything began.

“As sure as I can be,” Carl said reluctantly. This wasn’t exactly the same, Judith was proof of that.

“Dad, what are we going to do about Mom? About Shane? The group?” Carl asked questions bubbling up from within him.

Rick put his hand on his son’s head and stroked his short hair. “We’ll figure it out, son,” he promised. Rick wasn’t sure how just yet but he would figure it out. One way or another.

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Sunday, June 17th
Carol awoke with a start. This wasn’t where she had gone to sleep. The short-haired woman sat up and looked around the room and her eyes widened. She was back in the house she shared with Ed. This was her home from before.

“This isn’t possible,” Carol muttered throwing the blankets off and sliding her legs off the bed. A loud snore from her bed partner made Carol’s lip curl in disgust. Somehow, Ed, her abusive waste of space husband was laying there alive and well.

The first thought in Carol’s mind was that of course, she could fix that. Ed would never know, he just wouldn’t wake up. Immediately after Carol felt a rush of disgust. Ed was an awful human but he didn’t quite deserve being slaughtered in his bed, not when Sophia was just down the hall.

Sophia … Carol stood quickly and rushed to the doorway, her body moving almost outside of her control. She had to see her daughter. The woman practically ran to her daughter’s bedroom and pushed open the door.

On the bed curled up against the cold, Sophia had a bad habit of kicking off the covers in her sleep, was the daughter Carol had lost on the Highway.

Her beautiful, whole, living daughter. Carol stumbled forward a sob building in her chest. Once she was close enough the woman dropped to her knees and gently stroked her daughter’s hair. The tears she had been trying to push back slowly crawled down her face and her shoulders shook.

“Momma?” Sophia asked sleepily, her eyes just cracked open.

“It’s okay, baby,” Carol said softly, her voice choked with tears.

“Momma, are you okay?” Sophia asked seeing the tears fall down her mother’s face.

“Mommy, had a bad dream baby, but it’s okay now,” Carol said with a small smile. “It’s okay, we’ll be okay.”

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**Sunday, June 17th**

“Damn it,” Glenn swore and stomped back into his apartment. He had forgotten his keys. Nearly ten minutes before the Korean man had forgotten his phone and had to return to get the soon-to-be-useless lump of plastic and glass. Since waking up earlier that morning Glenn hadn’t been at the top of his game.

Call him what you liked, but waking up in the past wasn’t normal, even for someone who had been surviving the apocalypse. Give him walkers and even crazy humans and Glenn could handle himself but waking up alone, in his dirty apartment in Macon, Glenn didn’t know what to do.

Where was the group? Had it all been a dream? What about Maggie? Where was his wife? To make it worse Glenn had woken up with a splitting headache one that he couldn’t bring himself to think about too hard. The horror of that night in the woods was still too fresh, he could still see Maggie’s devastated face.

All he knew was that Glenn had a job to do. He was going to find Maggie and the rest of his family and to do that he needed his keys. So despite feeling stupid Glenn marched back into his apartment and fetched his keys and locked his door. For a moment an overwhelming sense of normalcy overwhelmed him. Before this would have been normal, expected, easy and now it was fake.
Glenn pushed it away and stumbled to his car, he needed to get to Maggie’s, he had to find Maggie, no matter what.

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Sunday, June 17th

Maggie had woken up to Beth’s singing. It had been so long since Maggie had heard Beth sing that the soft rendition of the Parting Glass brought tears to her eyes even before she had truly woken up.

At first, Maggie was certain this was a dream. A beautiful, painful dream. She was in her bedroom, her childhood bedroom on her daddy’s farm, with Beth’s soft voice floating through the thin wall separating their rooms. If she listened hard she could even hear her step-mother in the kitchen.

It wasn’t until the door to her room opened that Maggie realized that the signing had stopped. Beth, sweet Beth, peeked into Maggie’s room and Maggie felt her breath leave her, like a punch.

“If you are Beth,” Maggie called softly.

“Beth,” Maggie’s voice broke and she scrambled to get to her feet. The blond pushed the door open and moved to her sister. Maggie grabbed Beth and held on tight. “Beth!”

“You remember,” Beth sobbed into Maggie’s shoulder. “I thought it was just me, I thought I was alone.”

“Never!” Maggie swore fiercely. “Never again.”

The sisters embraced.

“Maggie!” Annette's voice rang through the house. “Come down, there is someone at the door for you!”

Maggie pulled away from her sister and the blond shrugged, just as lost as Maggie was. Still dressed in a pair of soft sleep pants and an old T-shirt she had stolen from Shawn, Maggie left to answer the door, Beth beside her.

“Who is it?” Maggie asked her step-mother when she made it downstairs. The blond woman just shook her head and tsked at Maggie for not yet having gotten dressed.

“I don’t know but he insisted that he see you,” Annette said thoughtfully.

He, Maggie thought. Her heart began to race and she moved without saying anything and felt her breath catch when she saw him standing beside the door. Annette had been too polite to make him stand out on the porch. “Glenn!” Maggie shrieked throwing herself at the Korean man.

Glenn caught her and pulled her close. Faintly, Maggie could hear Annette asking Beth how Maggie knew him, but the woman couldn't find it in her to answer. Maggie brought shaking hands to Glenn’s face and wiped the tears from his eyes as she felt him doing to her.

“I told you I’d find you,” Glenn whispered. Maggie sobbed and buried her face in his neck. “I’ll always find you.”

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> Sunday, June 17th
Daryl woke up in an instant. A hard life before and after the fall has made sure that the man could wake in an instant and the minute he had heard someone scream out, Daryl had jumped to attention. It took far longer for him to remember where he was than the hunter would ever admit. The dark paneling and dirty brown carpet were familiar in a painful way. The mattress without a box spring or frame sat on the ground. Daryl knew that if he pulled the thin sheets away the mattress would be stained and would look as uncomfortable as it felt.

“Daryl!” Daryl jerked in surprise and as a wave of pain hit him in the chest. That voice … Daryl hadn’t heard that voice since the prison. “Where the hell are you?”

The hunter moved to his door, it was his door, the room was to his room. His room in his shitty trailer that he had managed to afford by working at the small town mechanic’s place in town a few miles away. Someplace he hadn’t seen since he and Merle had lit up out of town at the beginning, heading to Atlanta.

“Daryl!” Daryl’s door slammed open, Daryl just managing to jump back so as not to get smacked in the face, and Merle stood there.

The older man looked like he always had, rough but the look in his eyes showed something that Daryl couldn’t rightly place. A deep, painful grief rose up inside Daryl and before he could stop himself the younger brother lashed out, his fist striking the elder on the face.

“The fuck!” Merle swore as he stumbled back. Daryl watched as Merle reached up and rubbed his face, careful not to use the hand that once held a sharp and dangerous bayonet and Daryl knew for sure that the Merle in front of him was the Merle that had been with him back at the prison.

“That was fer being a dumbass!” Daryl snapped. “And git’en yerself killed!”

Merle snarled back but didn’t strike out a sure sign that this Merle was not one that Daryl would have found before in this house.

“Guess that answers that,” Merle said glaring at his brother for the punch. “Wanted ta’ know if you remembered.”

“I remember,” Daryl said shortly. “I’s remember a lot.”
Tuesday, June 19th

“Momma, where are we going?” Sophia asked softly. Carol had packed up her daughter, cleared their home of food and any supplies and left. Despite her better judgment Ed had been left alive, asleep and handcuffed to the bed but alive. All of the provisions that Ed had gathered for years, the MREs, the water filters, paracord, that Carol had once only seen as a terrible drain on her resources and of taking up space in her laundry room were now hers. She had even stolen his rifle, it was an older pump action thing, but it was better than nothing.

It had been two days since she woke up in bed with her formally dead husband and found Sophia sleeping down the hall. Two days of verbal abuse and shock Carol has stumbled around the house trying to decide if she was having the best dream or the worst one. One on hand Ed was still alive. The fat man had shouted up a storm that first morning when Carol hadn’t had breakfast on the table when Ed woke up.

Carol’s hand itched for her gun and she knew without a doubt that she would put a bullet through the man’s head before he laid another finger on her or her daughter. That realization brought her to the phone book. Grimes, she thought as she flipped though looking for Rick’s name.

Rick would be the easiest to find. Being from King County, only a few counties over, and having been a sheriff’s deputy would make him more visible than anyone else would be. She wanted to reach out to Daryl, but she knew she’d never find the Dixon man before he eventually found her.

The phone rang three times before someone picked up. “Hello?” A familiar voice asked. It was higher pitched than she last remembered, more child-like then she remembered but if they had really managed to go back in time then Carol couldn’t have expected anything else.

“This,” Carol cleared her throat. “This is Carol, may I speak to Rick Grimes please?”

“Yes!” Carol said strongly. “It’s me, it’s me.”

“Dad!” Carl shouted away from the phone. “It’s Carol!” Faintly over the phone, Carol heard footsteps and the phone being handed to someone else.

“Carol,” Rick said sounding relieved.

“Carol,” Rick said back just as relieved. “I don’t know what’s going on.”

“Me either,” Rick admitted with a soft chuckle. “But I sure am glad to hear your voice.”

A soft cry started on Rick’s end and Carol inhaled sharply. “Is that Judith?” Carol asked, uncertain and unsure. It couldn’t be, not if they had gone back in time, but the cry was so familiar.

“Yes,” Rick said sounding just as uncertain. “I don’t know how,” he started. “She’s only a few weeks old, not even two months but she’s here. Is Sophia … ?”

Carol smiled at her daughter who was reading a book at the table and laughed a little into the phone. “She’s okay, she’s here,” Carol said almost breathlessly. “I thought it was a dream. I still think it’s a dream.”
“Me too,” Rick admitted.

“I’m coming there,” Carol decided suddenly. “I’ll pull Sophia out of school, we-we need to start to prepare!”

“Yeah,” Rick said thoughtfully. “Carl and I were talking about it. There’s a hotel in town, they’ve got cheap rates but it’s good, safe. They won’t give you and Sophia a hard time. Call me when you get into town.”

“See you soon.”

“We’re going to visit my friend, Rick, like I told you before, remember?” Carol explained. “He has a son around your age, you’ll like him.”

Carl and Sophia had been friends in the beginning last time and the boy was strong, tough. He would be a good friend to her again.

“His name is -”

“Carl,” Sophia whispered.

Carol brought the car to a stop and turned to face her daughter. “Sweetie how did you know that?” Carol asked seriously. She hadn’t mentioned Carl by name. She had mentioned Rick but never Carl.

Sophia looked down and picked at her jeans.

“Sophia,” Carol said sharply. “I need to know.”

“A walker bit me,” Sophia said suddenly. “I was trying to find my way back to the highway like Mr. Grimes told me but the walker got me! It hurt so bad.” Sophia sobbed into her hands. “A man found me, I thought he was going to help me. He stayed with me and then I went to sleep. I died. I didn’t wake up! I died!”

Carol gasped as Sopha told her the details of her death. She had been bitten trying to get back to the highway. The man she talked about had to be Otis. “Come here baby,” Carol said. Sophia unbuckled her seatbelt and crawled over the seat to sit next to her mother. Carol wrapped an arm around the girl and held her tight.

“It won’t happen again,” Carol promised. “I won’t let it happen like that again!”

----- LINE BREAK-----

Mother and daughter made to the hotel Rick told them about. The receptionist greeted Carol with a smile. “Oh! You must be the family that Deputy Grimes told me about, he said y’all were coming into town to see little Judy,” she said handing Carol her room key. “So thoughtful staying here so as not to make things harder with the new baby.”

Carol put on her blandest smile and nodded. Rick had obviously reached out and spoken to the receptionist, and told her some story. “Oh yes, Sophia can’t wait to see Carl again,” Carol said cheerfully. “The kids never get to see each other enough and I just know she can’t wait to see little Judy.”

“Mommy, when are we going to see Carl and Rick?” Sophia asked without prompting. Carol could have hugged her precious daughter.
“Soon, sweetheart,” Carol promised. “We need to put our stuff away and then we’ll give them a call, okay?”

“Oh, okay,” Sophia agreed as she started to bounce on her toes. Carol took the key card and adjusted her bag. Their room was on the second floor, the hotel only had two floors, and Carol went to the stairs without even bothering with the elevator. Her body was a little winded at the top of the stairs and she promised to work to get back into fighting shape soon.

“We’re in room 207,” Carol said. Sophia took off to find the room while Carol took a look around. It wasn’t vacation season and the receptionist had made an off hand-comment about how Carol and Sophia were almost the only ones here. The only reason they were on the top floor was because the bottom floor rooms only had one bed.

Sophia found their room and Carol let her open the door with the key card. The room was plain and generic the beds were clean and there was a nice window. Sophia claimed the bed away from the door and bounced on it cheerfully.

Carol smiled at her daughter and set their bags on her bed. She pulled out Ed’s shotgun and set it in the corner next to her bed. “Here, Sophia put this on the door,” she said taking the Do Not Disturb sign from her pillow and handing it to the blond girl.

Carol dug through her bag and pulled out two knives. She had been planning on giving one to Sophia after she had explained what was going to happen but because he daughter remembered Carol would give it to her now. Before Carol hadn’t taught Sophia how to survive in the new world and it had cost her, her daughter. Carol was determined that it wouldn’t happen again.

“Here Sophia,” Carol had giving the girl one of the knives. “This one is yours. Keep it on you always, do not take it off. Here, this is how you wear it.”

Carol showed her daughter how to clip the knife to her pants, and then moved to how to open it and close it.

“I’ll teach you later, okay?” Carol said tucking away her own knife. “Remember, keep it on you always.”

Sophia nodded firmly and Carol smiled. “Let’s call Rick okay? Then we can get some lunch.”

Carol sat on her bed and picked up the hotel phone. She dialed the number from memory and waited. The phone rang four times before an out of breath woman answered. “Hello?” She asked. It sounded like she had ran for the phone when she heard it ring.

Carol inhaled sharply. Lori. It was Lori.

“Hello?” Lori asked again.

“Is-is Rick there?” Carol asked, doing her best to keep her voice firm and steady.

“Yes, who is this?” Lori asked curiously.

“This is Carol, I’m a friend,” Carol explained vaguely. “He’s wanted me to call him back today. Said something about our kids getting together to play.”

“Oh! That Carol,” Lori said. Rick had obviously said something to her to explain why a strange woman would be calling the house looking for him. “He said you’d be calling, let me grab him.”
Carol heard the phone hit something, likely a table and footsteps lead away from the phone. It took a minute but Carol smiled when she heard Rick’s voice. “Hello?”

“It’s me,” Carol said. “We made it to town, we even checked in. Sophia want to get lunch if you want to join us.”

“Sounds good,” Rick replied. “I’ll grab Carl and Judy, Lori is about to head to work and I don’t have a shift until later this afternoon. We’ll meet you at the hotel.”

“Alright,” Carol agreed. “Rick.”

“Yeah?”

“She remembers.”

Carol heard Rick inhale sharply and quickly said her goodbyes.

The phone clicked and Carol felt herself start to relax for the first time since she woke up in her old home.

----LINE BREAK ----

They decided to stay in and order pizza. Rick, Carl, and Judith were pointed in the direction of Carol and Sophia’s room when they arrived. Carol opened the door and laughed when Rick greeted her. The two hugged, careful of the baby in Rick’s arms, and Carol laughed when they pulled away. “Come in!” Carol said ushering the trio inside. Carol pulled Carl into a quick hug as they moved to the open area of the room.

Carl went straight for Sophia and threw his arms around the girl. Carol’s daughter hugged back just as tightly.

Rick then suggested ordering pizza so they could eat and talk without worrying about anyone overhearing. Carol agreed it was a good idea so they placed and order and Carol took the chance to talk to Rick why Carl and Sophia took care of Judith.

“How is she here?” Carol asked softly. “Judith wasn’t born until we got to the prison.”

“I don’t know,” Rick answered. “It makes about as much sense as the rest of it, the dead walking around eating people, time travel.” Rick shook his head. Taking care of Judith had been hard the first time and there were a few occasions that they almost hadn’t. Doing it all again was going to be hard.

“It will be easier this time,” Carol said soothingly. “We know what to do, we know how to do it. We will be prepared.”

Carol watched Rick a deep breath and nodded but before he could reply there was a knock at the door. “Go get the pizza Rick,” Carol said. “We’ll be okay.”

Rick got up, Carol saw his hand go to his gun at his hip and smiled. Their bodies might not be the same but their minds were, and that was what mattered. They had lived through absolute hell and many of them had come out the other side. They would again, and this time it would be better.

“Kids,” Carol said getting their attention. They had been in deep conversation huddled around Judith, and hadn’t heard the knock at the door. “Pizza’s here.”
The kids both jumped up, mentally it had been a long time since they had pizza and it was easy to see that they were both rather excited about it. Carol nodded when she saw Sophia still had her knife and she saw a similar one on Carl’s belt. “Carl,” Carol said. “Just in case.” She pointed to the corner of the room where Ed’s shotgun rested. Rick had seen it when they sat down and had laughed at Carol’s preparation.

The boy nodded but was quickly distracted by the pizza his father held. The man sat it down on the bed and stepped back quickly. “Dig in,” he said with a laugh. Carl and Sophia pounced on the food. “I don’t know that we’ll get any of that one.” Rick said playfully.

“Probably not,” Carol agreed. “Sophia can eat half of a pizza by herself and I bet Carl can too.”

“And more,” Rick said. “Good thing I got us one to share.” Rick opened the top of the second pizza, plain cheese and grabbed a slice.

“So what’s the plan?” Carol said after she and Rick had both had a slice. “I think we have maybe a few months if everything happens the way it did last time.”

Rick rubbed his face and shook his head. “And we can’t rely on that, not with Judith here,” Rick said. “We need to start preparing, I guess.”

“What about the others?” Carl asked. Carol and Rick turned to him, they hadn’t known he was paying attention. “What about Glenn, Maggie, Abraham, Daryl? What about them?”

“If it comes down to it, we can find them again the hard way,” Rick said thoughtfully. “I could probably find the farm again and I know if Glenn remembers that will be his first stop.”

“Abraham, Rosita, Eugene will be harder,” Carol said cautiously. “Glenn only met them after the prison fell, weren’t they from Texas?”

Rick nodded. “Yeah,” he said drawing the word out. “Guess we will have to wait and see.”

“What about Daryl!” Carl asked again worried about the older man.

“I think he will find us long before we could find him,” Carol said with a laugh.

“But what if he doesn’t remember?” Carl said softly.

“Well, we won him over once,” Rick said playfully. “I’m sure we can do it again.”

Carol snorted and covered her mouth with her hands. Rick grinned and shook his head, even Carl and Sophia managed a laugh. “Either way,” Rick said. “We are going to find our people and make it work.”

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They stayed and talked and planned until Rick had to go on shift. “You’re sure it’s okay for Carl and Judy to stay with you?” Rick asked. Lori was at work for another hour, normally Carl would just go with Rick to the station where Lori would pick him up on her way home.

“It’s fine,” Carol said waving him off. “Judy’s not a problem and Carl can take care of himself just fine. We’ll be fine. We might go do some shopping, you know start picking up supplies.”

“Smart,” Rick said with a nod. “Carl, you mind Carol, you hear?”

“I will dad,” Carl said earnestly. “I’ll look after Judy too.”
“Good,” Rick said and turned to Carol. “We’ll talk more tomorrow.”

Carol said goodbye and shut the door behind him. She turned back to the children and let a real smile come across her face. “Okay,” Carol said firmly. “Let’s go shopping.” Carol herded the kids out of the door and down the stairs. She stopped only to pick up Judith’s car seat that Rick had left at the front desk.

“We’re going to Wal-Mart,” Carol said turning the keys in the ignition.

The drive was fairly quick. The Wal-Mart wasn’t in Rick’s town it was just a town over, it was a smaller store but Carol knew it would have a good hunting and fishing section. When they arrived, Carol carried Judith in her carrier and Carl and Sophia walked together talking softly. Carol would guess that Carl was catching Sophia up on everything she didn’t know, and she was thankful for that because there were some things that Carol just didn’t want to explain.

The cool air of the store made Carol shiver, even in the hot Georgia heat she had forgotten to turn on the air conditioner in the car, a habit that had been long since developed to save gas. “Okay, I’m going to grab a buggy, you two can look around but stay close,” Carol said settling Judith’s carrier in the buggy. “You stay within hearing range, grab anything that you think might help. If anyone asks, we’re going camping.”

“Okay, momma,” Sophia said sweetly. “Come on Carl.” Carol watched the two walk in front of her toward the camping section. She followed behind them and grabbed several things that caught her eye as she went. A few water bottles with charcoal water filters built in and the filter refills, she called the children to a stop when they came across the medicine isle and grabbed several pre-made first aid kits because the selection was a little low.

“Must be close to restocking day,” Carol muttered grabbing a few rolls of bandages and throwing them in the cart. Carol hesitated and had to eventually stop, she didn’t want to make anyone suspicious of anything and with three children, a bunch of camping gear and a lot of medicine was sure to look suspicious. At least it seemed that way to Carol.

“Okay,” Carol said tossing some toothpaste into the cart. “Let’s get the camping gear.”

The camping section was just as picked over as the medicine and something niggled at Carol’s mind, but she ignored it for the moment and grabbed a few tents and sent Carl after some camping knives. She told Sophia to look for lights or cookers, particularly anything that didn’t need gas or electricity.

Carol grabbed a few insulated sleeping bags that hadn’t been taken already and hesitated on an air mattress. It was the only one left but decided against it, they had slept on the ground before and they could do it again.

“I grabbed all the ones that were left,” Carl said dropping three machetes and two large bowie knives in the buggy.

Carol looked at the meager haul but nodded. “Good job,” Carol said. Judy whined and Carol popped her pacifier into her mouth to settle her. “Go see if Sophia needs any help.”

Carl nodded and disappeared around the corner and Carol was left staring at bullets. She couldn’t afford a gun, she could afford a few boxes of bullets. She grabbed three boxes of recognizable rounds, the kind that would fit the handguns they would end up using and hesitated before grabbing some that looked like they would fit Rick’s python.
Sophia and Carl came back with two lanterns each Carl also had a small camping stove. Carol smiled and the children as they put their finds in the buggy. “Good job,” She told them. “This should be enough for now. If we have time, we will stop at the thrift store on our way back into town and grab some clothes. Sophia and I didn’t bring a lot with us.”

Carol let the little group to the check-out and smiled pleasantly as the total climbed higher and higher. The cashier chatted cheerfully seeming not to notice or care that Carol wasn’t paying attention.

“It’s funny,” the cashier said scanning the last of the lanterns. Carol hummed absently her eyes flicking to Sophia to make sure she was still in sight. “You guys are like the tenth family to come in a prepare for a camping trip today. I didn’t know this was prime camping time.”

Alarm bells went off in Carol’s mind but she smiled sweetly and spun some tale about the weather being just right and swiped her card. The transaction was approved and Carol helped load her bags into the buggy. Her mind was on what the cashier said, the shelves had been emptier than she expected. Could there be others that remembered as well?

In the end they didn’t stop by the thrift store. Carol didn’t mention what the cashier told her, Carl and Sophia had been busy loading the buggy and hadn’t heard her. She thought Carl might suspect something, but with his friend so close it likely wasn’t the first thing on his mind. Carol resolved to tell Rick about it when she spoke to him next. She didn’t want to bother him at work and it was obvious that Lori didn’t remember so Carol didn’t want to cause problems calling Rick at home too much. She already wasn’t sure what the man had told his wife to get her to be okay with Carol having Carl for so long today.

Carol pulled into the library parking lot with a car full of supplies and three children in the back seat. Lori was just stepping out of the building and seemed to pull the doors shut and lock them. Carl jumped from the car and ran to give his mother a hug. Carol could remember how much it had hurt him to lose Lori, but Carol also remembered the friction between Rick and Lori at the end. In the short time they had met today, Rick hadn’t mentioned Lori much. She knew it was because to Rick, they weren’t married anymore.

Rick and Lori’s marriage had died years ago on the road before the prison. He had mourned her and while Carol knew Rick was too good a man to turn her away or abandon her when everything came to head it would be an explosion. After all, Judith looked exactly the same, and Carol couldn’t help but wonder just when Lori and Shane’s relationship started.

Carol took Judith out of the car and walked up to the woman, acting as if just a few years ago Lori hadn’t been dead and gone. Carol had seen more of Judith’s life that Lori had, even with this new timeline. “Do you want me to put her in the car?” Carol asked softly. Judith had drifted off to sleep on the ride back into town.

“Oh no, I’ve got it,” Lori said taking the carried with all the ease of a second-time parent. “Thank you so much for looking after Carl and Judy today, I’m Lori.”

“Oh, it was no problem at all. I’m Carol,” Carol said truthfully. “Sophia was glad to have a friend as we did a little shopping.”

“Aww,” Lori cooed seeing Carl say his goodbyes to Carol’s daughter. “Sorry, how do you know Rick? He’s never mentioned you before.”

“Oh!” Carol said thinking. “We’ve known each other for a while now, I, uh …”
“I just got out of a really bad relationship,” Carol said playing a familiar game. “My ex-husband didn’t like him talking to me much and Rick respected that. When I was finally able to leave he offered help. So me and Sophia are staying in the hotel across town.”

“Oh,” Lori said simply; she didn’t know how to respond so Carol just smiled blandly and did her best to look unthreatening. “It’s great that he’s helping you,” Lori said uncomfortably.

“Oh yes,” Carol agreed. “I owe Rick quite a bit for all he’s done for me. Well, it was nice meeting you Lori but I think it’s time to get Sophia some dinner.”

“Oh of course,” Lori said smiling genuinely again. “Say goodbye Carl, it’s time to go.”

“Bye!” Carl said giving Sophia a tight hug. The girl hugged back just as tightly and the two families separated. Sophia climbed into the front seat next to her mother and buckled in tightly.

“What do you want for dinner, sweetheart?” Carol asked drumming her fingers on the steering wheel.

“We have pizza left,” Sophia said. “I want that.”

The hotel had a small refrigerator in the room and a microwave in the hallway so that was easy to do. “Okay,” Carol said. “Let’s stop at the gas station and get something to drink.”

Carol pulled her car into the small roadside station and sent Sophia in with ten dollars and orders to return with a drink for each of them and something sweet for dessert. Money was very soon going to mean nothing and if a few dollars could help make the last few months of the old world good for her daughter, Carol didn’t mind paying for it.

When she left Ed she had taken the bank cards. Ed wouldn’t be smart enough to cut her off, at least not before Carol had drained the accounts and by then it would be too late.

Carol watched Sophia disappear into the store and exhaled hard. There were so many thoughts running through her head it was ready to explode. There was so much to do. They need supplies and if what she was coming to expect was true, they weren’t the only ones looking for supplies. More than that, they would need a place. Somewhere safe. It couldn’t be the prison, not again, not with Woodbury that close and it couldn’t be Alexandria, not with Negan out there. They needed a place of their own. Somewhere safe, somewhere they could defend and thrive. But to do that they needed each other. The group was scattered, some further than others and Carol was worried there would be some people they would never find again. Some people like Abraham’s group or Tyrese and Sasha. Or like -

“Daryl,” Carol said hardly able to believe her eyes. There, across the parking lot, leaning against a familiar truck with a familiar motorcycle in the bed was Daryl Dixon. Before she could think better of it, Carol was out of the car.

Carol made it almost halfway before Daryl looked up. For a moment, Carol couldn’t breathe, what if he didn’t remember? Then Daryl moved and Carol found herself wrapped up in a pair of strong familiar arms.

“You remember,” Carol said almost crying. “I was so worried!”

“Me too,” Daryl forced out. The hunter pulled away and looked at Carol as if seeing her for the first time. “I almost forgot what ya looked like at the start.”

Carol rolled her eyes and slapped him on the shoulder. “Speaking of, look at your hair! I haven’t
seen you face this clearly since the quarry,” Carol teased.

“Stop,” Daryl said pulled away slightly.

“Well, well, well,” a familiar voice said from the direction of the store. “What do we have here? A little mouse?”

Carol rolled her eyes and turned to glare at the eldest Dixon. “I take it you remember then too, Merle?” Carol asked certain of the answer.

“Sure do,” Merle said with a smirk. “Why not even twenty minutes ago, I’s telling my baby brother here that we ought to take care of some problems while we still could.”

“No yet,” Daryl grunted. “Gotta find Rick first.”

Merle glowered at Rick’s name but Carol and Daryl were unimpressed. “Behave, Merle,” Carol said sternly. “You’ve got both hands this time around, don’t do anything that might cost you one.”

Merle growled but Daryl stepped up ready to lay his brother out if he tried anything. A soft, voice broke the tension. “Mom?”

Carol turned right away, she could hear Daryl’s sharp intake of breath and she knew he recognized her. Sophia had two bags in her arms, one that had their drinks and other likely with their mystery dessert. “Sophia, sweetheart. come here,” Carol said holding her arm out. Sophia moved closer and her Carol pull her close. “Do you remember me telling you about Daryl?”

“Yeah,” Sophia nodded. “You said he looked for me when I got lost. He looked really hard.”

“That’s right,” Carol said biting back tears. “He looked for you so hard, sweetheart.”

“Thank you, Mr. Dixon,” Sophia said softly from beside her mother. “I know you would have found me if Mr. Otis hadn’t put me in the barn.”

Faintly Carol heard Merle curse as he realized just what had happened to Sophia before.

“Don’t thank me, kid,” Daryl said gruffly. “Didn’t find ya quick enough.”

“But you tired,” Sophia said earnestly. “And that’s what matters. We’re having pizza for dinner, would you like to eat with us?”

Daryl’s eyes met Carol’s and the woman nodded, even after Daryl’s flickered to his brother asking if he could come too.

“Come on, we will fill you in on what we know,” Carol said. “We’re staying at a little hotel a few minutes away.”
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

We catch up with the Greene's and company the say they wake up in the old world.

Chapter Notes

Pay attention to the date markers! This chapter takes place chronologically the same day as chapter 1.

Sunday, June 17th

Breakfast was interesting. Maggie refused to let go of Glenn’s hand and Glenn wasn’t about to let go of Maggie without a fight. Beth just looked on happily and Annette spent most of the meal trying to get to know Maggie’s new friend.

“Where’s daddy?” Maggie asked Annette. The confused woman had invited Glenn to stay even if she still didn’t understand how Maggie knew him. Beth had just the two were close but Annette couldn’t remember ever meeting him before.

“Your daddy took off early this morning,” Annette said. “Wouldn’t say where he was going, just said he was doing something important and that he would be back by supper time.”

Maggie, Beth, and Glenn shared a look that Annette seemed to miss but happily sat down to eat the delicious breakfast that Annette had made.

“Now girls, remember,” Annette said after they had eaten and cleared the table. “Otis will be around this afternoon to do some work in the barn and I think he and Patricia will be staying for dinner so stay out of his way and wash up before dinner.”

“Yes, momma,” Beth said sweetly.

“Yes, ma’am,” Maggie agreed. “Glenn’s going to stay with us today so we can catch up. We might end up taking his car into town to pick up a few things if you need something.”

Annette thought about it and said she would make a list and to see her before they left. Maggie promised they would do so and took Glenn’s hand and left the house. Beth followed, claiming to get want to get a start of her chores and the three went off to find some privacy.

Maggie led them to the stables where the horses were stabled. Nelly, the one who had thrown Daryl oh so long ago in another life greeted Beth and Maggie with a happy noise. Beth shushed the horse and gave Glenn and Maggie another moment.

The couple embraced and didn’t look like they would ever let go, but sooner than she expected Beth found herself pulled into the hug. Maggie pulled Beth between the two of them and whispered
apologies into her hair.

Eventually, the family pulled apart and the questions started.

“What is going on?” Maggie asked. “Is this a dream? Was that the dream?”

Glenn shook his head. “Does it matter?” he questioned. “We’re here, and we are together. That’s all that matters.”

“What about the others? Do they remember?” Beth asked softly. “Are we the only ones?”

“I don’t know,” Glenn admitted. “I came straight here. The others though if they remember they’ll find Rick.”

“And that’s how we will find them,” Maggie said firmly. Glenn could see the change in his wife. She was strong, stronger than she had ever been. There was a strength in Beth as well, a hidden well of power and knowledge that hadn’t been there before. If there was ever a question about whether what they had experienced was real, looking at the Greene sisters it was easy to see the changes.

“What about Daddy?” Beth asked. In the beginning, Hershel had stubborn, and unwilling to see the dead for what they were. Now, Annette and Shawn were alive and they had a chance to keep them that way, but it would be easier with Hershel’s help.

“I think,” Maggie said thoughtfully. “I think he remembers too. I don’t know where he went but he’ll be back and we can talk about it then, okay?”

Beth nodded and shifted her weight from side to side. “Okay,” she said. “I’m going to get started on my chores. Let me know before you go into town?”

“Of course,” Glenn promise. The blonde smiled and left the couple in the stables.

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Hershel was a man on a mission. When he had woken up this morning next to his wife Annette Hershel knew he had been gifted a second chance by God himself. So Hershel had taken note of the day, he remembered when he first started seeing his neighbors die and when he and Otis started putting them in the barn, and he only had a few months.

With the girls safe in bed and Annette just getting up to make breakfast Hershel kissed his wife goodbye and left to get his step-son. Shawn was studying medicine a few hours away. Shawn had got bitten on his way home when things started to get bad. The boy had stopped to help someone and got a bite on his arm and died when he made it to the farm. Annette had been heartbroken and they hadn’t known that Shawn would reanimate. When he did come back he bit his mother and they had lost Annette.

Hershel had been heartbroken and unwilling to see his wife and son as dead. So this time, Shawn would be on the farm when it all happens where Hershel could keep him safe. Even if he had to drag the boy back kicking and screaming.

The sun had only just begun peeking over the horizon when Hershel pulled into town. He pulled out the basic cell phone that Maggie had insisted he buy, (“What if something happens in the fields? You might need it!”) and dialed Shawn’s number. There was no answer but Hershel didn’t expect his step-son to be awake at this hour anyway. Hershel explained that he needed to see Shawn as soon as possible that day and that he would be in town doing some shopping.
His first stop was a lumber yard. The local lumber yard wouldn’t have had the materials that Hershel wanted. He wasn’t sure his group would end up long term, but he wanted to be prepared. The farm would remain relatively untouched for a long while if things played out the same so purchasing some building and fortifying materials and having them shipped to the farm would be a great investment.

After the lumber yard, his next stop was the to the local livestock auction. In the next couple of day, he was going to sell off a few heads of cattle, and look into buying goats. He knew he didn’t have long, but he had faith in his people to do better this time. The prison had been home, Hershel had died defending the place but he would do everything in his power to ensure they didn’t end up there again. That was why his third stop was to visit a friend who specialized in real estate.

Matthew Jenkins had gone to school with Hershel, many, many years ago. They attended the same church for many years before Matthew moved for work. Hershel and Matthew had kept in touch and had helped Shawn find his rental for school. What his old friend didn’t know was that Hershel wasn’t exactly interested in buying but looking with the future in mind.

Around eleven Shawn called back and the two made lunch plans at a local diner that Shawn liked to frequent. The little diner was what the kids would call vintage. The vinyl booths were bright red but the entire space smelled like the breakfast menu and coffee. There was a tattered paper sign in the window by the door with delicate handwriting proclaiming, ‘cash only’ and the bell above the door jingled when it was opened. Shawn was already where when Hershel arrived, a cup of coffee waiting at the seat across from the younger man.

Shawn greeted his step-father with a hug and they sat down together. “The waitress will be ‘round in a minute to take our orders,” Shawn said. He looked tired, but Hershel couldn’t tell if it was anything beyond normal student exhaustion.

“Thank you, son,” Hershel said taking a drink of his coffee.

“So what’s up dad?” Shawn asked curiously. “You never come up without calling first.”

Hershel didn’t often travel beyond the farm or their small community if he didn’t have to. Maggie had started making the majority of the out of town trips which left Hershel more time to tend the farm.

“Had some errands to run,” Hershel said truthfully. “But mostly I came to see you.”

He had spent all morning debating and thinking about how he was going to bring it up with his logically minded step-son. Hershel wasn’t sure what made him remember, how he did, and he knew even less about whether Shawn had any memory of the end of the world. The waitress wandered up and gave the pair a small but genuine smile, Hershel ordered eggs, bacon, hashbrowns, and toast while Shawn picked a short stack of pancakes and a small side of fruit. The waitress topped of their coffee and left the duo alone again.

The diner wasn’t very busy. It was a weekday morning, getting closer to the lunch rush but after the breakfast rush so Hershel and Shawn would have the place to themselves for a while yet. It was then that Hershel took the chance to ask Shawn if everything was alright. What Hershel had first thought was simply exhaustion began to look more and more like something was wrong. He was pale and shaky. More than that when someone in the kitchen dropped a dish the crashing noise had startled Shawn so bad that he spilled some of his coffee.

“Is something the matter, son?” Hershel asked carefully. “You’ve been jumpy and you’re rather pale.”
Shawn frowned down at the table and Hershel waited patiently. If there was one thing he had learned with Shawn it was that you couldn’t rush the boy. He did everything according to his own schedule and at his own pace. When Shawn was younger is had driven Hershel crazy and was the source of many arguments between the two. Now, older and wiser Hershel sat and waited. He drank his coffee and eat his breakfast when it arrived, waiting for Shawn to tell him what was wrong.

It was halfway through his hashbrowns that Shawn started talking about the terrible nightmare he had the night before. “There was some kind of disease,” Shawn explained. “I stayed at school because I thought it would blow over soon, but it didn’t. People just kept getting sicker and sicker. Finally, I had to head home but I got bit on my way back.”

Shawn’s voice dropped very low as he explained making it back home and dying on the farm. “It felt so real,” Shawn said earnestly. “When I woke up this morning I thought I was still dreaming.”

Hershel had gone still the moment he realized what Shawn was explaining. Hearing his son’s journey from school back to the farm and to hear him describe his own death left the older man shaken.


Shawn shook his head, Hershel could see that the younger man did not want to accept this, but Hershel pushed on, unwilling to put his son at risk. “Shawn,” Hershel said firmly, but soft enough to not risk being overheard. “You died that night on the farm, and your mother died shortly after.”

Shawn shook his head in disbelief. Hershel knew that it was beyond difficult to believe. Even he, who had lived so long into the end of the world could believe it. The weight of knowing what was to come was almost suffocating.

“That disease? It’s coming,” Hershel said not wanting to get into the details of how he and the girls had lived after losing the farm. “I’m not losing you again. Not like that. Come home with me.”

Shawn continued to shake his head. “It couldn’t have been real,” Shawn muttered. “It’s not possible.”

“I’ve seen a great number of impossible things,” Hershel said thoughtfully. “I’ve seen impossible cruelty, impossible negligence, I’ve seen impossible miracles as well and let me tell you, son. What is coming, that is not even the worst of it.”

Shawn finally looked up and found his father’s gaze. He looked shaken and confused. “I don’t understand,” Shawn said. “Why do I remember? How are we back here again?”

This time Hershel shook his head. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “I doubt we will ever know, but we have been given another chance and we have to take it.”

Seeing his father’s determination and his resolved seemed to steady Shawn. “What do I need to do?” Shawn asked he sounded exhausted.

Hershel reached across the table and grabbed Shawn’s hand. “We load up the important things and make it home before dinner,” Hershel said simply. “We have a lot of preparing to do.”

“Do, Maggie and Beth remember? Did they die too?” Shawn asked. “You said mom dies, but what about them?”

“Your sisters are some of the strongest women I know,” Hershel said fondly. “Come on, I’ll tell
you what I know as we pack.”

The older man pulled out his wallet and paid the bill in cash, leaving a healthy tip. Father and son left the diner. “We are going to stop and see a few properties before we leave,” Hershel said thoughtfully.

“Are we buying land?” Shawn asked confused.

“Oh, no,” Hershel said with a smile. “Not buying, scouting.”

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“Daddy’s home!” Beth called from the front porch.

Maggie, who was in the kitchen with Annette and Patricia working on supper, paused and looked to Glenn. Glenn had offered to help but Annette wouldn’t hear it and the Korean man had to settle with standing awkwardly in the kitchen as Maggie, Patricia, and Annette cooked around him.

Beth had stepped out to grab the wash off the line before it got too dark and let Otis know the food was almost done when she saw Hershel’s truck pulling down the driveway. “And it looks like Shawn is with him!” Beth said excitedly as she came back into the kitchen.

Maggie’s eyes light up at the mention of her brother. “That makes sense,” Maggie muttered to Glenn. “Daddy has to remember, there’s no other reason for him to have gone to get Shawn.”

“Shawn didn’t come home until after the outbreak had started last time,” Beth explained joining her sister and brother-in-law. “And by then it was too late.”

“Girls, go see if your daddy needs help,” Annette said. “I’ll set the table.”

“Yes ma’am,” Maggie and Beth said at almost the same time. Maggie grabbed Glenn’s hand and laced their fingers together as they walked. This would be the ultimate test for Hershel. If he recognized Glenn, then he remembered as well.

The sun was slowly sinking, the soft oranges during the landscape golden. Hershel’s truck was loaded down with stuff and Maggie could see Shawn’s car being much the same.

“Shawn!” Beth shouted throwing herself at her older brother. Shawn caught the blonde and hugged her tight.

“Bethie!” Shawn said with just as much excitement. “I missed you.”

“Daddy!” Maggie screamed. Hershel wrapped his arms around his daughter and held her tight. The last time they had seen each other was with a fence between them and a sword at Hershel’s neck. The old man had not survived that incident.

Before long Beth had moved from her brother to her father’s side and joined the hug. In the slowly dying sunlight, the little fractured Greene family had survived together for so long only to slowly slip away person by person came together again.

Shawn watched from next to his car and understood a fraction of what his family had gone through together after he had died. He saw the unfamiliar Korean man standing a ways away with a smile on his face, Shawn didn’t know him but he would bet his sisters did.

Maggie and Beth pulled away and Maggie waved the Korean man closer. “Daddy, look, Glenn
“found us,” she said taking Glenn’s hand into her own.

“Glenn,” Hershel greeted warmly with a brief hug.

“Hershel,” Glenn said, the word said more like a prayer than a name. “It’s so great to see you.”

“I think I have something of yours,” Hershel said as he pulled a familiar watch from his pocket. Glenn took it gratefully and tightened his grip on Maggie’s hand.

“So who’s this?” Shawn asked curiously. He guessed the man was close with Maggie and had been close to Hershel and Beth with how they acted.

“Shawn this is Glenn,” Maggie introduced. “He’s my husband. Glenn this is Shawn, my brother.”

Glenn’s handshake was firm and strong and his eyes were kind. “It’s nice to meet you,” Glenn said honestly. “I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“Nice to meet you too,” Shawn said with a laugh. Husband? How could Maggie have a husband, Shawn thought. How much had changed, did Beth have someone out there looking for her? Did he even know his family anymore? “I know nothing about you.”

Glenn chuckled and shook his head. “We can get to know each other later,” Glenn promised.

“Supper is on the table,” Annette called from the porch. She had her hands on her hips and Hershel could see she wanted answers. “Everyone, come on in and eat. When we’re done, someone is going to explain just what is going on here, and why Shawn is home when I know he has classes tomorrow.”

“Yes, dear,” Hershel promised. “Come along now. Supper’s getting cold.”

The Greene family patriarch ushered his children, including Glenn, into the house with Annette watching bemusedly. The woman shook her head and followed along after her family, she wanted answers but like any good southern mother, she needed to feed them first. Then she would ask her questions and if Hershel knew what was good for him, he’d answer each and every one of them.

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Supper had been a happy affair, the food was plentiful and the company was cheerful. Hershel had promised answers after dinner and the group accepted it. Annette and Shawn took the opportunity to get to know Glenn who easily won them over. Maggie watched her husband easily win over her stepmother and brother and kept an ear open when she heard Hershel explain to Otis that there were going to be several deliveries coming to the farm in the next few weeks. Beth softly engaged Patricia about something the older sister couldn’t hear but with the good cheer and family surrounding her, Maggie didn’t much mind.

After the meal was done, the dishes had been washed and put away everyone gathered in the sitting room.

“Hershel Greene, what is going on here?” Annette asked. “You were gone all with, left with hardly a word. And when you came back Shawn is with you, Shawn what about school?”

“And, Glenn you seem like a wonderful young man but I know I’ve never seen you before, but Maggie, Hershel, and Beth are treating you like family,” Annette continued. “It’s like you all woke up this morning knowing something I don’t.”
“That’s basically what happened,” Maggie said with a shrug before anyone else could answer.

“She’s right,” Hershel said with a sigh. “When I woke up this morning I had to go get Shawn because I knew something that I wasn’t sure anyone else would remember.”

“And what is it?” Annette demanded. “You’re all saying a lot of words but not saying much that means something.”

“Is this about the dead people?” Otis asked suddenly.

Maggie, Glenn, Beth, Shawn, and Hershel turned to the farmhand in shock. “You remember too?” Beth asked confused.

The large man nodded slowly. “I do,” he said. “I remember finding all those people and putting them in the barn. I remember the hunting accident with that little boy and I remember Shane.”

White hot anger flashed through Maggie at the mention of Shane Walsh. Rick’s partner had been out of control on the farm, a danger to everyone and this time he wouldn’t be the same risk, even if that meant Maggie had to put a bullet in him herself.

“Dead people?” Annette asked. “What on God’s green earth are you all talking about?”

Hershel stepped up and started to explain. He told the story of the start of it all, the news reports of mysterious deaths, of riots across the country. Annette gasped and whispered that she had seen a news report of a man on drugs that had eaten someone in Florida. Hershel told them about how when it got bad, how Shawn had tried to come home but died and then bit Annette. He told them how he put them in the barn and how slowly more friends and neighbors joined them in the barn.

Hershel explained how they met Rick and the others and their time on the farm until the night the herd came through. He continued as he explained their winter on the road, always hungry and cold. He smiled when he talked about the prison and how they fought and won their new home. He spoke haltingly about losing his leg and the Governor. He described their home, the place they had built at the prison and eventually he told them how they lost it. He stopped after he got to the part with the Governor’s return and his own death.

Maggie, biting back tears told her story. How she struggled to find Glenn and Beth after the prison fell, the journey to Terminus that ended in being trapped in a train car. Glenn told them what they were, the Termites, how they ate people. He told them about the escape, and how they found a church to rest in and how they confronted the cannibals that chased after them. He explained the deal he made with Abraham’s group and about the false cure and how they made it back to the group to hear that they had found Beth.

Beth picked up the story after that as best she could. She told a story that Maggie and Glenn had only heard from Daryl, and even then only the barest parts of it. She explained how she and Daryl had escaped together and how she had been taken by the people at Grady and how the group had come to rescue her, and how she had died at the end of Dawn’s gun.

Glenn started again as Maggie moved to embrace her sister. Glenn explained their lowest point, how life on the road was, after time and time again they hit a dead end with no relief in sight. He told them about meeting Aaron and about Alexandria. He told them about Aiden and Nicholas. He told them about Pete, about Maggie’s pregnancy and about the walkers in the quarry. He explained the wolves and how the walls fell. Finally, he told them about the saviors. He explained who they were and what they did. He told them how the group had terrorized the other communities and how Alexandria defied them. He ended with the night in the woods with the group on their knees
knowing that someone was going to die.

Glenn choked as he explained Abraham’s death and Maggie sobbed as Glenn forced himself to
describe his own death at the hand of the madman Negan. Maggie spoke through tears as she said
Negan took Daryl and left them there. She told her family how they brought Glenn and Abraham to
Hill Top and of the days after. She said that she didn’t know how they woke up here, or why they
remembered or anything.

“And it’s doesn’t matter,” Maggie said. “I don’t care why were are here again. That’s not what we
need to focus on.”

“Maggie’s right,” Hershel said. The old man had tears on his face from the story. He had cried at
his youngest daughter’s fate and he cried more when he learned about what happened to Glenn and
Maggie at Negan’s hands. “What’s important is that we are together and that we’ll be ready this
time.”

“What are we going to do?” Annette asked. “How do we prepare for this?” Hershel could see that
this wife was overwhelmed. He was overwhelmed and he had outlived his wife and stepson last
time.

“We get supplies,” Maggie suggested. Her eyes were red and tear tracks were still visible on her
face. “We get supplies and we find the others.”

Hershel nodded in agreement. “Last time they found us, so even if they don’t remember, they are
likely to find us eventually,” he said thoughtfully. “But I can’t imagine we are the only ones who
remember this.”

“I’ll find them,” Glenn said. “I think I remember where Rick said he worked as a cop.”

“But wait,” Maggie said thinking hard. “Wasn’t Rick shot before all of this? He said once he woke
up in a hospital.”

Glenn swore softly and swiftly apologized to Hershel and Annette for his language. “You’re right,”
Glenn said dejectedly. “He might already be in the coma. We don’t even know if he’ll survive this
time. He could already be dead.”

“He’s not,” Beth said plainly. When everyone turned to look at her she wiggled her smartphone at
them. “At least, there hadn’t been any news about it.”

The Greene’s didn’t have a home computer. Hershel didn’t know how to use one and it would have
cost too much to have it installed, but he had given into Beth’s pleading for a fancy phone. Now it
was proving to be an asset.

“I searched Rick Grimes, and there isn’t anything about him being shot,” Beth said flicking
through something on her touchscreen. “Lori has a facebook page,” Beth said searching names she
remembered. “So does Andrea.”

“Give me that,” Maggie said taking the phone. Beth shrugged and easily handed it over. “We can
use this to find our people.”

Glenn nodded. It was easy to forget what resources they still had because of how much they had to
adapt after the world had ended “Beth, how do I make a facebook account?” Maggie asked poking
at the application. Maggie had never bothered before. She hadn’t liked the idea of people finding
her on the internet.
“Give it back, I’ll do it,” Beth said snatching her phone back. “Say ‘cheese’!”

Maggie managed a quick smile before Beth’s phone flashed. Hershel watched with a bemused smile. He didn’t know what Beth and Maggie were doing but he hoped it would work.

“I’m having supplies shipped here,” Hershel said. “Lumber, fencing, and the like. Tomorrow, Otis, Shawn, and I are going to load up some cattle for auction and pick up a few goats.”

Glenn and the other nodded along to Hershel’s plan. Glenn had to smile, the older man was already planning for a long-term place. “I went and saw a friend of mine that specializes in real estate, Shawn and I got a few profiles on ranches far out and away from everything. Even if they won’t be permanent we can stay there if we need to leave the farm.”

“Wow,” Glenn said shaking his head. “I wouldn’t have even thought about that.”

Hershel laughed and smiled at his son-in-law. “Yes you would have,” Hershel said. “But not until after you found Maggie.”

“There!” Beth said triumphantly. “All setup. Who do you want me to look up? I’ll keep an eye on the messages so you don’t have too.”

Maggie rattled off a few names, “Michonne, she never told us her last name. Tara uh, Chambers? No, Chambler or something.”

“It wasn’t important,” Glenn explained to a confused looking Annette. “For a lot of people, last names were just reminders of people and family they had lost.”

“Is this her?” Beth asked showing Maggie Tara Chamber’s facebook picture.

“Yes!” Maggie cheered. “That’s her.”

“Who else?” Beth asked sending Tara a friend request.

“Sasha and Tyrese,” Glenn said for Maggie. “Their last name was Williams. Ty was a football player in Florida, remember?”

Beth nodded and made a noise when she found Sasha’s profile and sent the request.

“Try Rosita, R-O-S-I-T-A I don’t know her last name,” Maggie said. “Let me see the pictures.”

There were dozens of profiles with Rosita’s name but Maggie didn’t see the familiar face. “Maggie, someone named Eugene Porter just added you,” Beth said poking at the phone. “Do you know him?”

“Eugene?” Glenn and Maggie said together. “Yes! He’s the one that lied about the cure,” Maggie explained. “He must have had the same idea.”

“Well I accepted his request, oh he sent you a message,” Beth said. “It looks like a phone number.”

“Give it here,” Maggie said taking Beth’s phone again. She entered the number into her own, much more basic cell phone and handed it back to Beth. “I’m going to step out and call him.”

Hershel smiled at his family. Shawn was talking to Otis about getting to auction tomorrow. Beth was still tapping away at her phone in a way that would have normally resulted in a stern talking to about phone usage during family time. Annette and Patricia were talking softly, likely trying to understand what was going on. Maggie had stepped out and Glenn had gone with her. Hershel
didn’t know this Eugene character but he was family to Glenn and Maggie which made him family to Hershel. The older man stood from his seat and held out a hand to Annette.

“It’s getting late, Otis, Patricia, you are both welcome to spend the night,” Hershel said. “Glenn will be staying with Maggie so the guest room will be free. Bethie, don’t stay up all night on that thing. We all have a lot of work to do tomorrow.”

Beth smiled and nodded and after hugging her parents and brother and saying her goodnights Beth disappeared up the stairs to get ready for bed. Shawn did the same and walked with Otis and Patricia leaving Hershel and Annette alone. The man gave his wife a soft kiss on the temple and pushed her gently toward the stairs. “I’m going to check on Maggie and Glenn,” he said. “I’ll be right up.”

Glenn and Maggie had stepped back into the kitchen and could hear a distinct voice coming from the phone, Maggie had put the phone on speaker so Glenn could hear and speak as well. The young man had a very particular speech pattern that could be heard through the speaker.

“We’ll call back tomorrow,” Maggie promised. “Try and find Rosita and Abraham, we’ll find Rick and the others around here.”

“I will endeavor to do that,” Eugene said. “I do not wish to recreate my first meetings with them in the manner in which they occurred previously. Nor do I wish to be here when the proverbial shit hits the fan.”

“We’ll get you up here before that all happens, Eugene,” Glenn promised. “Or a few of us will come down there, we’re family remember? No one gets left behind.”

The man on the other end coughed loudly. “Correct, no one gets left behind,” Eugene repeated. “Then I will leave you and start looking for the others. It is my hope that they remember as well and I will not have to convince them.”

“If you lie about the cure again, I’ll punch you in the face,” Maggie promised with a hard edge in her voice. “Try and find them and then wait for more instructions. Don’t do anything stupid.”

“I shall not,” Eugene said as firmly as he could.

They said their goodbyes and Maggie rolled her eyes. “That man,” she muttered tucking her phone into her pocket. Glenn chuckled and shrugged. “Did everyone already turn in for the night?” Maggie asked her father.

“Yes,” Hershel said with a nod. “We have an early morning tomorrow. So head on up to bed, I need to talk to Glenn for a moment.”

“Right,” Maggie agreed. She gave her father a kiss goodnight and disappeared up the stairs.

“What did you want to talk to me about?” Glenn asked his father-in-law. “Is it about staying with Maggie? Because, uh I can sleep on the couch if you want. This is your house and I don’t want to make -”

Hershel laughed and shook his head. “Son, you can’t be a bright as I thought you were if you think for a second Maggie is going to let you sleep anywhere but in her arms tonight,” Hershel said. “No, I have a favor to ask you.”

“Of course,” Glenn said without question. “What do you need?”
Wednesday, June 20th

Carol breathed out a soft breath and looked over at her daughter who was still asleep under the covers. This would be their second day at the hotel, last night after finding Daryl and Merle at the gas station they had returned to Carol’s room and the woman had explained what she knew. They compared memories and tried to piece together a timeline with the information they had and what Rick had told Carol. Roughly, Carol had decided they had almost three and a half months before the bombing of Atlanta. It simultaneously felt like more than enough time to prepare and no time at all.

Carol had shared her worry that others remembered, she explained how the camping aisle at Wal-Mart had been almost bare. Daryl reluctantly agreed having shared that the local hunting store had almost been cleaned out as well. Merle even said that one of his associates had been muttering about people eating people before they lit up out of town. It confirmed Carol’s fears that they weren’t the only ones who remembered.

Early that morning, Rick had stopped by before heading home after his shift and Rick and Daryl had reunited. The men greeted each other likely family as Merel taunted his brother and the office before backing down to Rick’s glare. Rick had made it clear that if Merel was sticking around he needed to shape up because Rick wasn’t handing out second chances this time around.

There had been something in the man’s eyes that convinced the older man to listen. Even Daryl who would always try to do right by Merle even if the older man wouldn’t always do right by him had stood beside Rick at that moment. They had both seen Rick do terrible things to protect their family and Merle had caught a glimpse of that. Merle had left soon after with a vague promise to return soon, he said he had things to take care of.

Carol had shared a concerned look with Daryl but they let the man go.

“Is he going to be a problem?” Rick asked after Merle had left.

Daryl bit harshly at his thumbnail but shook his head. “Nah, he’s been clean since we woke up,” Daryl explained. “Gitin’ off the drugs is puttin’ ‘em in a shit mood is all.”

Carol snorted with a soft laugh at the thought and Daryl shot her a small smirk before sobering up. “He’s gunna kill the Governor,” Daryl said simply. “’s soon as he finds the asshole he’s gunna kill ‘em.”

Rick grimaced but nodded. “I ain’t gunna stop him,” Rick said slowly. “I don’t know who the Governor was before and what made him the way he was but if we don’t have to risk it, I won’t say I’m bothered by it.”

“I’s thinking of taking a trip,” Daryl said his eyes going dark. “Find that other sonofabitch and
takin’ him out ‘fore he’s a problem.”

Rick and Carol both knew he meant Negan without having to hear the man’s name.

“He talked a lot,” Daryl said simply thinking of what the man had told him while he was being held captive at the Sanctuary. “I can find ‘em.”

“No,” Rick said firmly. “Not now.”

When Daryl went to complain Rick shook his head and continued. “No, listen, if we do this right, we won’t ever have to go near D.C. or Negan,” Rick said. “At least not until we are ready and we want too.”

“Rick with the savior’s operation they aren’t going to stay in D.C. forever,” Carol said. “And what about the people in Alexandria, Hilltop, and the Kingdom? Can we really leave them to Negan?

“You were just saying that we might not be the only ones who remember, right?” Rick said. “Well, what if that asshole remembers too? Same for the others, we didn’t make it D.C. until two years after this all started. We have no idea what the road was like before that. We need to find our people and hunker down somewhere, we know life on the road isn’t sustainable and we do not want to walk into some unknown situation half cocked looking for one man.”

Daryl scowled but nodded reluctantly and Carol reluctantly agreed. “So what now?” Carol asked.

Rick yawned and shook his head. “Now? I’m going home to get some sleep,” Rick said with a smile. “Then we find our people.”

Carol smiled. “Alright then, this afternoon, I’ll go to the library and use their computers. Maybe I can use them to find some of the others.”

“What about you?” Rick asked Daryl.

The hunter shrugged and Carol got an idea. “You can watch the kids,” Carol said with a smirk. “Sophia needs to learn how to shoot.”

“Wha? No way,” Daryl said. “I’ll go shoppin’ er something and the kids can go wit’ ya.”

Rick laughed and shook his head. “No it’s a good idea, I’ll come along,” Rick said with a smirk. “Carl needs a refresher, he keeps forgetting he’s not as tall anymore and always overreaches everything. And you’ll get to see Judith again.”

“Lil’ Ass-kicker? She’s here too?” Daryl demanded suddenly and Carol nodded happily.

“We don’t know how, and I ain’t questioning it,” Rick said just happy that his daughter was alive. “But she’s here, only about six weeks old but she’s here.”

After that Rick has excused himself to get some sleep before coming back to help Daryl with the kids. Daryl grumbled but retreated downstairs for a smoke. Carol had returned to her room with Sophia still tucked away in bed and waited.

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The library was mostly empty which didn’t surprise Carol. There were three computers that the public could use Carol chose the first one she saw. Carol wasn’t sure where to start on trying to find her people so she began by trying to find some evidence of what was going on. Some part of
her, a dark part, whispered that it had all been a dream. A terrible, dream and the dead wouldn’t rise and their lives wouldn’t be ruined again. She almost feared that more than anything because if it had all been a dream then what did that make this?

Her first search of ‘new virus’ found nothing, but when she changed it to ‘dead people’ and ‘bite’ something came up. There was a story out of Florida of a man on an army base that had evidently taken some bad drugs and started to eat and kill his fellow soldiers. The news said the man was shot and killed when the police tried to arrest him and there was nothing else. The story had been reported by a small local paper and mentioned once or twice by a bigger news source but there was never any kind of follow up and a dark sense of satisfaction overcame her.

It was real and the dead were coming.

“Oh wow, that looks bad,” a voice said from behind Carol.

Carol jumped and turned quickly. She stared wide-eyed at Lori Grime who smiled at her apologetically. “Oh, I’m sorry I didn’t mean to scare you,” Lori said. “I just saw the headline and thought it was crazy.”

“Yes,” Carol said with a laugh. “It is.” Carol had no idea what to say to Lori, what do you say to a dead woman walking? A woman you had mourned? How did Rick and Carl do it? Especially since Carol knew Rick had moved on?

“Oh, hi, I’m Lori, we met last night when you dropped off Carl and Judy,” Lori said with a smile. “Is there anything I can help you with?”

Carol shook Lori’s hand and shook her head. “Oh no, I’m just trying to connect with some friends that I lost contact with a few years ago and I somehow managed to stumble across this!” Carol managed a self-deprecating grin. “I’ve never been very good at the computer.”

“Hmmm,” Lori said thoughtfully. “Maybe I can help? Someone in my mommy group helped me set up a facebook account, it’s been wonderful and it even let me connect with some old friends from high school. Maybe you can find your friends there?”

Carol made a noise of agreement and watched Lori create her account. “Okay, what was your name again, hun?” Lori asked.

“Carol Dixon,” Carol said without thinking about it. She wasn’t going to use Ed’s name, not here and now. “D-I-X-O-N.”

“It was nice of you to drop the kids off last night!” Lori said suddenly. “Normally I’d have to pick them up from the station or something.”

“It was no problem,” Carol said waving Lori off. “Sophia enjoyed the extra play time.”

“Excuse me? Can you help me find a book?” Another patron asked from behind the two women.

“Oh,” Lori said jumping slightly. She hadn’t heard anyone come up behind her. “Of course, I’ll be right there. Well, you should be all set up. You just search names, here and you can friend people by clicking this!” Carol watched as Lori explained and nodded that she understood.

“Well, I hope that helps but I’ve got to get back to work,” Lori said. “It was nice meeting you.”

“You too,” Carol said watching Lori walk away. The woman turned back to the screen and frowned. She wasn’t too sure about this, Sophia had asked to make a MySpace account not too long
ago but Carol had said no, she wasn’t sure it was safe but maybe if this could lead her to her people Facebook wouldn’t be too bad.

The first name she typed in was ‘Maggie Greene’ and when a familiar face popped up Carol smiled. She added the profile as a and sent a message. “Call me, 555-678-0123 room number 207.” She wasn’t sure if Maggie remembered but, this would be a good test.

Carol logged out like Lori had shown her and stared at the computer screen thoughtfully. She had plenty of time before Rick and Daryl had finished teaching the kids and she felt like there was more she needed to do. If the thing with Maggie worked out then Carol would try others from the group. A sudden thought came to mind. She had learned a lot by trial and error last time. How to deal with certain types of injuries, what foods were safe to eat. How to make water safe to drink but there was still a lot she didn’t know, maybe she could find some books that might help or even find some information online. Slowly Carol typed into the search bar, ‘how to make drinking water safe’ and her face lit up when dozens of answers scrolled across the screen.

Carol had research to do.

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Daryl gnawed at his thumbnail lost in thought. Rick could see his self-proclaimed brother was miles and miles away from the little piece of woods that they had chosen to teach the kids. Rick had suggested the actual shooting range but Daryl hadn’t felt comfortable so they retreated to the woods just outside of town where Rick knew most of the locals practiced. It was empty, which was normal for a weekday afternoon and spent shell casings littered the ground.

Rick had set up a few targets in the form of bottles and beer cans against the hillside. The kids had been given a gun and then Rick went over gun safety with Sophia while Daryl watched Carl start his practice. Daryl could see why Rick wanted Carl to get some shooting time in. Before, the kids had just gotten used to having one eye, and now he was back to two. Plus the boy kept reacting like he was taller and heavier than he was and it threw his aim off.

“What’s wrong?” Rick asked getting Daryl’s attention.

Daryl jerked his hand away and shook his head. ‘Nuthin’,” Daryl grunted.

“Bull,” Rick said easily. “Ya got somethin’ on your mind. I can tell.”

Daryl didn’t answer for a moment and let his eyes slide over to the kids who were laughing and teasing each other when they missed a target.

“This ain’t the same,” Daryl said simply. “Already it ain’t and what we know from before? Don’t mean we know what’s comin’.”

Rick followed Daryl gaze to the kids and nodded in agreement. His mind went to Judith who he was holding a bottle for right then. The two men had retreated back to take care of the baby after the kids got the hang of shooting. Rick didn’t want the sound of the gun to scare Judith or hurt her ears so he was he was standing back by his squad car taking care of the baby.

“You’re right,” Rick said looking down at his daughter. “Judith is proof of that. I don’t even know if she’s mine this time either.”

“Hey,” Daryl said firmly catching Rick’s gaze. “That girl? She’s yers. You fought fer her, bled. She’s yers. Don’t matter if Shane’s ta’ one to knock Lori up. That little girl’s yers. Same as last time.”
Rick was right. The men sat in silence for a long time, watching the kids hoot and holler with each target they hit. Judith was a warm weight in Rick’s arms and the man thought about what Daryl had said about fighting and bleeding for his daughter. His mind couldn’t help but bring a parallel between what Daryl had done for Sophia when she had gotten lost. Daryl had fought against everyone, even Carol to keep hope alive. He had bled for the girl, almost died trying to find her and part of Rick wanted to tell Daryl that. He could see the way the other man looked at Sophia. He looked at her like he was seeing a ghost. Rick held his tongue more than aware of how Daryl would react to Rick’s epiphany.

“We’ll make it work,” Rick said getting back to their original conversation. “We could retake the prison, hell we could take Woodbury if we wanted.”

Daryl scoffed but Rick could see some of the tension slip from his shoulders and the man continued. “We’re stronger this time,” Rick said thoughtfully. “We know what the hell we’re doing, we’re going to be fine.”

“There’s a lot we don’ know,” Daryl shot back. “Carol’s sure other folks remember too, they’re gunna try and do what we’re doin’.”

“Well we’ll just do it better,” Rick said firmly. “Go get the kids, we’re done for the day. Carol should be back around now anyway.”

“Psssh,” Daryl said pushing away from the car. “Ain’t no tellin’ wha’ that woman’s up too.”

Rick watched Daryl get the kid’s attention and he showed Sophia how to unload the gun and pack it away. Daryl didn’t bother taking Carl’s gun, Rick had made it clear that Carl should keep in on him at all times. They weren’t sure when the dead would start walking this time around but Rick wasn’t going to risk it. Killing a walker with a knife was difficult in the beginning and his young-again-son wouldn’t have the strength for it yet.

Daryl loaded the kids up in Rick’s squad car with ease and retreated to Merle’s bike, Rick wasn’t sure how the younger Dixon had managed to wrangle the bike from the elder Dixon but it was comfortably familiar to hear the bike’s engine thunder.

The drive back into town and to the hotel was short. Rick’s eyes flickered to the clock on his dashboard and mentally calculated how long until Lori got off work. It was around 2 pm so they had around three hours.

Rick and Carl hadn’t sat down and discussed Lori yet. Carl knew that his father had mourned and seemingly gotten over Lori in their lives before. The part of him that loved and missed Lori after she died now loved and missed Michonne. Rick knew his son was in a similar situation and was worried for the woman how had come to mean so much to them both. They needed to sit down and talk about what it all meant for them but by some unspoken agreement, they were waiting to see if Michonne even remembered them. Rick knew that Carl was worried that she didn’t and every day that went by without finding her, Rick was too.

Rick pulled into the familiar hotel parking lot and watched the kids run up the stairs as soon as they were released from the backseat of his squad car. Daryl rolled his eyes and took Judith, car seat and all, and stomped up after them. Left with no children to watch Rick leisurely made his way up the stairs to Carol and Sophia’s room.

Rick could hear the kids before he got to the door, someone had left the door cracked so he wouldn’t have to knock. Rick pushed the door open and was met with three smiling faces and an amused and slightly teary-eyed Daryl.
“It’s for you,” Carl said holding what Rick noticed was the hotel room phone. Rick looked at Carol asking who was on the other line but the woman shook her head and nodded to the phone. Rick scooted Carl down the bed and took his seat. His son handed him the phone and he put it to his ear.

“Hello?”

“Hey, dumbass.” Rick’s breath caught in his throat and he could hear a laugh somewhere on the other line.

“Glenn,” Rick said breathlessly.

“Yeah, it’s me.”

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Carol moved to stand by Daryl who was holding Judith like a lifeline in the corner as Rick talked on the phone with Glenn. When she had made it back to the hotel room, a folder full of paper she had printed with so much information that they hadn’t had before, the phone was ringing. Carol had thrown the papers onto her bed and jumped for the phone.

Hearing Maggie’s voice on the other line had been like breathing fresh air for the first time in years. It was even better when she heard Glenn’s voice with Maggie’s. Carol, Glenn, and Maggie caught up and made plans. Carol explained what she knew and who she had found and the young couple did the same. Carol had just been describing her meeting with Lori and the information she had gathered when Daryl and the kids walked in.

“We’re married now,” Carol said with a quirk of her lips. Daryl stiffened like she knew he would and turned to glare at her.

“The hell ya talkin’ ‘bout?” Daryl demanded.

“It says so on my facebook page and everything,” Carol continued not really answering Daryl’s demand. “Carol Dixon. We had quite the ceremony.”

Daryl squinted at her and Carol laughed. “Lori helped me set up a facebook page at the library, it’s how I found Maggie,” Carol explained. “She needed my name and I’m done living with Ed’s, so I borrowed yours.”

“Why’d ya wanna do somethin’ stupid like that?” Daryl demanded. “Ain’t nobody wanna be a Dixon.”

Carol shrugged. She had Daryl had a complicated relationship. She had loved him since they left the farm, but Daryl hadn’t been ready so Carol had accepted that. They were close, no one would deny that and sometimes that closeness moved from friendship to more and back without their meaning too.

“I don’t think I’d mind,” Carol said softly. “Not if it meant being with you.”

Knowing that she had overwhelmed him Carol took Judith from his stunned arms and retreated to where Sophia was sitting on her bed listening to Rick’s one-sided conversation. Carl was grinning from ear to ear and even Carol felt lighter having found some of her family.

“Alright,” Rick said getting Carol’s attention. “We’ll come out to the farm this weekend then.”

Carol nodded when Rick caught her eye and she guessed that Daryl did the same when Rick’s eyes
“Alright, we’ll see y’all then,” Rick said with a smile. “Bye.”

Rick hung up the phone and wrapped an arm around Carl’s shoulders.

“We’ve all been invited to a wedding this weekend,” Rick said happily. Carl gave a happy little shout and even Sophia looked excited. “Maggie and Glenn want to get it done official before the end. It’s gunna be us, Hershel and his family, and Glenn is trying to get his sisters to come into town.”

Carol understood that Glenn was trying to save his sisters and her heart went out to the young man. He had cried many nights over the fate of his family.

“Ya know if this thing works out,” Daryl said thoughtfully biting his thumbnail. “We’re gunna have a much bigger group.”

Rick nodded. “Yeah,” he said raspily. “That’s how I know we’re gunna be okay. Last time, we were small, weak. This time guys like the Governor or Negan? They don’t know who their fucking with.”

Carol smirked and shook her head. She could hear Daryl scoff but there was a look in Rick’s eyes that made her believe him. “Oh!” Carol said remembering her trip to the library. “I found a few things while I was trying to find the others.” She picked up the folder from behind her and handed it to Rick.

“A story from a month or so ago about a man on drugs that ate someone,” Carol explained knowing what was on top. “But that’s not what’s important, look behind it.”

Carol watched as the confusion on Rick’s face melt into awe. “That’s instructions on how to make gunpowder, food preservation instructions, how to filter water, Rick, this is almost everything we didn’t know before,” Carol said as Rick flipped through some of the papers. “I was going to sit down with Sophia and learn how to do it, so we aren’t dependant on the paper. But this information, it’s out there waiting for us to find it.”

“Good,” Rick said handing the folder back. “I want you to teach Carl too when he’s with you.”

Carol nodded, not bothering to tell the man that she would have taught Carl without Rick’s permission.

“You kids want pizza for lunch again?” Rick asked picking up the phone. Carl and Sophia both eagerly said yes, knowing that pizza would soon be a thing of the past. “Alright, godown to the front desk and tell Margret that we have a pizza order coming.” Margret the woman who ran the little hotel liked to know if there were any deliveries or guests coming, and she had babysat Carl once or twice when he was younger so he knew it would be a good way to get the kids out of the room for a minute or two.

After the door slammed shut behind them Rick rubbed his face and sighed. “I’m gunna tell Lori tomorrow,” Rick said. “I didn’t want Carl to hear because I don’t know if she’s gunna believe me and if she does I don’t know what to do from here.”

“Judith looks exactly the same,” Carol said softly. Rick nodded tiredly.

“I know,” he said softly. “I ain’t gunna bother with a divorce, we don’t have time and it’s not worth it.” Rick paused and looked the baby sleeping happily in Daryl’s arms.
“She’s mine,” Rick said forcefully. The tone and the words made Daryl smirk dangerously. “Lori and Shane, they wanna be together? That’s fine, that’s on them, but my kids? They don’t get my kids.”

“Lori was my friend,” Carol said softly. “And she made a lot of mistakes, but so did you, Rick.”

Rick waited eagerly to hear what Carol was going to say.

“But I’ll stand with you,” Carol finished. “If need be, the kids can stay here with me and Daryl while you and Lori make some decisions. When is Shane coming back into town?”

“Couple-a-days,” Rick said. “Then it’s a week or two until I’m supposed to get shot.”

“That ain’t happenin’,” Daryl said. “We don’ know that yer gunna survive that shit again.”

“Carl has already made that very clear,” Rick said with a laugh.

“I’ll knock yer ass out,” Daryl promised. “Take ya out to Hershel’s farm and let the ol’ man deal wit’cha.”

Rick laughed hard but quieted down when Daryl glared at him because Judith shifted in her sleep. Carol giggled but the look in her eyes said that she would gladly help Daryl kidnap Rick if it would save his life. A sense of warmth built up in Rick’s chest, Daryl and Carol were two important pieces of his family. They had fought, bled, and as his mind went to Glenn safe and alive on the farm, died together. This time, they were going to thrive.
Chapter 5

Thursday, June 21st

Michonne was a woman on a mission. Since she had woken up in the bedroom of her old townhouse to Andre cries over the baby monitor life had seemed more like a dream than reality. Seeing Mike again had been a shock. The sight of her old boyfriend that Michonne knew had left her son be eaten had ignited a rage inside of her that she hadn’t felt in a long time. Without a word, Michonne had taken Andre and left. She had written a note for Mike saying that she and Andre were going to Michonne’s mother’s and that they would be back in a week. Michonne’s mother had been three years dead before the dead started walking.

In reality, Michonne was looking for her people. She had left without her phone, without any kind of plan she had loaded Andre up, packed supplies just in case the world ended while she was out and was headed straight for King County where she remembered joining Rick and Carl on a run to their old home.

Part of her, more than a part of her, worried that she was wrong. That everything had been a terrible dream, something she had thought up after a night of too much ice cream before bed. The babbling toddler in the backseat of Michonne’s car ensured that she couldn’t let that thought fester for too long. Michonne wasn’t going to risk her son’s life, not again.

When she pulled into town, the black woman could hardly recognize it. It was different than what she had seen during that run. The town hadn’t been cleared by Morgan and there were people, real living people, milling around doing their business. It was alive in a way that she hadn’t seen in two and a half years.

Michonne wasn’t sure where to start but Andre’s fussing in the back alerted her that she needed to stop somewhere and take care of her son. A lump welled up in her throat and Michonne’s eyes flickered to the rearview mirror and met Andre’s eyes. The two-year-old giggled and waved at his mother. He was alive. Many times since she had woken up Michonne had just repeated that phrase, over and over again until her chest stopped hurting and she could breathe again.

Another part of her ached for the little girl and the teenage boy she had left behind. Carl and Judith had become just as much hers as Andre. The little giggling girl and the sweet but oh so brave Carl, memories of them made Michonne ache like she had for Andre in another life.

“How about we get something to eat sweetheart?” Michonne asked. “Maybe there is a McDonald’s in this town.”

“Happy Meal!” Andre shouted with glee and Michonne laughed.

“If we can find one,” Michonne promised.

There wasn’t a McDonald’s but the woman did find a small place that boasted the best chicken strips and sweet tea in town. Michonne decided that would be good enough and went through the drive-through. She pulled off into the parking lot after she got their order and poured Andre’s lemonade into his sippy-cup and handed him a chicken strip. The toddler eagerly started gnawing on it and Michonne turned to her own order, she sipped at her tea as her mind wandered. She knew Rick was a cop, but she had no way of knowing if he was working that day.

She wasn’t sure if just showing up at the police station was a good idea. With a sigh Michonne
continued to eat, listening to Andre talk in between bites. It wasn’t the best plan but it was her only plan.

At least it was until Michonne watched Carol, Daryl, Carl, and a little blond girl walk into the restaurant that Michonne had just ordered from. Barely remembering to grab Andre’s food Michonne unbuckled her son from his car seat and popped him on her hip, food in hand she marched into the restaurant. She would have sworn that she could have heard her heart pounding in her chest.

The restaurant was cool and refreshing compared to the Georgia heat outside. Michonne could see Carol’s back, her hair was shorter than Michonne had ever seen it and so was Daryl’s. Carl looked so young stand next to the little girl, the two of them whispering about something. It was Carl that saw her first. The little boy looked up from his conversation and gasped.

“Hey,” Michonne said softly letting the boy know that she knew him. Before she could blink Michonne had a little boy plastered to her front holding her tightly. With her free hand, Michonne hugged Carl back just as tightly. Andre made a curious noise and looked at the little pale boy who was hugging his mommy and Michonne laughed.

In the end, they ended up seated at one of the larger tables inside the restaurant. Michonne sat with Andre and Carl on either side of her. Daryl and Carol sat across from her with the little girl who Carl had introduced as Sophia, Carol’s daughter who had died. In his arms, Daryl had Judith. Michonne still wasn’t sure how the little girl was here but she couldn’t stop herself from staring.

“I can’t believe I found you,” Michonne said for what felt like the 100th time. “I just took off without any kind of plan.”

“It’s all been luck,” Carol agreed. “This time and last time. I found Daryl at a gas station in town.” Michonne laughed a little and shook her head. That seemed fitting for Daryl and Carol, somehow.

“And what did you say this handsome little guy’s name was?” Carol asked looking at Andre.

“This is Andre,” Michonne said with a soft smile. “I, I lost him last time and I’m not risking that happening again.”

Carol reached across the table and placed a gentle hand on Michonne’s clenched fist. “That’s my Sophia,” Carol said softly, and Michonne knew she was talking about the little girl sitting across from Carl. Her eyes reflecting the pain that Michonne knew her own showed when she looked at Andre. “I lost her last time, too.”

“Not this time,” Michonne promised for the both of them.

“Not this time,” Carol repeated just as fiercely.

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Margaret at the front desk was overjoyed at another guest at the hotel, she didn’t even care that Michonne had run off without a credit card and was stuck with the cash she had on hand. Carol had spun some story about Michonne running away from an abusive boyfriend and Margaret had eaten it up. She had told Michonne that the room was hers for as long as she needed it, and to not worry about a thing. Carol had explained to Daryl that the older woman was lonely and used the hotel to try and not be alone. Daryl had just muttered something and stomped off to his and Merle’s room to get something.
Part of him was worried about his brother. Merle had been gone practically since they had gotten here and Daryl wasn’t sure where the older man had gone. Part of him was sure that Merle was off stomping a new mudhole into the Governor’s ass, but another part was worried that his brother was somewhere high off his ass trying to forget the end of the goddamn world was coming. Either way, there was nothing for Daryl to do but worry, which he hated doing.

Looking around the dark room, Daryl didn’t bother much with remembering to turn on the lights, he grabbed the pack of cigarettes from his bed and went back to Carol’s room where Michonne was. When he pushed the door open, they tended to leave the doors cracked so everyone could come and go as they pleased, Daryl saw Carol and Michonne sitting close whispering. Carl, Sophia, and Andre were flipping through a baby sign language book Carol had brought back from the library.

She thought it would help when Judy got older if she could express what she wanted quietly maybe she wouldn’t cry as much. It looked like the kids were practicing on Andre. Daryl joined the women on the bed. He sat on the corner and scowled at the whispering women who giggled when he sat down.

“Carol was just telling me about your wedding,” Michonne teased. “Congrats.”

“Stop,” Daryl said rolling his eyes. “Other than that wha’ er y’all over here clucking ‘bout?”

Carol giggled and shook her head. “I was telling Michonne about the wedding this weekend, Glenn and Maggie’s,” Carol said.

“I want to try and find Andrea,” Michonne said thoughtfully. “She was my friend and if I can save her this time …”

Daryl nodded but with a frown. “She bes’ not shoot me this time,” Daryl muttered making the women laugh. “I’s serious!”

“Don’t worry Pookie,” Carol said. “I’ll protect you from Andrea.”

Daryl squinted at her but nodded. “Ya better,” he said shortly.

“Look! Do it again Andre!” Carl said loudly. “Michonne, watch!”

Andre giggled but when Carl asked Andre who Michonne was the little boy clumsily signed ‘mother’ and laughed when Carl and Sophia praised him so enthusiastically.

The kids settled down to teach Andre more sign language and left the adults to continue talking. “So where’s Rick?” Michonne asked looking over at Carl who was playing her son.

“He’s talking to Lori today,” Carol said gently.

“His wife,” Michonne said with a heavy sigh.

“Ex,” Daryl interjected squinting at the kids as they tried to teach Andre another sign. “He dun’ want anything ta’ do with ‘er. Just gunna try and keep ‘er alive for Carl.”

“But,” Michonne tried but Carol shook her head.

“Rick remembers you just as well as you remember him,” Carol promised. “He loved Lori once, but he doesn’t anymore. You’ll see when he comes to pick Carl and Judith up tonight.”
“You’ve lost your mind,” Lori hissed. “You can’t expect me to believe this crap.”

Rick wanted to scream. He and Lori had been going around in circles all morning. Carol had stopped by early that morning and picked up Carl and Judith. Rick had explained to Lori that he needed to talk to her and that his friend offered to watch the children. Lori had easily agreed to a day without the children to be with her husband. That just made Rick’s job harder.

Things had started off normal enough, they had breakfast after the kids had left and Rick basked in the normalness of it all. Lori chatted about inconsequential things, the patrons at the library how much she had missed working since Judith’s birth, stupid things that Rick really didn’t care about but he let her chatter wash over him.

Rick had agonized over how to tell her, how to ask her. How did you ask your wife, the mother of your children if she remembered the apocalypse that killed her? How did you ask her how long she had been cheating on you with your best friend?

“I know it sounds impossible,” Rick said trying to placate her. “But you have to listen to me! I’ve got a dozen other people who remember this thing too, I’m not crazy!”

“The walking dead,” Lori repeated shaking her head. “Rick that’s the plot of some terrible horror movie. Is this what you’ve been spending our money on? Rick! We need that for Carl and Judy!”

“In a few months, money isn’t going to matter, Lori!” Rick shouted waving his hands. “None of this is going to matter!”

Lori bit her lip and looked away. “Ok,” Lori said softly. “Maybe you’ve been working too hard. I know with Shane gone on vacation you’ve been doing a lot by yourself. Why don’t you go take a nap, love? We can talk after you’ve gotten some sleep.”

Rick scoffed and shook his head. “It’s not like that Lori,” Rick said exasperatedly. “I’m not crazy!”

“What do I have to do to prove that I’m telling the truth?” Rick asked earnestly. “I can’t watch Carl lose you again, please, Lori.”

Lori shook her head. “If, if this is real, why can’t I remember?” Lori asked. “You’ve got other people that remember right? So why not me?”

“I don’t know, Hershel said his wife doesn’t remember, but his son does,” Rick said. “Maybe it’s random. Maybe it’s something else. I know it sounds crazy but god Lori, you have to believe me.”

“I need proof, Rick!” Lori said firmly. “This is all so much, it’s too much!”

“You’ve been cheating on me with Shane,” Rick said his shoulders sinking. “I know because you did it last time too. I know because Judith looks exactly the same. I know because Shane’s mother had blond hair but neither me or you have blond hair.”

Lori gasped and shook her head and Rick knew it was right. “I ain’t mad,” Rick said rubbed his face tiredly. “I’ve been through that already.”

“Rick, I,” Lori forced out and shook her head again.

“Don’t,” Rick said sternly. “I didn’t tell you this to hurt you. I don’t need excuses. I need you to trust me. You’re still the mother of my kids, yeah my kids. Judith is mine in all the ways that
matter. I need you to have my back here Lori.”

Lori nodded and Rick knew that she wasn’t sold on the looming apocalypse, not yet, but she was willing to go along with what Rick said if only because of his knowledge of the affair.

“So you knew Carol, before?” Lori asked softly. She sounded hesitant and unsure but Rick appreciated what she was trying to do. She was trying.

“Yeah,” Rick grunted flopping back into his seat. The couple was sitting at the kitchen table with mugs of now cold coffee sitting in front of them. “You knew her too.”

Lori frowned but didn’t contradict him. “How many other people are there that remember this?” Lori asked hesitantly. “You said a dozen? Are there others?”

“Not quite an even dozen,” Rick admitted. “There’s a good number of us and if everyone keeps trickling in like they have then who knows.”

“What about Shane? Does he know?” Lori asked hesitantly. She knew it was dangerous bringing up Shane now but Lori had to know.

“I don’t know,” Rick admitted. “Shane, he, he wasn’t right at the end. Tried to take you and Carl. He tried to kill me.”

Lori gasped but Rick pushed forward. “The world is going to be a different place, Lori,” Rick said earnestly. “I need you to understand that. For a lot of us, we still live in that world and we’re different people than we were.”

“Carl has been different,” Lori admitted. “He looks at me like I’m a ghost. So do you.”

“In the other world, Judith was born later almost a year in,” Rick explained. “You died Lori. Carl and I, we buried you. Mourned you.”

Lori shook her head and tears gathered in her eyes. Her son, her precious baby, no wonder he looked so sad when he saw her. “You moved on,” Lori said with sudden clarity. “I can see it in your eyes.”

“I did,” Rick said gently.

“What’s her name?” Lori asked feeling like she had a hole in her chest. She knew it wasn’t fair, wasn’t fair to be so upset when months ago Lori had been with Shane. Part of her ached for the way things had been, years ago when Carl was still very young and they had still been madly in love. Then stupid things had gotten in the way like work and life. They had drifted apart and even when they returned home each night to share their marriage bed there was none of the love that had once filled them.

Lori had felt lonely when she turned to Shane. Her husband’s partner and best friend had been there for her, loved her in a way that Rick hadn’t in years. When she had found out she was pregnant with Judith Lori had been torn. She didn’t know whether the baby was Rick’s or Shane’s, it could have been either. During her pregnancy, Rick had lit up in a way that he hadn’t in years. Lori had seen a side of her husband that she had thought was gone and she found a similar side in herself. Things were going well until Judith was born and all Lori could see was Shane. Now knowing that Rick knew, and hearing him claim Judith it made something in her chest jump but knowing there was someone else, it hurt.

“Michonne,” Rick said after a long moment of silence. “She - we’ve been through a lot together.”
Lori nodded.

“Did you know her before?” Lori asked. Had Rick also been having an affair?

“No,” Rick said swiftly. “We met during, the group, we found a prison made it our home. We met Michonne there.”

A half-formed memory tickled the back of Lori’s mind. Gray walls, cold floors, and sharp, terrible pain. The woman shook the thought away and shivered. “I’ll try Rick,” Lori said faintly the strange cold feeling still racing her up back. “I’ll try.”

Rick reached across the table and grabbed Lori’s hand. “That’s all I’m asking,” Rick said. “Try for Carl and Judy.”

Rick and Lori talk for the rest of the morning and well into the afternoon. Rick could tell that Lori didn’t believe him, not really, but she was close. She was going along with what Rick asked because he had brought up the affair. Lori had acted similarly before she stood behind him to distance herself from Shane and she was doing it again.

He explained that Carol and Daryl were in town, staying at the small local hotel and that they had been invited to a wedding that weekend. Lori could come and see the rest of the group, maybe it would somehow make her remember. Lori worried about being judged but Rick promised that everyone had gotten over that, it had been years, he explained and there was much more important things to worry about.

“What do you need me to do?” Lori asked when the clock had struck two. “How can I help?”

“You can’t half-ass this Lori,” Rick said still seeing doubt in her eyes. “These things are coming and we have to be prepared.”

“I don’t that I believe that the world is going to end,” Lori admitted. “And really don’t believe that the dead are going to rise up and start eating people, but you believe something is coming, something bad. And if it’ll protect our kids, then I’ll do what you need me too.”

Rick met Lori’s gaze and held her eyes for a long time but eventually, he nodded. “Alright,” Rick said. “We’ve got plans and after the wedding this weekend we are going to finalize them with the others. We’re going to need food. As much as we can get. Cans, dry stuff, anything that is nonperishable.”

Lori agreed but Rick still saw her hesitance. “Three months,” Rick said calmly. “Give me three months and if this doesn’t play out how I think it will, I’ll go to whatever doctor you want and take anything he tells me too.”

“Three months,” Lori repeated cautiously. “Promise?”

“Just play along for three months and I promise.”
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

A lot happens in this chapter. I didn't really realize it when I was writing it but there's a lot. I hope the Richonne reunion is good enough for you all, it was highly anticipated.

Also, the chapters are getting longer, ever so slightly more recent chapters are going to be pushing 8/9k words if the word count keeps going up like it has been. Anyway, enjoy!

Saturday, June 23rd: early morning

The farm looked beautiful. Beth and Shawn had strung up fairy lights and Maggie had just watched her brother finish putting up a beautiful arch that they still had from Hershel’s marriage to Annette which had also been on the farm.

“Maggie,” Beth called from behind her. Maggie turned and saw her sister who had a beautiful smile on her face. “Carol called, she and the others are on their way, and Michonne’s with them!”

Maggie felt a huge smile stretch across her face. They hadn’t talked to the others in a day or so so they hadn’t known that Michonne was with them. “When will they get here?” Maggie asked almost bouncing on her toes. Today was going to be a great day, her family was coming and then tomorrow she going to legally marry the love of her life surrounded by her friends and family. There was nothing better.

“Carol said about noon,” Beth said putting her hand on her hip. “Just in time to help cook. Glenn should be back around then too.”

Glenn and Shawn had raced to the airport to pick up Glenn’s oldest sister Charlie and his twin sister Grace. Charlie was an EMT from just outside of Detroit that had recently been laid off and was happy to have an excuse get away from Michigan. Grace had just finished culinary school and was job hunting while living on Charlie’s couch. Both sisters were surprised when Glenn called them out of the blue to attend their brother’s wedding to a woman they had never met or even heard of but the Rhee sisters were nothing if not adaptable.

“Where’s daddy?” Maggie asked curiously. She hadn’t seen her father all morning.

“He’s working as always, Mr. Shetland is bringing the goats by later today,” Beth said. The wedding wasn’t until tomorrow evening. The group had decided to spend the weekend together preparing and celebrating. This would end up being one of the last celebrations they had before the end of the world.

“It’s hard to believe what’s coming, ain’t it?” Maggie asked her sister. The Greene girls both looked out at their father’s farm and the set up for Maggie’s wedding. The sky looked idyllic and Hershel said the next day would look even better.

“No,” Beth said thoughtfully. “We’ve seen it. We’ve lived it. There was beauty then too.”
Maggie glanced at her sister and sighed. They still hadn’t talked about what happened at Grady. The blonde had just shaken her head and said it was over and Maggie hadn’t wanted to press. Partially from guilt and partly because she knew there was someone else that Beth would talk to coming to the farm very soon.

Maggie wasn’t sure what the relationship between Beth and Daryl was beyond the platonic nature of it. Daryl had only ever had eyes for Carol and even then only just. While Beth had nursed a crush on the redneck at the prison look at her sister now, Maggie didn’t see the strands of a teenage crush which she was thankful for.

“Yeah, there was,” Maggie agreed thinking of the beautiful things she had seen, the sunrise that morning with Sasha when Aaron found them, Glenn’s face when he found out they were going to have a baby. Without thinking about it Maggie’s hand drifted to her stomach and Beth gasped.

“Are you?” She asked softly looking wide-eyed from Maggie’s hand to her face. Maggie shook her head. “No,” Maggie said simply. “Just thinking about before.”

“Oh Maggie,” Beth said her voice full of compassion. Glenn and Maggie had shared the news of their pregnancy from before and told everyone that Glenn hadn’t lived to see their child be born.

“It’ll happen again,” Beth promised. “You’ll have your baby again.”

Maggie blinked away tears and grabbed Beth and pulled her in for a hug. The sisters stood out in front of their father’s farm and embraced.

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Saturday, June 23rd: the period of time from early morning to just after 1 pm

Rick and Michonne’s reunion was short but oh so very sweet. That night after the surprise meeting at the fast food place when Carol dropped off Carl and Judy she told Rick who had found them. Carol could see the look in Rick’s eyes and didn’t bother to try and leave just then, instead, she waited for Rick to settle the kids and told Lori he would be back later.

Carol knew that it would kill him to be away from the Michonne but he wouldn’t leave the kids alone with just Lori to protect them if something were to happen. Instead, Rick slipped from the house after around 30 minutes and into the passenger seat of Carol’s car. The drive back to the hotel was quiet and almost lept from the car when they arrived.

Rick got Michonne’s room number from Carol and was gone before the woman could even close her door. Rick took the steps, two at a time and passed a ruffled Daryl Dixon who was heading out for a smoke but didn’t stop to chat. When he found her door he knocked quickly and waited.

Not knowing whether Michonne had remembered him had eaten away at Rick. It troubled Carl too, it affected the Grimes men so much that they couldn’t bear to talk about it in case Michonne didn’t remember. The two minute (Rick counted) wait for the door to open felt like the years stretching on.

When the door finally opened, Rick felt his breath catch in his chest. Michonne, she was there and from the smile on her face, she remembered him. She was dressed comfortably, there was a softness in her frame that Rick had never seen before and the beautiful toddler on her hip likely had something to do with it.

“Hey,” Rick said his voice rough with emotion.
“Hey yourself,” Michonne greeted with a bright smile. “Wanna come in?”

“I’d like that,” Rick said with a matching grin.

At some point during the night, Rick found Carol’s keys in front of Michonne’s door and he found his way back to Lori and kids.

It was obvious that Rick’s late arrival home was affecting Lori. The thin woman was nervous and unsure of her place with the close-knit group that next morning when everyone finally came together to head to the farm for the wedding.

It was Michonne that offered the olive branch and made things bearable. While Rick was talking the kids about something Michonne slid right up to Lori and introduced herself. Carol could see that Rick had been honest about his relationship with the sword-wielding woman Carol could hear what the women were talking about but from the lingering looks at Carl Carol could take a guess on what they were talking about.

“Ten bucks on Michonne,” Daryl whispered watching the two women size each other up.

Carol stifled a laugh and jabbed her elbow into Daryl’s side. “Shsss,” Carol hissed. “Don’t be mean!”

Daryl just sniggered and turned his head.

“It’s a fool’s bet anyway,” Carol muttered back. “It wouldn’t even be a fair fight.”

Daryl jerked and did his best to swallow his laughter. Rick gave them both an amused look like he knew what they were talking about that made them dissolve into giggles.

Sorting out who was riding who to the farm was the most awkward thing Carol had ever sat through. Rick obviously wanted to ride with Michonne but Lori didn’t want to ride with a stranger and the three of them couldn’t ride together. Carol eventually took matters into her own hands and whispered to Sophia to ask Carl if he and his mom wanted to ride with them. Daryl had taken one look at the awkward situation and stomped off to leave a note for Merle in case the older Dixon wandered back in.

Sophia asked Carl who in turn asked Lori. Lori looked uncomfortable but eventually gave in much to the group’s collective relief. Carol shook her head and smiled at the thankful looks Rick and Michonne shot her and told the kids to start loading things up.

The farm was going to be their base when the world ended. All of the supplies and provisions that the group gathered would be stored at the farm until they found somewhere permanent to stay. Carol stopped just long enough to call the farm to let them know they were on their way. Carol packed up the kids riding with her and welcomed Lori into the car. The thin brunette tried to smile but it came out more like a grimace. It was going to be a long car ride.

It turned out to be a quiet car ride, Sophia and Carl were bound and determined to learn sign language which Carol fully supported. Carol was actually fairly proficient having gone to school to be an ASL interpreter. Carol never finished as she had met Ed two years into her degree and fell pregnant with Sophia shortly after. When she let her eyes drift to the rearview mirror to watch the kids she caught a few signs she recognized.

“We decided on a sign for walkers,” Carl said half way to their destination. “You make the ‘W’ sign and then you do bite.”
Lori made a soft noise of distress but Carol nodded to herself and praised the kids. There were several instances where the group would have benefitted from not talking and being quieter so she fully supported the kids and their quest to learn sign language. She had even seen Daryl flipping through the books she had brought home from the library, the nonverbal language appealing to the hunter in a way she knew it would.

“This book doesn’t have a sign for gun,” Sophia said flipping through the book with a pout.

“We can just do this,” Carl said making an ‘L’ shape and pointing his index finger a Sophia with his thumb up in the air.

“It’s like this,” Carol said holding up her hand so the kids could see it.

“Oh! I was close,” Carl said happily and the kids went back to trying to muddle their way through signed conversations.

“How do you do it?” Lori asked softly when the kids started debating the use of one sign over another. She was obviously conflicted, torn between Rick’s own rock-solid certainty and her own inability to believe that something so horrible was coming. “How can you be so sure?”

“Sophia didn’t make it last time,” Carol said simply her eyes firmly on the road ahead of her. “I refuse to let it happen like that again.”

Lori fell silent and neither woman spoke again until they followed Daryl’s bike down the Greene driveway.

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Daryl quieted the engine of his brother’s motorcycle and watched the two cars behind him come to a stop. Daryl let his eyes drift over the farm and his breath caught in his chest at the memories that swamped him. As his eyes swept back he stopped on a figure standing on the porch. She was short, blonde and looked exactly like she did when he first met her. Daryl climbed off the bike and stumbled toward the Greene’s farmhouse.

“Beth,” Daryl said hoarsely blinking away tears.

“I told you, you’d miss me when I was gone, Daryl Dixon,” Beth said with a soft smile.

Daryl rushed up the stairs and wrapped the little blonde girl in a tight hug that she returned just as fiercely.

Carol watched Daryl and Beth’s reunion with a smile. Being back of the Greene’s farm was bittersweet for the woman. Sophia was looking around with excitement seeing the farm for the first time, and Carol clutched her daughter to her side. This was where she had lost her daughter before. Without meaning too, Carol’s eyes drifted to where Sophia had been buried in another life.

“Momma?” Sophia asked softly. “Are you okay?”

Carol nodded and smiled down at her daughter. “Yes sweetie,” Carol said. “I’m just glad we are all here together.”

“Me too,” Sophia admitted. “The farm is so pretty, but the barn scares me.”

“Me too,” Carol whispered back.
“Glenn!” Carl shouted breaking away from his father’s side and throwing himself at the Korean man who had just emerged from the house next to Maggie.

Glenn caught the boy and hugged him tightly. Glenn met Rick’s eyes and the older man cleared the space between them swiftly. Carl pulled away and let Rick grab Glenn in a tight embrace.

“Good to see you, Glenn,” Rick said his voice full of emotion.

“Good to see you too,” Glenn echoed letting Rick pull away to greet Maggie just as Carol came to join them on the front porch. “Carol! Sophia!” Glenn said in greeting.

Daryl watched as Rick and Carol greeted Glenn but he couldn’t make himself move forward. All he could think about was that night. Daryl shook so hard that even Beth could feel it standing close to him. When Glenn finished greeting Carl, Rick, Michonne, Carol, and Sophia Daryl saw Maggie nudge Glenn and her eyes flickered to Daryl.

Glenn moved first. Daryl straightened up and stood stock still as the smaller man moved swiftly to stand in front of the hunter. Beth moved back to stand by her sister and all Daryl could see was Glenn. The Korean man stopped maybe a foot from Daryl and waited.

“Glenn,” Daryl finally forced out emotion heavy in his voice.

Glenn reached out and before Daryl could flinch back the smaller man pulled Daryl to him and held him tightly. Without meaning too, Daryl’s hand fisted themselves in Glenn’s shirt and the older man shook with sobs. “Man, I - I’m,” Daryl tried to get out. “It shoulda been me. Shoulda been me.”

Glenn held Daryl tight for a long time and let the other man calm down before he pulled away. The others had long since retreated to the house to let Glenn and Daryl have privacy. “Hey man look at me,” Glenn said when Daryl refused to make contact. Reluctantly Daryl drug his eyes up to meet Glenn’s and he flinched at the warmth he saw there.

“It wasn’t your fault,” Glenn said firmly. “Hey no, you were defending Rosita I saw it.”

Daryl shook his head but Glenn pushed forward. “Daryl, you weren’t the one wielding the bat, okay? That wasn’t you, it wasn’t your fault,” Glenn repeated.

“I’s punched ‘em,” Daryl said, his voice cracked on the last word. “He wasn’t gunna kill ya ‘til I did that.”

“Man, we don’t know that,” Glenn said with a sigh. “Negan was psycho and we caused him lots of problems. He was probably going to kill two of us from the start.”

Daryl shook his head tears still in his eyes. He couldn't believe anything but what he knew. He had gotten Glenn killed. He had been the reason Maggie had been left widowed. Daryl knew he would carry that weight with him for the rest of his life, even now with their second chance.

“I forgive you, Daryl,” Glenn said earnestly. He had an idea of what Daryl was thinking and he didn't want his friend to suffer like that. “None of that was on you but if you need to hear it, then I forgive you.”

Daryl sagged but Glenn knew it wasn’t enough, not yet. Daryl twitched and Glenn knew he was itching to get out of there. “Hershel and his neighbors have a hunting agreement this time of year, it’s not deer season but Hershel cleared it with the neighbors if you want to go out.”
Daryl nodded once and lopped off the porch and stopped long enough to retrieve his crossbow from Carol’s car before disappearing into the treeline.

Glenn watched Daryl disappear before he turned and entered the house. The Greene house was fit to burst. Hershel had joined the group at some point and was smiling happily with his arm wrapped around Annette’s shoulders. Annette had been a great sport about the whole thing. She was still hesitant but with each person, she met that remember the other timeline the more accepting she became.

“Is that Judith?” Glenn asked rejoining the group. Rick nodded and looked down at the baby in his arms. “I know you said she had been born earlier here but I kept picturing her almost two.”

“Me too,” Rick said. “It’s hard to believe she’s this small again. I met your sisters, they’re nice girls.”

Glenn laughed. “Yeah, Charlie and Grace are great,” Glenn agreed. “Charlie’s an EMT and I think she remembers. She asked to stick around for a while talking about maybe getting an apartment or something. Hershel told her not to bother, that she could stay here.”

Rick’s eyebrows went up in surprise but he nodded. “EMT, that would be handy to have around,” Rick said thoughtfully. “And she’s your sister. What about Grace?”

Glenn shook his head. “No, I don’t think she remembers,” Glenn admitted. “She was talking about a job interview she’s got in a few weeks, Charlie was trying to talk her out of it.”

“We’ll convince her to stay Glenn,” Rick said comfortingly. “Don’t worry.”

“How are things with Lori?” Glenn asked watching the thin brunette talk with Grace about something.

Rick grimaced and Glenn frowned. “Awkward,” Rick admitted with a shake of his head. “How do I talk to my dead ex-wife?”

“I don’t know Rick,” Glenn admitted. “I don’t envy you here.”

Rick gently bumped Glenn’s shoulder so as not to disturb Judith and they joined the conversation.

“Daryl?” Carol asked coming over to join Rick and Glenn.

“Hunting, Hershel told the neighbors that Daryl would be out there when he arrived,” Glenn said. “Shouldn’t be any problems.”

“Good,” Carol said with a firm nod. “You good?”

“We’re good,” Glenn promised. “He just needs time.”

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Daryl finally joined the group when the sun started to set. Sleeping arrangements had been hashed out and dinner was almost ready. Rick had spent the day going over plans with Hershel, Glenn, and Shawn while everyone else prepared for the wedding. Hershel showed Rick the ranch houses that he and Shawn had picked to be possible stops on their way to something permanent. Each one had its own well system like the farm and one even had a natural gas pump that Rick liked the look of. With sturdy walls, the ranch wouldn’t likely be their long-term home but it was isolated enough that it would be safe for a few months if the farm fell.
The group spent the evening with good cheer and a great meal.

A loud banging on the door interrupted the good cheer and festivities. Hershel answered the door and found Merle Dixon, bruised and bloodied but grinning widely standing in front of him.

“Merle,” Hershel greeted cautiously.

Having heard his brother’s name Daryl jumped up and moved to stand behind the old farmer.


“Why baby brother, ya said there was a weddin’!” Merle said cheerfully. “I’s even brought a weddin’ present.”

“What?” Daryl asked, already knowing in his heart what his brother was talking about.

“Why don’t you, me and the other menfolk mosey on out to the barn and I’ll show ya,” Merle said still strangely cheerful.

Daryl turned to look at Rick who also had an idea of just what Merle’s wedding present would be. “I’m comin’ too,” Maggie said fiercely.

“I’m going,” Michonne said shortly. Rick didn’t bother to argue.

Rick, Michonne, Glenn, Maggie, Hershel, and Daryl followed Merle out of the house, off of the porch and toward the barn. The barn wasn’t full of walkers this time but the atmosphere was heavy and oppressive.

“Merle’s got shitty timing,” Rick muttered to Daryl as they paused at the barn doors.

“His dumb ass prolly thinks this is a great present,” Daryl grumbled. Now was not the time to have an enemy stashed in the barn waiting for a bullet to the brain, and he was waiting for a bullet to the brain there was no other way for this to end.

Rick laughed softly and shook his head. For a moment Daryl was taken aback by how relaxed Rick was in this moment. He had never seen the other man this relaxed, especially with an enemy this close. Daryl figured it had something to do with the time travel, there was no other explanation. That was the current safety of the group was experiencing. All thoughts of safety fled when Daryl saw the Governor.

Philip Blake looked normal, ordinary, nothing like the mass murderer that Daryl he would become.


Maggie flinched back and Michonne stepped forward menacingly but Rick stopped her from attacking the bound man with a shake of his head.

“He remembers,” Herschel said unnecessarily.

Merle had tied the Governor up tightly, his hands zip-tied behind his back and somehow attached to his pants if Rick would guess. He had a length of wire binding his arms to his sides as best they could be with his hands behind him. The wire also covered his legs and kept his feet together. His
face was bloodied and bruised and Rick cared too, he was sure that he could match the man’s blood on Merle’s knuckles or on his boots.

“Was gunna introduce myself all civil-like,” Merle said with a chipper smile on his face that looked out of place. “This sumbitch tried to shoot me right between the eyes. That shit ain’t happenin’ again.”

Daryl growled and kicked the bound man in the side making him yelp.

“Easy, easy, lil’ brother,” Merle soothed. “I done kicked this fucker’s teeth in so we’re square.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t take care of him yourself, Merle,” Rick said ignoring the wheezing monster at his feet. Daryl’s kick seemed to have aggravated busted ribs.

“I thought about it,” Merle admitted scratching his chin thoughtfully. “Thought about it long and hard when I had my gun to his head. But, I’s figured there’s a lot of bad blood ‘tween me and the lot-a ya’ll. Brought him back to the hotel, had me a wonderful meal made by Ms. Margaret and saw that you were off at a weddin’! And I thought to myself what would make a better gift for the lovebirds then this piece o’ shit!”

Merle kicked out again catching the governor in the shoulder with his steel toe boots making the prisoner hiss in pain.

“Was gunna bring ya his head,” Merle continued carelessly not seeing or not caring at how Hershel and Michonne both lost color in their faces. “But I figured ya might want the whole thing.”

Maggie was almost vibrating in place with pent-up energy.

“I’m going to shoot him,” She said plainly. “I’m going to shoot him in the head and then we are going to drive his body out to the middle of nowhere and let the woods have him. None of you are going to stop me.”

Rick could tell that Hershel wasn’t happy with his daughter’s plan to shoot a man point blank but Rick had done his best to describe to the old man just what had happened after they lost the prison how Maggie had suffered since Hershel had died.

“Maggie,” Rick said cautiously. Silently asking the woman was sure that she wanted to do this.

Maggie silently held out her hand for the gun that Rick always carried with him. “I’ll stay with her,” Michonne said softly. Rick’s eyes flickered to the black woman and then nodded. It wasn’t that he didn’t trust Maggie but he didn’t trust Philip Blake and if anything happened. But Michonne took the gun Daryl offered her and managed a small smile at Rick so he knew that everything was under control.

“Maggie?” Glenn asked softly, asking without asking if she wanted him to stay.

Maggie shook her head and kissed Glenn on the cheek. Glenn followed the rest of the men out and left Maggie and Michonne in the barn.

“This complicates things,” Rick said watching the barn doors. “If the Governor remembers then there is no telling who else will too.”

“We can take ‘em,” Daryl said firmly. “Gunna have a bigger group this time, more supplies.”

“Baby bro is right,” Merle said slowly. “I don’t know what happened to y’all after my little run-in
with the Governor but I know we’re better off the most of the damn world right now.”

The loud crack of Rick’s colt python shattered the soft silence of the night but looking around Rick couldn’t help but notice a softening of everyone’s shoulders and the light feeling in his own chest. As terrible as shooting a man in a barn sounded, there was a peace that came with it. The monster that had hurt them, took away their home, set them on the path to Negan was dead.

The Governor was dead.
Chapter 7

Sunday, June 24th - first hours of the new day

“Daryl,” Merle hissed from the foot of couch where Daryl was sleeping. Daryl jerked awake and scowled at his brother fiercely.

“The hell ya want?” Daryl demanded as he tried to blink away sleep. The group had just gone to be maybe two hours ago. The energy from Merle’s ‘wedding present’ keeping them awake later than planned.

Merle jerked his head to the door and disappeared from the living room without making a sound. Daryl scowled but pushed himself upright and shoved his feet into his half laced boots on the floor. Daryl had thought there was something off with Merle since his arrival, something more than just his twisted idea of a wedding gift. Daryl had been the only one to notice, knowing Merle like he did, and had kept an eye on his brother as best he could. He had hoped it was just leftover irritation and mood swings from coming down off of only God knew what drugs, but now being woken up like he was after only a few hours of sleep Daryl knew it was something worse.

Daryl left the house just as quietly as Merle had before him. Peering out into the darkness Daryl could see Merle standing by Daryl’s truck where the older Dixon was supposed to be sleeping. He had taken the blanket and a pillow Annette had offered, being the gracious hostess that she was, and said he would camp out in the bed of Daryl’s truck. The driver’s side door was open but Merle’s bulk was blocking Daryl’s view inside.

His heart thundered in his chest and Daryl was uncertain of just what it was that Merle was going to spring on him. Daryl closed the distance between him and his brother quickly and swore as quiet as he could when he finally got a look at what was in his truck, or rather who.

There, wrapped up in the blanket that Annette had given Merle with her little blond head resting on a pillow was a little girl. She looked younger than Sophia and after a moment Daryl realized who she was, the Governor had a daughter.

“Shit,” Daryl mumbled. “I forgot he had a kid.”

Merle nodded and gently closed the truck door so as not to wake the little girl curled up in the seat.

“Found ‘er tied up in the closet where that fucker lived,” Merle explained. “He thought she was a walker or somethin’ had her all bound up like he did before.”

It appeared Philip Blake thought the apocalypse came early.

“She was cryin’, had pissed ‘erself an’ was beggin’ fer food,” Merle grimaced. “Was dead rats on the floor at ‘er feet. He was just as fuckin’ crazy as last time.”

“What did you do?” Daryl asked trying to picture Merle in that situation. Merle had probably burst
in Philip Blake’s home guns blazing ready to reign down vengeance on the man who killed him. Daryl could picture it easily. Picturing his big brother when he found the little girl tied up and crying in the closet was both hilarious and terrifying. It had been equally likely that Merle could have left the kid there, sure he would have called the cops and left an anonymous tip because Merle didn’t hurt kids. Merle taking Penny, Daryl thought the girl’s name was Penny, had not been what Daryl would have thought his brother would have done.

“Knocked our buddy Blake out, and stuffed him in the back of the trunk of his car. Untied the girl and told her to go clean up. Made ‘er a sandwich,” Merle explained gruffly. “Packed up ‘er shit and kept ‘er in the car. Moved ‘er here when I went and dumped Blake’s car.”

“Fuck,” Daryl swore. “What are we gunna do with her?”

Merle shrugged and looked far too unconcerned for Daryl’s liking. “The world’s coming to an end baby brother,” Merle said. “In a few months, ain’t no one gunna care about a lost little girl and her dirtbag daddy.”

**Sunday, June 24th - early morning**

The grass was wet but it hadn’t rained last night. Carl wiggled his toes in the damp grass and Sophia, sitting beside him, did the same. Everyone was up early helping set up for the wedding or doing chores for the farm. Carl liked that everyone pitched in and helped, it reminded him of the prison. Carl and Sophia had just finished helping with the goats and were shooed off to help someone else. Carl, knowing that downtime would be scarce in the coming months took a moment to kick off his shoes and enjoy the damp grass.

“Are you scared?” Sophia asked softly. The kids were seated on the porch letting their feet skim the grass.

“Of the walkers?” Carl asked, making sure he knew what she was asking about.

“Yeah,” Sophia asked thinking of her own dark memories of before. She could remember the pain of the bite and it made her shiver.

“No,” Carl said slowly. “The walkers aren’t that scary when you realize what else is out there. It’s the people that are scary.”

“Like Negan?” Sophia whispered. The name was said seldomly on the farm. It was like people were scared that he could show up if they said his name too much or too loudly.

“Yeah,” Carl croaked.

“He killed a lot of people, didn’t he?” Sophia asked. She knew he had killed Glenn and someone named Abraham but Sophia had a hard time picturing it. “He hurt the group?”

Carl nodded looking pale. “But there were others, too,” Carl admitted in a quiet voice. “There’s always bad people out there.”

Sophia was quiet for a long time. The children sat side-by-side wiggling their toes in the damp grass.

“You’re a survivor,” Sophia said finally in a thoughtful tone. “You’re the only kid that made it from the quarry to the end.”

“You’re going to make it too,” Carl said earnestly. “Your mom has been teaching you how to kill
walkers and I’ll protect you!” Carl held out his pinkie finger in a solemn promise.

Sophia smiled and shook her head and grabbed Carl’s pinkie with her own. “We’ll protect each other,” Sophia said. The two sat together, toes wiggling in the damp grass until Annette called their names to help with breakfast.

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**Sunday, June 24th - late morning**

Maggie Greene would guess that not many women murdered a man the night before their wedding. Not many would marry the man they met and fell in love with in another lifetime either, but to Maggie, that was the most important part. That evening she was going to be marrying Glenn, just as the sunset with her friends and family surrounding her. For now, her job was to sit around and let other people make her look pretty.

Breakfast had been a boisterous affair, with people talking over each other and Glenn and Maggie attempting to sneak away for some alone time but the others had cheerfully decided to impose the tradition of keeping the groom from seeing the bride before the wedding and after breakfast Rick, Daryl, and Shawn had drug Glenn away with promises to bring him back before the ceremony was due to start.

Hershel agreed to watch Judith and Andre with Carl and Sophia helping between popping in to see Maggie.

“Anyone know where they took Glenn?” Maggie asked fluttering her eyelashes that Beth had just put mascara on.

“Daryl said something about hunting,” Carol said with a small smile.

Charlie, Glenn’s older sister, snorted with laughter. “Glenn? Hunting?” She said laughing. “I’ll believe it when I see it.”

“Unless his video game count,” Grace offered up. The women from the group who remembered Glenn from the beginning last time laughed at the mention of video games. He had complained more than once about missing a game or two and he had wished his experience in first person shooter games transferred to real life shooting.

“Merle’s not with them, is he?” Maggie asked worriedly.

Carol shook her head. “Oh no, Merle is making himself scarce and running an errand for me,” Carol said mysteriously. “Don’t you worry about it, Maggie.”

“Sweetie, your Glenn can take care of himself,” Annette said with a sweet smile. “This is your day, just enjoy it.”

Maggie sighed but forced a smile. “Ok ladies,” Maggie said. “Make me pretty.”

The women descended upon Maggie with manic grins and brushes. Carl and Sophia watched from the side of the room laughing whenever someone would suggest an outrageous makeup choice.

“Oh this color looks beautiful on you,” Beth said finishing up the coat of paint on Maggie’s hand.

“I want to see,” Carl said peeking around Beth to look at the nail color. Beth leaned over so the boy could see the pearl shade they had chosen for Maggie’s nails.
“Oh wow, it’s so pretty,” Carl said with a smile. “Can I wear some?”

The women stopped and looked at Lori who seemed uncertain about her son wearing nail polish.

“Carl you know nail polish is for girls, right?” Lori said gently.

“That’s dumb,” Carl said simply and more than a little confused. “In a few months it’s not going to matter what is for boys or girls, the walkers won’t care.”

“He’s right,” Michonne said. “What’s a little nail polish going to hurt anyway?”

Lori still looked uncomfortable but Annette stepped in. “Bethie used to paint her daddy’s nails when she was younger,” Annette explained making Beth laugh a little a blush a pretty pink. “Hershel never seemed to mind the purple nails.”

“Here, Sophia,” Carol said handing her daughter a peach-colored nail polish that came from Beth’s large collection. “Why don’t you and Carl use this color?”

Sophia eagerly took the little bottle and drug Carl off to the side to start painting their nails.

“I still don’t know how I feel about that,” Lori muttered watching Sophia explain what she was doing so Carl could paint her nails next.

“They’re just having a little fun,” Carol said soothingly. “Let him enjoy this. Here will you start with Maggie’s hair please?”

Before she knew it Lori had been sucked back into the mass of women helping Maggie get ready for her big day.

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Sunday, June 24th - early afternoon

“How do you manage to do that!” Glenn demanded, his arms shaking. Daryl shook with laughter and beside him, even Rick’s shoulders were shaking with mirth. When Rick, Daryl, and Shawn had drug, almost literally, Glenn into the woods to give the women some time in the house to prepare for the wedding Glenn had demanded to try Daryl’s crossbow.

The crossbow-wielding redneck after, a moment had smirked and trust his weapon of choice in the groom-to-be’s arms. “If ya’ can load it, ya can shoot it,” Daryl said with a smirk on his face.

Glenn had taken the challenge as it was meant and set out attempting to load the bow. It didn’t go well. “No really, I’ve seen you load that thing while we are surrounded by walkers!” Glenn said honestly shocked.

“Loaded it after pullin’ a bolt from my side, too,” Daryl said not in the bragging way his brother would have.

Glenn shot an envious look at Daryl’s arms, and the man smirked. “Merle told me the same thing, if I could load it, I could shoot it,” Daryl explained taking the crossbow back and loading it. “Took me two years. But since it’s yer day an’ all.”

Daryl held the loaded crossbow out to Glenn and the other man took it happily. Glenn fumbled with the heavy bow for a moment but got his grip. “Don’t point it at me, dumbass,” Daryl growled
shoving the bow away from where Glenn had it pointed at him. “Aim at a tree or somethin’.”

Glenn turned and faced a tree, he saw Daryl reach out and jerk Shawn back out of the possible line of fire. The men watched and howled with laughter when Glenn’s carefully aimed show didn’t even clip the tree he had been aiming at and shot right past it.

Daryl took the crossbow back and shouldered it with ease. “Go find my bolt,” Daryl demanded after he gave Glenn a quick slap on the back. Glenn rolled his eyes but trotted off to find it.

Rick, shoulders still shaking from Glenn’s epic miss, sobered up quickly when Daryl motioned him over. Shawn watched curiously and Daryl waved him over as well. Daryl hadn’t had a chance to tell Rick about the little girl currently hiding in the room Carol and Sophia had claimed. Merle and Daryl had snuck the girl in just as Carol had been waking up. Carol had, of course, understood the eldest Dixon’s actions and understood Daryl’s reasoning for not telling the group the girl was there just yet.

Daryl repeated the story of how Merle found her and brought her back. Daryl hadn’t spoken to the little girl but Carol had and she was scared and confused. Rick’s face quickly changed to concern. “We didn’t wanna say nothin’ with ‘til after the wedding,” Daryl said. “Glenn and Maggie deserve this.”

“And the girl, Penny, she’s okay?” Rick asked softly.

“Carol and Sophia are watchin’ ‘er,” Daryl said reassuringly. “Carl too probably.”

“Where’s Merle?” Rick asked. He didn’t really trust the eldest Dixon brother but he had seen the loyalty to his brother and Rick hoped it would be enough this time around.

“He’s out getting supplies,” Daryl said. “Guns and shit that we cain’t get legally.”

Rick nodded. Before he would have been against the move but now, knowing how precious guns and ammo were going to be Rick was grateful that Merle was willing to pick it up.

“You guys are something else,” Shawn said just as Glenn made his way back to the group. “I can see how y’all survived for so long.”

“We just did out best,” Rick said with a shake of his head. “It wasn’t easy. It’s not going to be easy.”

“But it ain’t gunna be like it was neither,” Daryl tossed in. “We know too much.”

“Daryl’s right,” Glenn agreed as he handed the bolt over to the hunter. “We’re strong this time, so much stronger.”

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The slowly sinking sun had painted the farm a beautiful gold. The sky was a canvass of pinks and reds and purples with small clouds streaking across the sky. On the grass where, in another life a small camp had been set up, there were chairs and a beautiful handmade arch set up in a picturesque wedding scene.

There were no traditional family sides, except for the Glenn and Maggie’s blood relations. The rest of the group mingled and sat where there was room. Hershel, an ordained officiant in the county, stood ready to watch his daughter walk down the aisle. There was no music played as Maggie walked to stand with Glenn and her father but they didn’t need it. The sounds of crickets and the
flickering of lightning bugs set the background perfectly.

Maggie was in a light airy summer dress. She hadn’t wanted a proper wedding dress, she hadn’t thought it was important. Glenn was scrubbed up nice and was wearing a button-down he had borrowed from Shawn. It was easy to see that the couple only had eyes for each other. Glenn followed Maggie until she was standing right in front of him. The bride took a moment to press a kiss to her father’s cheek before turning a beaming smile onto her soon-to-be-husband.

“We are gathered here today,” Hershel began. “To celebrate a union that has stretched beyond time and death. Glenn and Maggie met when the world seemed to be at its darkest. The world was at the cusp, stuck between the old world and the birth of something new. It was dangerous, life was hard but there was still love.”

The audience listened, some with a clear recollection of the times Hershel was speaking out and others confused and somewhat lost. Grace hadn’t told what was coming and the few others that hadn’t been with the group before or also didn’t remember tried to picture the kind of world Hershel was talking about.

“I had the honor of watching their relationship grow and to see the people who they would become together,” Hershel said. “This time around I hope to see even more. I hope we all get to see more. Glenn, Maggie, you may now share your vows.”

The couple turned to face each other fully and suddenly it was as if there was no one else on the planet. Glenn reached out and took Maggie’s hands into his own and brought them to his lips and pressed a kiss to her knuckles.

“Maggie I will find you,” Glenn said emotion thick in his voice. “That was the last thing I ever said to you before.”

Glenn paused and let the emotion wash over him. Maggie had silent tears streaking down her face.

“I never imagined how much I could find at the end of the world but I’m not going to let it go. No matter what happens between now and then, between now and the very end. In this life or the next. I’ll find you, I’ll watch over you. I’ll be there. I will always find you again.”

Maggie’s shoulders shook but she had a smile on her face. “Losin’ you was the worst day of my life,” Maggie whispered. “I had already lost everyone else, Annette, Shawn, Daddy, ‘n Beth. Glenn Rhee, I could have never known when I met you how much you would mean to me.”

“I want to live with you, raise a family, grow old together,” Maggie continued very voice wistful and thoughtful. “This time I intend to make sure that happens. I’ll fight every walker, I’ll take on any group to make this happen. You’re not leaving me behind again.”

“By the power vested in me by the state of Georgia, I now pronounce you man and wife,” Hershel said happily. “You may kiss the bride.”

The party lasted late into the night. The group danced and ate and just enjoyed being together. Rick took turns twirling all of the women around the makeshift dance floor, two-stepping like any southern man worth his salt. He even stepped in and danced with Carl and Judy when the older boy picked up the baby and danced a little.

Carol stifled a laugh when Sophia managed to con Daryl into a dance to the music. The hunter obviously uncomfortable but still he spun her daughter a few times before he deposited the giggly girl into her mother’s arms and stomped off to hide.
Grace had wanted to confront her twin on just what was going on and question him about what Hershel had said during the wedding but Charlie pulled her away and made her promise to wait until tomorrow. Grace hadn’t liked the idea but gave in and found herself wrapped up in a conversation with Maggie about the wedding cake that Grace had pulled together with so little notice.

As the night stretched on and the moon steadily rose in the sky the party-goers slipped away. Glenn and Maggie first, retreating to the little cottage where Patricia and Otis stayed gifted to them for the night. Then Carol and the children, all sleepy-eyed with full of cake.

Eventually, it was just Rick left. The man sat on a bale of hay that had been hauled into the yard for seating. The moon shone brightly above him as he just sat and enjoyed the silence.

“You’re up late,” he called softly. Michonne flashed a quick smile and walked forward to join him.

“Too much sugar,” Michonne said. “Grace made an amazing cake.”

“She really did,” Rick agreed. “I figure if she’s cooking then it won’t matter how many times we eat squirrel. She did up the bird we brought back, tasted amazing.”

Michonne nodded her agreement and the pair fell into a comfortable silence again. “When were you going to tell me about the little girl hiding in Carol’s room?” Michonne asked softly but not confrontationally.

“You saw her?” Rick asked not bothering to lie or deny it.

“She was going to the bathroom when I stepped out, she’s too small to be Sophia,” Michonne explained. “Is she Penny?”

Rick nodded.

“I wondered about her,” Michonne admitted. “When Merle showed up with the Governor, but I didn’t say anything.”

“I didn’t either,” Rick said. “She’s taken care of. We’re going to tell the group tomorrow.”

“Everything is going to start picking up, isn’t it?” Michonne asked already knowing the answer.

“Yep,” Rick said his thoughts already millions of miles away. “Tomorrow Hershel and I are going to look at the ranch with the natural gas hook up, Eugene has started to collect what we will need for a solar hook up, and if the location is right we’re looking into wind energy.”

“But there is still so much to do,” Michonne said without needing Rick to mention it.

“There is,” Rick admitted rubbing tiredly at his face. “This is going to be like Alexandria, we have to build our place, from the ground up.”

“It’s better that way, it’ll be ours,” Michonne promised. “No stupid rules that are just puffed up leaders clinging to the old ways. We know what it takes to survive and we can do it.”

Rick just nodded but turned to look at the women he loved. “I know,” he finally said.

“Then come to bed with me?” Michonne asked with a soft smile. The sword-wielding woman held out her hand and Rick took her hand into his own and let Michonne lead him to bed.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

This was a fun chapter to write. Let me know what you guys think of Charlie and Grace! Also, Maggie acts a little out of character in this chapter but it's mostly due to leftover trauma from her time with Governor.

Monday, June 25th- Morning

The morning began with a flurry of activity. Carol had taken it upon herself to introduce Penny to the group. The little girl was quiet and withdrawn, and the adult who remembered immediately turned to Merle who had slunk inside to grab some chow being heading out. The eldest Dixon brother had taken upon himself to gather items that the other members of the group couldn’t. Merle had connections to prescription medications, guns, and ammo that couldn’t be gotten legally without a lot of work.

“People are going to notice she’s missing,” Maggie said to the others. Carl and Sophia had taken little Penny under their collective wing and were keeping the girl out of trouble. The kids had retreated from the table as soon as the dishes were cleared to help tend to the animals.

“If her mother isn’t in the picture,” Rick said thoughtfully. Merle shook his head stuffing a biscuit in his mouth. “Then with the Governor, gone people will assume he took her and took off.”

“It’s not safe!” Maggie insisted. “We should drop her off in town or something.”

“After she’s seen all of our faces?” Carol asked giving Maggie a dry look. “We don’t need to risk manpower when this thing starts to break some of us out of jail.”

“Little bro could do it too,” Merle said with a hoarse laugh. The elder Dixon slapped Daryl on the back and the younger rolled his eyes. Before, Daryl had indeed broken someone out of jail, because Merle, the dumbass that he was, had been locked up when the world went to shit.

“Just ‘cos I can,” Daryl stressed giving his brother a sharp shove “Doesn’t mean I wanna.”

“Keep it down!” Glenn hissed. He peered over his shoulder at some of the others. “Lori, Annette and the others still don’t know what happened to the Governor.”

Everyone on the farm was fully aware of what was coming and the memories the others had of the end. Grace admitted to having a nightmare several days ago of monsters that are people but didn’t have any real memories. Charlie, Glenn’s oldest sister reluctantly explained that Grace likely didn’t remember because she had gotten bitten early on and Charlie had put her down after sustaining a bite to the arm. Someone in the girls’ group had cut off Charlie’s arm and the Korean woman had lasted just as long as Rick and the others had.

Lori, Annette, Charlie, and Grace did not know, however, just what Merle’s wedding present had been or rather who and just what Maggie had done with the ‘gift’.

“She can’t stay here,” Maggie said dragging the group back into the conversation at hand. “If
“They won’t,” Michonne said. “Merle covered his tracks, right?” Merle nodded, he had a look on his face that looked almost offended. “See? We can’t just drop her off in town when everything goes down she’ll die.”

That made Maggie pause and the brunette reluctantly nodded. “So who will take care of her? Not Merle obviously,” Maggie said. Merle jerked and choked on his food, it never occurred to him that he might be responsible for the girl. Daryl sniggered meanly and gave his broken two harsh smacks on the back to help him stop coughing.

“I will,” Carol interjected. “She looks enough like Sophia that if anyone sees her before the end they won’t ask questions.”

Rick looked around to the others who all seemed to finally agree then nodded. “Alright then,” Rick said. “Penny stays, Carol will take care of her. It’s time to get down to business.”

With the children outside with Otis and Patricia already starting on chores, Rick and Hershel started handing out assignments.

“Hershel, Daryl, and I are going to visit the properties today,” Rick said. Hershel and Shawn had visited a few the day the old farmer had brought Shawn home but didn’t find any that would work for the group long term. “The next few orders of lumber and fencing should arrive today Glenn, you, Shawn, and Otis will be here to get it and store it, right?”

“Right,” Glenn said Otis had stepped out to take care of the horses and the new goats but both men planned to stay on the farm.

“Oh! Here’s Eugene!” Beth said placing her phone in the middle of the table. Rick gave the blonde a smile and a nod of thanks.

“Can you hear me Eugene?” Rick asked speaking loudly.

“Yes,” Eugene said shortly. “I surely can.”

“Good, have you any luck with Abraham or Rosita?” Rick asked hopefully.

“None yet,” Eugene said with a hint of sorrow in his voice. “I have located both Rosita and Abraham but neither show signs of remembering the world to come. I will endeavor to keep trying in hopes that something sparks their memories.”

“Good, good,” Rick said with a sigh. “Until then I need to you to be on the lookout for supplies in your area. In a few weeks, a couple of us are going to head down with some trucks and get you and anything else that we might need. Money won’t be a problem.”

The group pooled their money. Lori didn’t know that little fact because part of her still thought Rick and the others were crazy. Still between the money Carol had stolen from Ed, Rick, Michonne and Hershel’s savings the group had a decent store of money. Things they couldn’t afford were marked and noted for pick up after everything went to shit. Medicine, tools, and weapons at the top of the ‘now’ list.

“Carol -”

“- Lori and I are taking the kids back to King County so I can do more research,” Carol said interrupting Rick much to the man’s amusement. “Later the kids and I will start our learning
Rick conceded with a nod and an amused smile.

“Michonne? Do you want us to take Andre with us?” Carol asked turning to the other mother. “The kids and I can watch him if you need your hands free.”

“That would be great,” Michonne said. “Rick wants me on outreach duty.”

Last night Rick had asked Michonne to help Beth reach out and find other members of the group, between the two of them they hopefully be able to reach others who had survived with them last time. The group stood at about twenty people so far but to sustain the type of home they were planning to build they needed more people, more people they could trust.

“Maggie, Charlie, and Grace,” Rick said bringing the conversation back to assignments. “You three are on food and medicine duty. Hit the surrounding towns, and pick up what you can. Daryl is loaning you his truck so don’t be afraid to load up.”

“There is going to be some stuff we can’t buy, or can’t get a lot of without looking like drug addicts,” Charlie said thoughtfully. “But between the three of us, we should be able to get a good haul.”

“Do we have any idea of whether we can maintain some kind of freezer system?” Grace asked hesitantly. “I can do a lot with nonperishables but it would be easier if we had a freezer.”

“Glenn’s is working with Patricia and Annette to mark places in town his machinery like that we can get after everything happens,” Rick said. “Eugene had promised to work on a solar grid for us that will run freezers but for now, nonperishables only.”

Grace bit her lip but nodded and got the same look on her face that Glenn did when he had an idea.

“Speak your mind,” Rick said when she looked back to him.

“The Greene’s have a lot of supplies for canning and fermenting but we will need a lot more if we are going to have more people,” Grace said gathering courage to speak her mind. “So we need more canning jars and I was thinking maybe a food dehydrator. I can do it without one, but if we can get an inexpensive drying oven it will save us lots of time and let us store a lot of food quicker.”

Glenn grinned at his twin and Rick looked to Hershel who nodded. “Alright, you’ve made your case, if you can find one go ahead and pick it up,” Rick said. Grace flashed a shy smile and retreated to work on her list of food items.

“Carol, Michonne, Daryl and I will be heading back to King County after this,” Rick said. Before the group broke to attend to their jobs. “We can follow up by phone and come back together this weekend.”

Beth ended the call with Eugene and the others slowly left the Greene’s kitchen. “Let’s get to work,” Rick said standing from his place at the table. “Hershel, Daryl, y’all ready?”

“We’re burning daylight, son,” Hershel said. The old man looked ready and eager. “My friend Matthew Jenkins is going to meet us out at the first property.”
The first property wasn’t what they were looking for. The first ranch Hershel’s friend showed them was a one-story ranch with a small barn. The home only had three bedrooms and little room to grow. It had had well access but Daryl had disappeared during the tour and returned shaking his head. The woods wouldn’t be safe and he didn’t see any evidence of a strong animal presence. Hershel told Matthew that ranch number one just wasn’t what they were looking for.

The second property was an old style farmhouse, much like the Green’s home, with lots of cleared land and a large barn and some horse stalls. The main house was still smaller than Rick would like, only having three bedrooms but it had room for the group to expand it if need be. The men explored the farmhouse curiously. Daryl disappeared again, but when he returned he reported an unstocked pond in one of the pastures and good sightlines.

“Is this any closer to what you’re looking for?” Matthew asked when the men came back together. Matthew Jenkins was a tall thin man with short-cropped silver hair. He, like Hershel, was in good health and both men looked to have quite a few years still ahead of them being in their early to mid-sixties.

“Much closer,” Hershel said almost lost in thought. “The house needs some repairs and it’s smaller than I’d like but we could make due.”

“I don’t know if we could get it ready in time,” Rick said rubbing his face, he had forgotten to shave that morning and his slowly growing in beard itched. “The bedrooms don’t have flooring.”

“Merle ‘n me could fix ‘em,” Daryl said with a casual shrug. “We’ve done roofing an’ flooring before.”

“You didn’t mention a time frame or move in readiness,” Matthew chided Hershel. “All of the homes I’ve to show you today are fixers. You didn’t even say what it is you’re what you plan to do with these properties.”

“We don’t mind a fixer,” Hershel said. “We are already planning a few additions and updates but we are on a bit of a timeline.”

Matthew made a thoughtful noise and pulled out a tablet and expertly flipped through it. “You need a large property with room to grow, for both people and animals. Good sightlines and not too much of a project,” Matthew said thoughtfully as he flipped through the properties on his tablet. “I might have just the thing.”

Matthew flipped the tablet around and showed the three a picture of a large run-down building. “Ignore the outside,” Matthew said. “The inside is almost completely redone. A young couple bought the property three years ago with plans of turning it into an eco-green bed and breakfast, unfortunately, they passed in a tragic car accident last year before the project could be finished.”

Matthew started swiping through pictures to show the three the inside. “It has five bedrooms, four bathrooms, a small study and an office. It’s two floors with a mud room built on the back, there,” the realtor pointed out the built-on room. “This building was used a hospital during the civil war. The couple started a passive solar greenhouse in the back and the inside is a bit of a mess with all the silly green gadgets they had installed but it might be more like what you’re looking for.”

Rick felt a smile crawl across his face with every picture the man showed them. Beside him, Daryl peered at the pictures with just as much curiosity. “How many acres?” Daryl asked.

“Fifteen in total,” Matthew told them. “Some are already cleared for the work the previous owners wanted to do but a lot of it is still covered in trees. You’ve got a creek to the south-east, far enough
away that flooding hadn’t been an issue. There is also a couple dozen fruit trees over in this area.”

“This is perfect,” Rick said with a laugh. It was absolutely perfect. Getting walls up would be tricky but if the Alexandrians could do it during the start of everything then Rick knew his people could do it with a two-month head start.

“Can we see this property?” Hershel asked urgently. “Money is no object.”

“Good because this property is $499,000,” Matthew said with a smile. “That’s why I didn’t suggest it before, but if you want to take a look, I’ll show it to you.”

The three men and realtor loaded back up into their cars and Rick followed behind Matthew. “This place is it,” Rick said certainly. “I can feel it.”

“If it’s half as good as the pictures it will be perfect,” Hershel agreed.

“But yer buddy is getting suspicious,” Daryl said gnawing on his thumbnail. “We ain’t exactly being subtle here.”

“Daryl’s right,” Hershel agreed. “I can’t be sure if he thinks we’re crazy or if he remembers too.”

“Does it matter?” Rick asked honestly. “As long as he shows us this place and we can get to it when everything starts happening.”

The drive to the next property took nearly an hour, it was in total nearly two hours from the Greenes’ farm and nestled right in the middle of nowhere.

The property connected to the main road by way of three miles of backroad and a long gated driveway. The property was beautiful and Rick could easily see why the young couple had chosen it for their bed and breakfast despite it’s out of the way location. Rick parked the car behind Matthews and exited with Daryl and Hershel.

“Do we want to start with the house or the grounds?” Matthew asked with a smile. He could see the look on Rick’s face and knew they had found the property they had been looking for.

“Let’s start with the house,” Hershel decided for the group.

“Like I said before, the main building here was once used a hospital during the Civil War,” Matthew said ushering them toward the house. The building was white and in need of a wash. There wasn’t any obvious damage to the building, but the windows all looked older and in a few places the siding needed to be replaced. “The roof was replaced just before the previous owners passed, and it’s been inspected. The inspector thinks the roof should be good for another ten years or so.”

The front porch was raised and had two white columns framing the two-story house. “The exterior needs a little cosmetic work but it doesn’t need anything structural,” Matthew promised. “This is the entryway, it’s a little small but up opens up to the staircase to the second floor. On the right we have the kitchen, come with me, please.”

Matthew lead them from the front door into the kitchen. Rick looked around eagerly with Hershel by his side. Daryl squinted around the room opening cabinet doors while Matthew talked.

“The cabinets and the countertops are what the kids call ‘green’ made from sustainable materials, the flooring is a scratch resistant linoleum that looks just like hardwood,” Matthew said tapping his foot on the floors. The men stare at the kitchen curiously. “It’s got an under the sink water filtering
system that should last a while, and the filters are fairly inexpensive. I’ve been told these are better than the ones that hook up to the facet.”

“Is the property connected to the main water line?” Hershel asked looking the filtration system over after Daryl pulled the sink cabinet doors open.

“It is currently hooked up to the city of Jasper’s water supply but there are three wells on the property and it could easily be hooked up to one of them,” Matthew said looking through his information on the property.

“Over here, we have a compost bin, the previous owners were dead-set on making this place as eco-friendly as possible,” Matthew said with a hint of fondness in his voice. “All of the appliances are energy efficient and the lighting uses somewhere between 50% and 90% less energy than your everyday light bulbs. The energy, of course, coming from the solar panels on the roof.”

“As you can see we have a large island for food preparation or for kitchen side dining, there is a more formal dining room just off the kitchen here it used to be a butler's pantry and could easily be converted back, if you desire,” Matthew said waving his hand in the direction of the dining room. “If we go back out this way, you will see the stairs again, and that door there, no the other one, that’s the first of four bathrooms. Each bathroom is equipped with something called a composting toilet and there is only one bathtub in the place, something about showers being better for the environment.”

Matthew then proceeded to show them the living room, the study and a mudroom in the back. The built-on mudroom had equipment for hand washing clothing as well as a small pedal-powered washer. He then took them upstairs and showed them the five bedrooms, the small study off of the master and the other three bathrooms.

“All right gentlemen, are you ready to see the grounds?” Matthew asked when they finished the tour of the house.

Rick had grown more and more animated with each room they saw and Hershel looked just as excited to see the grounds. Even Daryl was getting pulled into their excitement if only just a little.

The outside of the property was just as promised. The solar greenhouse was a perfect size for what Rick and the others wanted. The property had land marked off for what was obviously going to be garden patches and there was a place set up that would be perfect for the goats.

It would need a lot of work, though. They would need to clear space for the cows and the horses graze. Further, they would need to clear even more space for the walls that needed to start going up as quickly as possible. There was even a rainwater catchment system in place that would be perfect for the needs of the crops and the animals.

“The solar panels are in great shape,” Matthew said. “There are materials in the barn to set up a small wind turbine as well for more off the grid power options.”

“This is perfect,” Rick said softly to himself. “Daryl, did you go take a look at the creek?”

“Yup,” Daryl acknowledged the hunter had broken away when Matthew started explaining the greenhouse and the work that still needed to be done. “The land’s good, covered in trees and brush though.”

Matthew tucked away his tablet and turned to Hershel. “Well, was this it?” He asked curiously. “I do wonder just why you are looking for a new property Hershel because I know you would never
sell your farm.”

The other man looked at the three shrewdly. “I have also never seen these young men before Hershel and you and I have been friends for a long time,” Matthew continued. “I have to wonder if you three are looking for a place like this for a reason.”

“It seems to me you’ve got something on your mind,” Rick said answering for Hershel. “You might even have an idea why we are looking for a place like this.”

“I might have an idea,” Matthew agreed. “Something big is coming gentlemen and if you have plans to ride it out I’d kindly ask for a place with you all.”

“There will be no riding it out,” Hershel said sorrowfully. “What’s coming doesn’t have an end in sight as far as we can tell but we do plan to be better prepared this time around.”

“I was afraid of this, I knew the minute you called to see properties,” Matthew said with a sigh. “I had hoped it had all been a dream, a terrible nightmare but a dream nonetheless.”

“We ain’t that lucky,” Daryl said with a snort.

“No, we are not,” Mathew agreed. “Still as it so happens, I think the four of us can come to an agreement. A place for me and my grandson when this all begins and I give you this property.”

“Give us?” Rick asked confused. “You’d give it to us?”

“Oh, yes if it will keep my Patrick safe, I will gladly hand over the property,” Matthew explained and when he saw Rick and Daryl’s confused faces and Hershel’s understanding look he explained. “The young couple who owned this place were my son and daughter-in-law. When they died in a car accident last year I was left to take care of Patrick, their son.”

“Patrick,” Daryl said softly. “’Bout this tall? Dark hair? Glasses?”

Matthew nodded curiously. “Yes that’s my Pat,” he said wondering just how the redneck knew his grandson.

“He’d have a place wit’ us no matter what,” Daryl said thinking back to before to the kid that had just wanted to shake his hand. “He was one of ours.”

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“Alright,” Charlie said pushing her buggy up and bumping the one Grace was standing beside. “I grabbed some camping gear to that way I don’t look too much like I’m trying to make meth in the woods.”

Charlie’s cart was full of over the counter medicine, pain relievers, allergy pills, and the like. She also had batteries of different sizes including the rechargeable kind. They had picked up the charger at a different store.

“Geeze, Charlie, say it louder why don’t you,” Grace muttered not looking up from her list. The three women were at their third store of that day. This one a Target where Grace had finally found a food dyer. It was a smaller model, so she grabbed two more and stuck them in Maggie and Charlie’s buggies. “Has Maggie come back yet with the canning supplies?”

“Not yet,” Charlie said looking around for their sister-in-law then turned to peek into Grace’s cart. “Do you have enough flour there Gracie?”
“This type of flour has a one-year shelf life,” Grace said flipping through her list. “We will have to learn to make our own if we want more after a year or so. So no, it’s not enough flour Charlie.”

“Hey don’t get snappy with me, okay? I get it, this is tough,” Charlie said holding her hands up in surrender. Charlie was Glenn’s height and thin, she wore her hair in a bob had a habit of biting her nails. Grace had longer hair to her shoulders and was a few inches shorter than her fraternal twin. The two were undeniably sisters.

Grace seemed to deflate her sister’s scolding. “Sorry,” she muttered. “I just don’t know how to handle all of this. All of these new people and the monsters. It’s too much.”

“Hey, it’s okay,” Charlie said bumping Grace’s cart again. “We’re down here with Glenn this time and his group it’s going to be okay.”

“You can’t promise that,” Grace said with irritation. “We don’t know that.”

“Well we can’t just give up,” Charlie said hotly. “I buried you last time and I’m not doing it again.”

Grace swallowed and looked away. Charlie had explained how she had to put Grace down and almost lost her life to the bite she sustained while doing it. Sometimes Charlie forgot she still had a left arm.

“What’s next on the list?” Charlie asked eager to put the small argument behind her. “We could get more sugar it will stay good forever if we keep it dry and unless we can figure out how to make it ourselves …”

“Right, got it, how about the artificial stuff?” Charlie asked. “Should I grab that too?”

“Yeah it’ll be better to have than not,” Grace said thoughtfully.

“Be right back then,” Charlie said turning her cart around to head to the sugar aisle.

Grace closed her eyes and sighed. This was not what she had been expecting from her life but then again her life had been out of control since she had that dream about the monsters. Getting invited to Glenn’s surprise out of the blue wedding and then finding out her dream wasn’t just a dream, it was all too much for the woman and Grace just wanted to find somewhere to be alone with her thoughts.

The farm was bursting at the seams. She was glad at a lot of the people were going to head back to King County with Rick that night if they hadn’t left already.

“Oh shit! Watch out!” Someone from behind Grace shouted.

Grace jerked when a buggy hit her hard from behind. She could hear footsteps running up on her and Grace turned with a grimace. The buggy that hit her appeared to have been pushed by a little girl. “Meghan!” The woman who had called out before said. She had dark brown hair and brown eyes. “Oh my god,” she said in a rush. “I am so sorry! Meghan say you're sorry right now!”

“I’m sorry,” the little girl said in a wobbly voice like she was about to cry. “Are you okay?”

Grace managed a smile for the little girl and nodded. “It’s fine,” she said ignoring the pain in her back. “You just need to be more careful okay? Someone could have really gotten hurt.”

Meghan sniffled but nodded.
“I am so, so sorry, I’m Tara, by the way, Tara Chambr,” Tara said introducing herself. “Meghan wanted to push the buggy and even though I told her not to run she decided not to listen.”

“Sorry aunt Tara,” Meghan said sounding pathetic. “I just wanted to go fast.”

“Yeah, and I’m sure Ms.?” Tara trailed off and looked at Grace expectantly.

“Grace Rhee,” Grace said giving her name with a shy smile.

“I’m sure Ms. Rhee didn’t want a buggy to the back,” Tara said putting a hand on her hip. “Go put the cookies back, since you didn’t listen we aren’t getting them.”

“But aunt Tara!” Meghan whined obviously upset by losing her cookies.

“Nope, not happening, put them back, I’m watching,” Tara said taking the bag of cookies from the cart and giving them to the girl. “March.”

The two women watched Meghan walk off sadly to put the cookies away. “I really am sorry,” Tara said softly when Meghan got out of earshot. “Are you alright?”

“It’s fine,” Grace promised as she reached behind her to rub her sore back. “I might have a bruise but nothing worse than that.”

“Still,” Tara said. She paused and bit her lip in thought. “If you want, maybe I can make it up to you and we can grab dinner sometime?”

Grace jerked a little in surprise and turned to look at Tara wide-eyed.

“I mean if you’re interested, but of course if you’re not I totally get that and I can walk away right now and pretend—”

“I’d like that,” Grace said cutting the other woman off. Tara was probably only a few years older than Grace and very attractive. Grace had come out to her siblings when she was nineteen after their father had died but being as shy as was, Grace didn’t date much. “I’m staying with my brother and his wife, a town over but it’s not a long drive.”

“Oh great!” Tara said excitedly. “I’ll give you my number, uh, here what your number I’ll call you really quick.”

Grace recited her number and smiled when she saw Tara’s call come through. “There, I’ll call you tomorrow or something and we can work out a time?” Tara said hopefully.

“Sounds great,” Grace said just as Meghan came back. The little girl looked like someone had told her that Christmas was canceled she was so down. “Well, I need to find my sister.”

“Yeah we need to leave too,” Tara said. “Meghan has soccer practice this afternoon. So, I’ll see you soon?”

“Really soon,” Grace promised.

“Oh, by the way, your name seemed familiar any chance I know your siblings?” Tara asked before they left.

“Well my brother lives around here and he used to deliver pizzas,” Grace said with a shrug. “Maybe you know him that way?”
“Yeah, maybe that’s it.”
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

I meant to post this yesterday but it was my birthday and I forgot. This chapter is basically the second half of chapter 8. Next chapter things start to get interesting.

ALSO: warning for brief descriptions of child abuse.

Monday, June 25th- King County Public Library

Carol was really getting the hang of this computer stuff. She had printed several dozen pages on natural medicine and remedies and had turned her attention to long-lasting recipes and food storage tips. She has bookmarked a few pages on making soap, shampoo, and deodorant. Carol was determined to get as much information as she could and store it away. The library had an old laminator that Lori had donated to the cause, it normally cost 50 cents a page but Lori had allowed Carol to do it for free as long as her boss didn't notice.

The kids, Carl, Sophia, Penny, Andre, and Judith helped if they could. Carl, Sophia, and Penny were running a little assembly line for Carol gathering the printing and laminating the important things. Andre was making use of the library's small quiet play area and Judith was napping in her stroller nearby.

They had been at for a few hours, with the kids who could read taking breaks to play or browse the books. Lori would stop by Carol's computer sometimes and watch with an uneasy gaze. She was still so unsure of the future. Everything had changed for her overnight. She had traced it all back to that morning Carl had crawled into bed with her and Rick made breakfast. There had been something weighing on his mind then, she could tell, and now she wasn't even sure if it was the looming apocalypse or the absence of the woman who had evidently replaced her in this other world.

Michonne was a nice woman and her son was absolutely adorable but Lori wanted to hate her. Lori had seen the looks her husband had given the black woman. Rick had looked at Lori like that once when things were new and they were so much in love. Carl looked at Michonne in a way that made Lori ache. It was the look of a child looking at his mother. Lori had been replaced.

According to the story, she had been told Lori had died in a prison giving birth to Judith. Carol told her how much her death had affected Rick and Carl both but seeing them look at Michonne like she hung the moon and stars Lori found that hard to believe. Maybe that was why she fought the idea of the end of the world so much, because if she believed them then she believed her marriage with Rick was over and that she had lost Carl.

More than that, the looming specter of Shane's arrival date was coming ever closer. Lori had allowed herself to entertain that Judith was Shane's daughter and not Rick's. She had cut things off the moment she found out she was pregnant and had clung to Rick fiercely during her pregnancy. At the time Rick had clung back just as hard, eager to rekindle the fire and love that had dimmed so much during their marriage.

Things had been getting better, they talked more they went on dates and for a moment Lori had
thought it was all going to be okay. But now it was like all of that progress never happened. Rick didn't seem to remember or care that they had been trying to fix their relationship instead he was so focused on this supposed end of the world and his new family that Lori was left struggling.

What did a dead woman say to her husband who had already moved on? To her child that had found comfort from another? So Lori stayed quiet and she played along. She ignored the strange dreams and the feelings that surrounded her. Still, she helped, in small ways but she still helped.

"Hey mom, Carol is going to get us lunch," Carl said peeking into Lori's small office. The library wasn't very big and only had two full-time employees, one of which being Lori. "We're getting sandwiches, what do you want?"

"A veggie sub, please," Lori said after a moment of thought. "Let me grab a few dollars from my purse."

"Carol said not to worry about it," Carl said before his mother could get up from her desk.

Lori frowned. "If she's sure," Lori said hesitantly she wasn't comfortable with how everyone in Rick's new group of friends blew through money. It wasn't sustainable and at the end, if the monsters didn't come like Rick thought then they would be left with nothing.

Carl nodded and turned to disappear back into the main part of the library but Lori called out. "Carl can you wait a minute, please," she said. "After you tell Carol would you come back here, please? I want to talk to you for a minute."

Carl agreed and disappeared from the office. Lori sighed and sagged in her uncomfortable office chair. She wasn't sure what she was going to talk to Carl about, she didn't know where to start. Maybe about the affair or about the strange insistence of his father that the world was coming to an end. Or maybe Lori would ask him about Michonne.

It took Carl a few minutes to come back but when he did, the boy slipped into the office and took a seat in the extra chair without prompting. Lori took a moment to gather her thoughts.

"Carol said she's going to get the food in twenty minutes," Carl said fiddling a loose thread from the chair.

"That's good," Lori said lamely. When had it become so hard to talk to her son? Carl was just a little boy but ever since that day he had been acting so much differently. "Carl, sweetheart, can we talk for a minute?"

Carl frowned, he seemed confused about Lori's question. "What do you mean mom?" Carl asked. "We're talking right now."

"It's about your dad, and the stuff he's been telling you," Lori said gently. "The stuff about the monsters."

"They're called walkers," Carl said simply as he picked at the flaking peach nail polish on his thumb. He had expected this from his mother but he had thought that she wouldn't bring it up when she didn't right away, he had obviously been wrong. "And dad didn't tell me anything about them. He didn't have too, I remember them from before."

Lori grimaced. "Sweetie, are you sure it wasn't just a dream?" Lori asked almost desperately. "You told me you had a bad dream the other day, maybe this was it."

"I knew you didn't believe us," Carl said with a sigh of irritation. The boy slumped in his seat
feeling defeated. "Dad said you were going to try!"

"Sweetie, I am trying," Lori said earnestly. "I'm trying to understand what happened to my family. You and your daddy, you changed overnight and now there are all these new people and Rick is saying all kinds of crazy things."

"You have to believe us mom," Carl implored her. "If you don't you're going to die, again."

"Oh baby," Lori said, she stood from her seat and moved to wrap Carl up in a tight hug. "I'll be fine. We're all going to be fine. I'll tell your daddy to stop with this crazy talk, okay? You don't have to worry about this anymore."

"No! Mom! Listen to me!" Carl said firmly. "Dad isn't crazy! And neither am I, the walkers are coming! I don't want to have to shoot you again, please!"

Lori felt her breath catch her chest. Sometimes when she was alone she could remember the pain. She could remember the cold floor under her back and blood, so much blood. It finally ended and if Lori thought hard she thought she could hear the sound of a gunshot. Those memories left her gasping and struggling for breath.

"You do remember," Carl said softly breaking Lori from her thoughts. "I can see it in your eyes."

Lori pulled away and collapsed back into her chair. "No, no," She insisted. "It was just a bad dream, baby, that's all just a bad dream."

"No, it's not," Carl said. The boy stood from his chair and stepped forward to give his mother a hug. "I know it's scary mom, but you have to accept it. For me and Judy, please. I don't want to lose you again."

Carl pulled away from the hug and frowned. "I'm going to help Sophia and Penny with the babies," Carl said. He stopped for a moment at the door to Lori's small office and turned back slightly. "I know it's scary and you don't want to believe it but you need to accept what's coming. We're willing to help you. Me, Dad, Carol and the others, we'll help you but you have to try."

Carl reached down to his belt and unclipped the knife he had taken to carrying around. Since they did live in Georgia the knife didn't draw too much attention even if a few people thought he was too young. Carl took the knife from his hip and set it carefully on Lori's desk. "Here, just in case," he said giving his mother a final look before he went to find Sophia and Penny.

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Sophia liked Penny, she liked the other girl a lot actually which was why she had agreed to help her mom hide the girl when she first showed up at the farm. Sophia didn't really understand why they were hiding Penny but she did understand that Penny's dad was a bad man. He thoughts went to her own father for the first time since she and her mother had left.

Sophia's dad had hit her twice that she could remember. The first time she had been eight years old and she had been running through the house shouting about something and her dad had slapped her across the face for being loud. Her mom had lost it, she threw things and shouted at her dad threatening to call the police and Sophia had never seen her mom act like that before.

Her dad had been so shocked that he didn't even look at Sophia for months after that. Things settled down for the girl and her dad didn't hit her again until she turned 12. It had been only two months ago, there was a dance at school coming up and Sophia wanted to go with her friends but when she got home from school her mom hadn't been home. Instead, her dad had demanded to know what
had her in such a good mood and the girl had no choice but to tell him about the dance.

Ed had refused and told Sophia that only sluts went to dances and that his daughter wasn't going and that was final. Sophia, who had spent all day dreaming of going to the dance with her friends, had talked back. Normally Sophia was a quiet girl and knew better than to talk back to her daddy like that but that day she lost it. She yelled and shouted screaming that it was unfair and Ed let her build up a head of steam before reaching out and slamming his fist into the side of her head.

Carol has been livid when she came home and found Sophia crying in her room with a large bruise on the side of her face. The had left that night for a women's shelter in Atlanta but it didn't last.

"What are you reading?" Sophia asked. The two girls were sitting with Andre watching him play with the blocks scattered around him. Carl was still off with his mom and Carol had left to pick up their lunch order.

"A Series of Unfortunate Events," Penny said showing Sophia the cover. "I like reading."

"We can bring the books with us when we find out where we are going to live," Sophia said thoughtfully. "It's not like they will get much use here."

Penny didn't respond to that and Sophia turned to look at the younger girl. Sophia was maybe two years older than Penny but Sophia felt years older than the other girl sometimes. This was one of those times.

Penny looked small curled up like she was in the beanbag chair where she has made herself comfortable. She also looked scared so Sophia reached out and took the girl's hand and gave it a squeeze.

"Are you scared of the walkers?" Sophia asked quietly. "Or are you thinking about your dad?"

Penny didn't answer and pulled her hand away when she moved the book closer to her face and pretended to read it. Sophia didn't let her get away with that she started talking softly. Sophia told Penny how her dad had hit her before and how much he had hit her mom. Penny didn't look away from her book but also didn't turn a page the entire time Sophia was talking. Sophia told her how her mom had packed her up and that they left her dad handcuffed to his bed when they left to find Rick.

"I miss him sometimes," Sophia whispered. "I've never told my mom but I do. He wasn't always mean. He took me to the park once and we play for hours it was fun. It's okay to miss your dad."

"He tried to make me eat rats," Penny said her voice shaking. "And he tied me up in the closet. I'm scared of the dark."

Sophia scooted closer to the younger girl and they sat together until Carl came back.

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Glenn scowled at the goats who ignored him and continued eating. The hot Georgian sun beat down on the three men, Glenn, Otis, and Shawn who had caught the goats who had escaped their pen just after feeding time. It had taken a few hours but all six goats had been caught and relocated back into their pen.

"Is this all of them?" Glenn asked wiping the sweat from his forehead. Maggie and his sisters were still out shopping and wouldn't likely come back until nearly supper time. Rick, Daryl, and Hershel were still out seeing properties and Glenn could care less where Merle was as long as it wasn't on
"Yep," Otis said panting heavily. "Quick little guys, aren't they?"

"Slippery, too," Shawn said he looked just as tired as the other two. "They need a better pen this one is too small."

"Your dad said not to bother until we move to the new place," Glenn told him. "I hope they find somewhere today. The faster we get this started the better off we will be."

"Yeah," Shawn agreed. "Are we planning other livestock? We won't be able to survive on goat milk and the few cows we have left."

Glenn squinted at the goats and tried to remember if they had talked about what other kinds of livestock they would need. "We haven't talked about it yet," Glenn said. "Hershel has probably already thought about it and knows what we need but we've been stockpiling medicine and store-bought stuff."

"That's not going to last us long," Shawn said. "The local feed store has rabbits we should consider getting some of them. Good pelts, good meat, and they breed quickly. Quiet too."

"Huh, that's not a bad idea," Glenn said. "We need to start collecting seeds and stuff too soon."

"Patricia and I have been getting some," Otis interjected. "She went to Wal-Mart to their garden center and got a bunch of seeds and some seedlings."

"That's a great idea," Glenn said. "I'm going to tell Maggie to pick some up if she sees any."

"Glenn!" Annette shouted from the porch. "Rick's on the phone!"

Glenn looked at the other two men and the three of them started back to the house. It only took a few minutes before Glenn gratefully took a glass of ice cold sweet tea from Annette and picked up the landline. "What's up?" Glenn asked after he took a big drink of his tea.

"We found it!" Rick said excitedly.

"What?" Glenn demanded. "So soon? Are you sure?"

"It's perfect," Rick assured him. "You and the others have to come see this I'm going to call Carol and Lori next let them know to check it out. It's perfect Glenn wait until you see it. Get the others you'll see."

Glenn took down the address and said goodbye. The Korean man threw back the last of his tea and turned to the others. "They found a place," Glenn said. Annette, Patricia, Otis, and Shawn looked excited. "When the final delivery comes, it should be here within the hour, we'll all load up and go check this place out."

"What about Beth and Michonne?" Shawn asked. Beth and Michonne, who had been put in charge of finding the others had made a quick run into town while Glenn and the others were chasing goats for a few things Annette needed for dinner.

"They should be back before the lumber gets here," Glenn said thoughtfully. "We'll head out then."

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Rick and the others had spent the rest of the day at the exploring the property and talking about
plans with Matthew. The older man had quickly pointed out their group of over twenty with children would not all fit in the house even after remodeling the office and study into bedrooms. Rick had reluctantly agreed space would be an issue. Just a few nights at Hershel's farm had been tough on the group and long-term the house on the homestead couldn't sustain them.

Matthew suggested that they look into tiny homes a phenomenon one of the younger partners at his real estate firm was interested in. Tiny homes scattered around the property might be a solution. Rick promised to look into it and retreated to the greenhouse with Hershel. Daryl had scoffed at his self-proclaimed bother and had Matthew show him the roof access to inspect the solar panels.

The four men continued to explore the property until they heard the crunch of gravel indicating a car pulling up the long driveway. It was late afternoon but the summer sun was stubbornly clinging to the sky when Carol and Lori climbed out of their cars. Carl, Penny, and Sophia spilled out soon after.

"The house is so big!" Sophia said bumping Carl's shoulder.

"We aren't all going to fit in there though," Carl said thoughtfully as he looked around at what he could see.

"Are we going to live here now?" Penny asked softly. Since she and Sophia had talked that afternoon the younger girl had been stuck to Sophia like glue. The older kids were doing their best to keep her company and help her.

"Maybe," Carol said answering the girl's question. She had Andre in her arms and Lori had Judy. Lori had been incredibly quiet since Carol had come back with lunch and while Carol didn't know why the knife clipped to Lori's belt gave her some idea. "Stay within my sight Sophia, you too Penny."

The girls agreed and Carol made a straight line for Daryl. The hunter was chewing on his thumbnail but managed a greeting for Carol. Carol passed the toddler over to Daryl who tapped his face cheerfully with chubby hands.

"This place looks nice," Carol said looking around. "How did we manage to get it?"

"The owner's Patrick's granddaddy," Daryl said shooting a look over at Matthew who was talking to Rick and Hershel. "Owns the whole place, said he'd give it to us if he and Patrick can stay. Told 'em they could."

Carol laughed and shook her head. "We just keep getting lucky, something's got to give soon," the woman said. "I hope we're ready when it does."

Daryl was stopped from replying when the Maggie, Grace, and Charlie arrived. It was easy to see the car was absolutely packed with supplies. Grace being the smallest crawled out of the back seat and had to stop and stuff several bags back inside that almost fell out.

"Did y'all buy the whole damn store?" Daryl asked peering at the car curiously.

Charlie scoffed and even Maggie giggled. "Not even close," Charlie said rolling her eyes. "Grace was upset we didn't get more."

"This won't last us two months," Grace said shortly. It was easy to see that this was not the first time she had said this. "Not at the number of people you've all suggested and who knows how many more we'll end up with. Growing food takes time so we are going to be reliant on this stuff anything hunted or scavenged."
"Kid's right," Daryl said gruffly. "We done spent a lot of time hungry last time. Ain't looking to do it again."

Grace gave the older man a grateful look before turning to her older sister as if to say 'see, someone agrees with me'.

"Aww Gracie," Charlie said giving her younger sister a hip bump. "We know how important food is, it'll be okay."

"Are Glenn and the others here yet?" Maggie asked looking around. She didn't see her husband or his car so she guessed he was still at the farm.

"Glenn, Shawn, and the others are coming after they finish unloading the lumber delivery," Rick said. The man finished his conversation with Hershel and Matthew and lead the way to the other group that had formed. The kids were exploring nearby, Daryl still had a hold of Andre and Lori was cradling Judith. Rick took a moment to introduce Matthew and explain his connection to the group, the folks that remembered the prison greeted him warmly. Rick offered a tour but the group decided to wait on Glenn and the others.

Almost an hour after Grace, Charlie, and Maggie arrived Glenn and the group from the farm arrived. Michonne picked up Andre and went to Rick's side just as Glenn did to Maggie. The others from the farm were introduced to Matthew and the tour began.

Grace and Annette spent the entire time they were in the kitchen plotting and planning. They had decided right away the dining room would be reconverted back into a pantry because it wouldn't be large enough for the group to eat in any way. Carol suggested working on a covered outdoor eating area later to make sure everyone had room. Communal meals were good for the group so they planned on making them work in at the homestead.

The rest of the tour inside went quickly. Glenn and Maggie claimed a room in the house because they volunteered to stay on the homestead while everyone was scattered. Charlie and Grace decided to stay as well, taking two rooms even though they would likely share when everyone moved in.

The tour of the grounds was quick because of the dying light but everyone agreed the house and the land looked perfect.

"We're going to need walls," Michonne said looking out at the tree covered land. "Need to clear these trees too, anything could hide in them."

Rick nodded. "I'm going to quite at the station tomorrow," Rick said thoughtfully. He ignored Lori's look and continued. "I say we split into three groups. King County, the farm, and here on the homestead." Matthew had told Rick that his son and daughter-in-law were going to name the bed and breakfast the Homestead and the name just stuck.

"We've all got phones and can easily move between the different locations," Rick said. "All deliveries should go to the farm or to King County. I don't want people out here. I've already asked Matthew to take this place off of any kind of listing. The less people that know about this place the better."

Carol and some of the others nodded in agreement. "But what about walls," Maggie asked. "At least for the first two years, we're gunna need 'em."

The sheer number of walkers would eventually decrease and eventually, the real threat would
become the humans left alive. Walls, good thick walls were needed to survive the herds that would eventually be coming through.

"We're going to have to do it ourselves," Rick said firmly. "Woodbury and Alexandria did it last time at the start we can too. Tomorrow. Tomorrow this all starts for real. No more sitting around collecting things just in case. This place is going to be our home and we have to start working to protect it."

The group murmured agreement and eventually, the sleepy children prompted the group to break. Rick, Lori, Carl, and Judith piled into a car to head back to King County. Rick pressed a chaste kiss to Michonne's lips before he left and promised to see her tomorrow. He wasn't willing to leave Lori and the kids alone in the house. Carol, Michonne, Andre, Sophia, and Penny took Carol's car back to the hotel where they had been staying. Daryl hitched a ride back to the farm where his bike was waiting and would join them soon. The farm group split between the remaining cars and Matthew's vehicle to get back to Hershel's.

Everyone was brimming with nervous excitement. It was time to get serious.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

I know a lot of you were looking forward to this chapter because of who finally show's up. Keep in mind this is just the beginning.

Also, there is a mention of what could be considered past dubcon or possible noncon in the form of getting someone drunk to have sex with them. Let me know if I should tag it. It's only mentioned briefly and with less description than the child abuse from the previous chapter.

Wednesday, June 27th

Shane paced the length of his living room. He had been back in town for two days and hadn’t left his house. He felt like he was going crazy, nothing made sense anymore. Some days ago, Shane had awoken with the knowledge that something was coming, something worse than anyone could ever imagine. The man had tried to shake it off as a dream but the more he thought about it the more convinced he became. Shane could remember everything, he remembered Rick getting shot, and then the madness at the hospital, and the government dropping bombs on Atlanta.

More than that Shane remembered the quarry, the group, Rick coming back to life and everything that followed. His first real thought was of Lori, Lori and the little baby he knew was his. It was obvious to Shane that he remembered for a reason, it was his job to save his family from the Walkers.

He could picture it in his mind. He could get supplies and be ready when bombs dropped. When the group came to the quarry Shane could lead them again but do it right this time with no Rick. First thing Shane was going to do was make sure the Dixon’s didn’t come around. Shane hadn’t liked them when they first turned up but Daryl and Merle had more firepower than Shane did and the brothers looked ready to use it if they needed. Shane hadn’t been willing to shoot a man, not then, but now Shane would shoot both redneck pieces of trash in the head if he needed too. Hesitating made you weak and being weak made you dead. Shane wasn’t going to die this time.

Shane barely remembered to call the station and let them know he wasn’t coming in, he muttered something about food poisoning from his trip. The Sheriff had waved him off and explained that Shane didn’t have a partner anymore anyway.

Shane had nearly dropped the phone when his boss explained that Rick had just up and quit the force yesterday morning. He had offered no real explanation other than needing to take care of his family. Shane croaked out a promise to look into it and hung up.

Had Rick quit at the station? That didn’t make any sense, because Rick loved being a cop almost more than anything. Shane wondered if this meant that Rick remembered too. It would be just his luck that his so-called brother would remember. Shane still wasn’t sure how Rick had survived the first time, alone in the hospital he shouldn’t have been able to survive it really was a miracle that he did.

Shane ran a hand through his hair as he tried to sort through his options. He didn’t want to risk
running into Rick. Even if the other man didn’t remember something was wrong because Rick would never quit at the station and more than that he would have never done it without telling Shane. He needed to see Lori. It was Wednesday so the woman should be at the library that afternoon unless Rick had hidden her away somewhere.

Rage burned in Shane’s chest at the thought of Rick hiding Lori away from him. It had been Shane that was with her for the last year. It was Shane that Lori went to when she and Rick fought. It had been Shane who Lori went to for comfort, not Rick, hadn’t been Rick in years.

Part of Shane felt bad. Rick was his brother, his best friend and Lori was supposed to be like a sister to him but that had never been the case. Shane had promised himself he would never try to make a move on Lori but when she came to him crying over some fight with Rick … Shane had been weak. He offered her a beer, then another, and another until Lori wasn’t sad anymore. Shane poured on the charm, he said all the right things, all the things that Lori wanted to hear from Rick. He kissed her first and she had said no, that she didn’t want to cheat but Shane sweet-talked her said she deserved love, and romance. He promised her all of these things and more and eventually she gave in.

Their relationship hadn’t been perfect, they had to hide from Rick and from Carl. The little boy idolized his daddy and Lori hadn’t wanted to interfere with that, so Shane had done what he could to stand in when Rick was busy but still stayed back. Everything had been fine until Lori broke it off one day out of the blue. Shane didn’t realize until later that it had to be because she found out she was pregnant.

Then it was months of ice between them. Lori refused to even be in the same room as Shane without Rick being there. He had hoped after his vacation that things would go back to normal, that Lori would see what she was missing, who she was missing but then the memories came back and everything changed.

Shane stopped in his tracks he needed to see Lori. It took Shane a moment to find his keys and then he was out the door. The drive to the library wasn’t long and Shane grinned when he saw Lori’s car in the parking lot. There were two other cars but Shane didn’t recognize them. They would leave soon enough, he was sure.

The police officer pulled into a parking spot, not quite within the lines but no one would say anything because his car was recognizable enough. He slammed his door shut and marched into the library. The cool air hit him in the face hard, Shane suppressed a shiver at the drop in temperature and went straight for where he knew Lori’s office was.

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“Daryl, does this look right to you?” Carol asked pointing at the computer screen. The kids were with Michonne and Rick working on the Homestead. Carol had taken Daryl and the two of them were on people finding duty at the King County Library. Everyone was staying either at the farm or the homestead that night so Daryl and Carol had been volunteered to ride with Lori after she got off work.

Carol had immediately sat down and went to work gathering information and trying to reach out to familiar faces on social media. She and Eugene, thought a messenger app, was also making online purchases for the homestead. Daryl was helping in between being bored out of his mind watching Carol play around on the computer.

The hunter moved his head and looked at the remedy Carol had pulled up. It was supposed to be a natural remedy for headaches but the hunter scoffed and shook his head. “I guess if yer dead, yer
head cain’t hurt no more,” Daryl said sarcastically. “That shit burns yer skin, cain’t imagine it wouldn’t do the same to yer insides.”

Carol frowned and closed the tab. “Well that one is out,” she said easily. “I’ll let Eugene know to avoid that plant.”

“Half these remedies are poison,” Daryl remarked. “The people writing these things don’t know what the hell they’re doin’.”

“Not everyone was born with a crossbow in their hand and the ability to track like they were born for it,” Carol said teasingly.

Daryl scoffed and looked away. His eyes scanned the library out of habit and the hunter jerked in surprise when he saw the form marching to Lori’s office. Daryl jumped to attention and followed the familiar form of Shane Walsh with his eyes.

“What’s wrong?” Carol asked turning, but just missing the man ducking into the office.

“We got trouble,” Daryl growled. “Shane just walked in an’ he’s wit’ Lori.”

“Shit,” Carol swore. “What’s the plan?”

“I’mma go in there and beat his ass,” Daryl said simply. Carol watched the hunter clear the distance to Lori’s office quickly. The door had been shut, obviously by Shane because Lori liked to keep in open. Daryl could hear voices on the other side of the closed door Daryl didn’t bother knocking, instead, he just pulled it open and practically snarled.

Lori was still in her chair, Shane had obviously caught her by surprise and the small office meant with Shane looming over her like he was she didn’t have a lot of room to get up and get away. Shane whipped around and when he saw just who had barged in his eyes seemed to flash dangerously.

“What the hell do you want?” Shane demanded. “We’re busy.”

Daryl snorted and reached out to jerk the man back out of Lori’s face. Shane tried to jerk away but Daryl was stronger. Daryl pulled the man out of the office, and Carol rushed in to check on Lori. Daryl forced Shane out into the main lobby of the library. Thankfully the other patrons had split, about the same time that Shane came in leaving just Daryl, Carol, Lori, and Shane in the building.

“Get out,” Daryl demanded as he shoved Shane back.

“What the hell do you want?” Shane demanded. “We’re busy.”

Daryl scoffed. “I know ‘xactly who ya’ are, Walsh,” Daryl spat.

Shane gave a half-laugh and shook his head. Without warning, he lashed out and caught Daryl in the face with a punch. The hunter stumbled back, having not expected the punch but quickly recovered and swung his own fist that connected with Shane’s nose. Shane howled at the loud crunch of the cartilage and pulled back to glare hatefully at the other man but then a dark smile crawled across his face.

“You fucked up Dixon,” Shane said, the voice was nasally and full of pain. “The world hasn’t ended yet and I’m still the goddamn law around here. You’re under arrest.”

“Shane!” Lori shouted frantically. “Stop it! Leave Daryl alone!”
Shane jerked around and scowled at the women. “Stay out of this, it’s none of your business,” Shane snapped. “Turn around and put your hands behind your back, Dixon.”

Daryl hesitated but Carol who was standing next to Lori nodded her head. “Just go with him Daryl,” Carol said firmly. “We don’t need to cause a scene.”

Shane sneered at her and turned back to Daryl. “Now Dixon,” Shane spat. “Or I’ll charge you with resisting as well as assaulting an officer.”

Carol watched as Shane roughly cuffed Daryl. The man wasn’t in his police uniform but he had his duty belt around his hips that held his gun, cuffs and other supplies including a radio. The radio he pulled out and used to call a car to the library.

“Go call Rick,” Carol whispered tucking something into her pocket out of Shane’s sight. “Tell him what happened. Tell him that Shane remembers and that he had Daryl arrested.”

Lori, still shaken and pale, gave a shallow nodded and disappeared back into her office hopefully to call Rick. Carol stood and watched Shane attempt to stem the blood flow from his nose. Daryl had been parked on the floor next to the doors with his arms cuffed behind him. “It’s not going to stick, Shane,” Carol said in an even voice. “Lori and I both saw you hit him first.”

“My word against his, and y’all’s,” Shane said, the voice muffled by his hands. “If I have my way that dumb redneck piece of trash will be sitting in county ’til the damn world ends.”

Daryl swore colorfully and loudly. This was just the kind of attention that the group had been attempting to avoid.

“Daryl, don’t say anything.” Carol said sharply. The hunter gave her a look that clearly said he knew better than to give the police anything. Merle had been arrested more than enough times to give his little brother some pointers. Don’t talk to the cops, if you’re going to start shit start it in front of sympathetic witnesses.

Shane didn’t notice Lori slip back into the lobby. She was shaking but gave Carol a little nod that the other woman hoped to mean that she had contacted Rick. “Rick’s coming up to the station,” Lori whispered. “He’ll be here in about an hour.”

The homestead was approximately an hour from King County so if Rick left right away then he would, in fact, arrive in an hour. “He said he’s bringing Michonne,” Lori said softly just as the car Shane had radioed for arrived.

Carol allowed a small grin Michonne was a closed mouth individual but on the road together you tended to learn a lot about the people you traveled with and eventually after a while even the secretive Michonne shared. “Yeah she’s going to be Daryl’s lawyer,” Carol said.

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Rick was pissed. Beyond pissed, even. Michonne who was sitting in the passenger seat of the car could tell. Michonne had never met Shane Walsh but she had sure heard of him. The first time had been from Andrea that winter they spent together after the loss of the Greene’s farm. Eventually, when Michonne joined the prison she had heard of the group’s time with Rick’s former partner.

Lori’s phone call had been short, she had only told Rick had Shane was there and he was arresting Daryl. Rick had managed to get out of her that the other man remembered and he was mad.

The group had been working to prepare the homestead. Early that morning Shawn had gone to a
neighbor and borrowed their trailer so they could haul the lumber and fencing that had been
delivered to the farm. The group had spent most of the morning loading up things to take to the
homestead. All of the supplies that could be taken were packed into various cars and taken.

When they arrived, the group had split to start putting things to rights. Hershel and Matthew took
up a place at the large island in the kitchen to look over the tiny houses that Matthew had
mentioned. Thankfully the house had a lot of staging furniture so the group didn’t have to bring
any just yet.

Grace, Annette, and Patricia charged themselves with starting to convert the dining room back into
a pantry. They claimed Otis to help rebuild shelving that that afternoon. They were also sorting the
nonperishable foods that the group had started collecting and sorting it by expiration date.

Shawn, Beth, and Charlie had taken an hour or so to claim the study on the ground floor as a mini
hospital. They moved the staging furniture around and made a list of other items they would need.
Beth, had decided she wanted to give medicine a try. Her stay at Grady Memorial Hospital had left
some lasting effects. Shawn promised to give his younger sister his books from his classes so she
could learn. Charlie, who the group learned had just received her certification as a paramedic six
months ago, recommended getting some of the materials she had used for EMT and then her
paramedic certification for the girl.

After the medical group finished, they went to help the rest unload and store the lumber and
fencing in one of the barns on the property. It had been slow going because there was a lot of
lumber and fencing. Rick and Michonne had been helping when they got Lori’s call.

Rick had explained what was happening to Glenn who promised to keep the projects moving, and
Maggie promised to keep an eye on the kids with Beth’s help. So Rick and Michonne loaded up
and were speeding towards King County to get Daryl out of jail.

“Do you want to talk about this,” Michonne asked as they entered the last quarter of their drive.

“Nothing to talk about,” Rick grunted, his fingers tightening on the steering wheel.

“Yeah,” Michonne mocked. “Nothing to talk about. It’s not like Shane was your best friend for
years and cheated with your wife.”

Rick’s jaw clenched but Michonne pushed forward. “Come on, Rick,” Michonne said. “Talk to
me.”

“It’s exactly like you said,” Rick told her. “He was my best friend, my brother and he betrayed me.
Tried to steal my life. He tried to kill me.”

“And now he’s waiting in your home town with one of ours locked up,” Michonne said simply.
“What are we going to do about it?”

“I’m tempted to just shoot him,” Rick admitted.

“That’ll get you a bunk right beside Daryl,” Michonne countered. “And no matter how good I am I
won’t be able to get you off on that. And I am damn good at what I do.”

Rick managed a small smirk. “You are pretty good at getting me off,” he remarked almost
playfully.

Michonne snorted with laughter and gave the former officer a light shove. “That was not what I
meant,” Michonne said sternly.
Rick sighed. “It would be easier if it was,” Rick said mournfully.

Michonne laughed softly and shook her head. “Seriously though,” the woman said. “Don’t worry about Daryl. He’ll be out in no time, and we’ll deal with Shane. Even if it means taking him out back and shooting him in the head.”

Rick didn’t reply but Michonne could tell that he really liked that last option. Rick went straight to the hotel where Carol, Michonne, and the Dixons still had rooms. Rick and the others had vague plans to take the furniture from the hotel for use at the homestead once it got closer to the end. Daryl had also said they were taking Ms. Margaret as well because the woman lived alone in her hotel and the hunter didn’t want to leave the older woman alone when the shit hit the fan.

Rick and Michonne found Carol and Lori in Carol’s room. The two women were watching something play on Carol’s phone when Rick and Michonne walked in.

“Oh good,” Carol said. “Here Michonne look at this.” Michonne curiously went to look at the video on Carol’s phone and laughed when she realized what it was.

“You guys don’t even need me,” Michonne said still laughing. “There is almost nothing left for me to do with this.”

“What is it?” Rick asked.

“Carol recorded the whole thing,” Michonne said with a smile. “Shane swung first.”

“I’m not surprised,” Rick said shortly.

Michonne just shook her head. “I need to take that with me, and you two should ride along,” Michonne said thoughtfully. “Well come on. Let’s go get Daryl out of jail.”

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“No bail yet the judge hasn’t been in yet today,” the bored jailer said ignoring Michonne. He didn’t even look up from his phone when they entered.

“Brandon, I know that is not how you are supposed to greet people,” Rick snapped. Brandon, the jailer, jerked in surprise.

“Officer Grimes!” Brandon said in surprise. “Sheriff Mooreland said you quit!”

“I did,” Rick acknowledged. “I’m here for Daryl Dixon.”

“Officer Walsh brought him in for assault an officer and resisting arrest,” Brandon said confused. “He’s in the drunk tank, Officer Walsh said he’s violent.”

Carol scoffed and crossed her arms. Michonne stepped forward again and this time Brandon paid attention. “I’m Mr. Dixon’s lawyer and if you don’t bring me Officer Walsh and the Sheriff in ten minutes I’m going to sue your little jail and your little city and crown myself mayor. Do you understand me?”

Brandon paled and nodded. Michonne watched eagle-eyed as the young man picked up his phone and called the two men.

Sheriff Mooreland was an older, rounder fellow. He was a few inches shorter than Rick but looked competent and irritable. Shane looked just the same as he had at the start of everything last time.
Michonne was unimpressed with both men. “What seems to be the problem here,” the Sheriff asked looking from Rick to Lori and Carol, and then to Michonne.

“Rick,” the Sheriff greeted still very confused. Rick didn’t respond.

“My client was brutalized by one of your officers and then arrested for it,” Michonne said cooly. “You’re Dixon’s lawyer?” Shane asked with a scoff. “I’m pretty sure he doesn’t like your kind.”

“I don’t like how you said that Officer Walsh, would you care to explain what you meant by my kind? No?” Michonne said simply. Both Shane and the Sheriff has shifted awkwardly unwilling to say anything and be accused of being racist. “Moving on. Why was my client arrested.”

“Daryl Dixon was arrested for assaulting a police officer and resisting arrest,” Sheriff Mooreland said backing Shane. “Which I’m sure you knew miss?”

“Ms. Dawson. Michonne Dawson, Esq.” Michonne said cooly. “Like I said, I’m Daryl’s lawyer. The assault claim is frivolous and trust me, we will be filing suit against your office and Officer Walsh for assault.”

“Ma’am,” the Sheriff said stopping Michonne from continuing. “Daryl Dixon comes from a well known criminal family, and -”

“I was unaware that Daryl’s family had anything to do with this, Sheriff,” Michonne said cutting him off. “In fact, I wonder just how it is you know that because Daryl and his family aren’t from King County, in fact, they live almost 25 miles away in Blackburn, and more than that I know Daryl Dixon doesn’t have more than a traffic ticket on his record.”

“But again, that is not why were are here today.” Michonne said. “I have on this phone video evidence that your officer, attacked my client first and Daryl was just defending himself. I also have two eyewitnesses, the two women behind me, that say the exact same thing. “

Michonne gave the two men a hard look. “Now tell me, do you want me to go get Daryl or are you? Because if I have to go find the judge and show him this how do you think your DA is going to feel?” Michonne asked.

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The cell door swung open and Daryl turned his head and gave it a shake. “‘Bout damn time,” he said irritably. The hunter stood from the bunk where he had settled himself. Daryl was still in his street clothes and his fingers were ink-stained showing that he had been booked in.

Rick just grinned at his friend and shook his head. “We had to get you a lawyer,” Rick joked. “We got one of those running around?” Daryl asked curiously.

“Two, when we find Andrea,” Michonne said joining Rick at the door of the cell.

Daryl just nodded. “Lori, okay?” Daryl asked. “That piece-o-shit was yellin’ at ‘er and gettin’ in ‘er face before.”

Rick’s face grew dark at the mention of Shane’s behavior. “She’s fine,” Rick said shortly. “Go get your stuff, Lori, Carol, and Michonne are out there waiting. I’ve gotta talk to Shane and Sheriff Mooreland.”
Daryl clapped Rick on the shoulder and left the cell. Rick followed and made eye contact with Sheriff Mooreland. The Sheriff nodded, he could tell Rick wanted to talk with him and agreed. The Sheriff had been blown away when Rick quite out of the blue, he was even more confused when Shane had brought in Daryl Dixon a name he recognized from a few counties over. Then when Rick arrived with an attorney for Dixon and obvious tension between Rick and Shane the Sheriff had many questions but no answers.

“Walsh,” the Sheriff barked. “Get out of here. You called in sick and I don’t want to see your face again until your next shift. We’re gonna have words about the Dixon thing.”

Shane grunted and glared at the assembled group, Rick and Daryl stared him down until he left the station. “I’ll be right back,” Rick said to the small group. “Get Daryl’s things from Brandon.”

The Sheriff’s office was nice enough. There were no windows and the cinder block walls were painted beige. Rick took one of the older wooden chairs that sat in front of Mooreland’s desk.

“What the hell is going on, son?” Sheriff Mooreland asked as soon as his door shut. “First you just up and quit without a warning and now this?”

Rick sighed and leaned back in his chair. “It’s a long story,” Rick said truthfully. “The important part is, I’ve been having some marital problems that involve Shane.”

Sheriff Mooreland’s bushy eyebrows shot up. “Really now,” he said drawing out the word ‘really.’ “I’m sorry to hear that son.”

“I just need to get away for a little bit,” Rick said spinning a story that was mostly true. The good Sheriff didn’t remember and Rick didn’t want to get into the end of the world right then. “Lori and I, we’re working on things. Shane’s been making it difficult and I don’t want the kids drawn into this.”

“Of course,” Mooreland said. “Carl doesn’t need this drama.”

“Exactly,” Rick agreed. “So we’ve been working on a friend’s farm letting things settle. Thinking about moving out that way too.”

“What happened with Dixon?” Mooreland asked. “I saw the video that fancy lawyer brought. It seems like they have a history.”

“They’ve never got along,” Rick admitted. “And Shane went after Lori today while Daryl and Carol were visiting her at work. Daryl told him to get lost and Shane didn’t like it. Thankfully Carol decided to record the whole thing.”

“Yeah,” Mooreland said. “Alright. I’ll keep Shane out of your business.” The older man gave Rick a hard look. “I don’t like getting involved in domestic situations like this Rick. I do not like it, but you’ve been a good hard worker for me in the past. If there is anything I can do…”

The Sheriff trailed off and Rick nodded. The two men shook hands and Rick stood to leave. “Oh, and Rick,” Sheriff Mooreland said stopping him. “Maybe some time out of town would be for the best. Walsh is, well there’s something off about him.”

Rick grimaced and nodded. “Yeah I know,” he said reluctantly.

Rick left the office and found the others waiting next to Brandon’s desk. Daryl was glaring a hole in Brandon’s head while the young jailer tried his best not to melt under the fierce look.
Carol watched with a smile and even Michonne looked amused. “What happened?” Rick asked curiously.

“Brandon didn’t want to give up the vest,” Michonne explained with a small smile. “Daryl offered to go find it himself and stick his boot up Brandon’s ass to move things along. He found it pretty quick after that.”

Rick laughed and clapped a hand on Daryl’s shoulder. His mind was whirling even as he left with the others. Rick soon found himself in the car with Michonne, the woman in the driver seat. “Where do we go from here?” She asked. For Rick, the man read much more in the question than Michonne likely meant. The homestead was nearly ready for habitation. They needed more furniture and the group would soon be too large for the main house. It had only been a week but things were still moving too slowly for Rick. They didn’t have nearly enough food or materials. There was still so much to be done, and now Shane was back.

It was only the Sheriff’s presence that had warded off the better part of Shane’s temper. Rick had a feeling his old friend was lost somewhere between the old world and now, he could see it in his eyes. There was so much going on and Rick didn’t know where to start or where anything ended. Before, things had been simpler if only because there were no rules but the ones that he and the others made.

Now everyone was stuck playing by the old world rules for the next two months and it was costing them valuable time. Rick groaned and let his head fall back onto the headrest of the seat. “What’s wrong?” Michonne asked letting her eyes leave the road for a moment to flicker to her partner.

“This isn’t enough,” Rick said. “We’re racing against time, other groups, and our own morals. We’re doin’ the same damn things that Alexandrians did, we live in a world that doesn’t exist anymore.”

“Seems to me the world you want to live in doesn’t exist, yet,” Michonne countered. The samurai had lived without walls, without people, for the longest time. She had given herself to the monsters of the world and she had felt nothing. Since then she did her best to make sure her family didn’t do the same. She would fight tooth and nail to make sure they had walls, that they had a home.

It was easy to see where Rick was coming from and what he saw as wrong but they had to play the rules that governed and right now, without the walkers they had a fine line to tread. “We can’t keep doing this,” Rick said finally after a moment of silence between the couple. “It ain’t enough and we’re all going to suffer for it later.”

“So what are we going to do about it?” Michonne asked.

“It’s time for a council meeting,” Rick said. “No more playing by the old rules.”
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

I didn't want to end this chapter because it's basically a lot of planning but it was a lot of fun to write. I hope it's at least a little fun to read. If you are interested in possibly joining a discord to talk about this or any of my other fics let me know!

Wednesday, June 27th - Early Evening

“How big of a problem is Shane going to be?” Maggie asked. The group had all retreated to the homestead minus Otis, Patricia, and Shawn to watch the Greene’s farm. When Rick and the others rolled up with a grumpy Daryl nursing a bruise on his face and slightly smug Michonne everyone had immediately wanted to know what happened. With the sun slowing sinking over the horizon the group had retreated into the house. They hadn’t yet picked up lights for the grounds so the homestead was pitch black at night.

Rick had requested that everyone gathered together. It was a tight fit, but everyone squeezed together in the living room. The kids settled on the floor or in the case of the babies in someone’s lap. Lori had a hold of a sleeping Judy and Andre was in Carol’s lap playing with a soft toy.

Carol and Lori had taken up one of the staging sofas that came with the house, Matthew said he wouldn’t bother returning it. Maggie has snagged a deep squishy chair and Glenn had squeezed in with her. Beth and Grace were sitting on the floor next to Glenn and Maggie’s chair whispering to each other. Grace had taken to Beth well and the two were often found planning and chatting.

The Dixons, Merle had rolled up that afternoon (Daryl having told his brother where they were) after Rick and Michonne had left to get Daryl out of jail with three duffle bags full of guns and even more prescription-strength medications, were talking in hushed whispers in a corner of the living room.

Hershel, Annette, and Charlie were on the second sofa directly across from the one that Lori and Carol shared. Rick stood at the front of the room where he could see everyone, Michonne had taken the armrest of Carol and Lori’s sofa to half sit half lean on.

Rick took a moment to look out at his group. There were so many people that he thought he would never see again and several faces he had never had a chance to meet. There was strength in his group and compassion. Rick could see both reflected in the eyes and face of the people watching him, waiting for him.

Rick knew he had never been the perfect leader. From the so-called Ricktatorship (Rick had heard Carl describe it as such once and he had laughed until his sides hurt) to the council at the prison and eventually to whatever had happened at Alexandria Rick had made mistakes. He had trusted the wrong people, he had refused to trust the right people, and he had made terrible decisions while trying to keep his family alive.

Now, in their second chance, the group was again turning to him for leadership and Rick wanted nothing more than to do things right this time but to do that he was going to need help. More than that to get the homestead in shape he was going to need help.
“Shane is a problem,” Rick said finally answering Maggie’s question. “A lotta y’all remember him from before and Shane completely lost it last time and he’s on his way to that point again.”

“Got his head on enough to remember he’s a cop,” Daryl interjected gruffly. “Course he never forgot that last time either,” Merle grunted and elbowed Daryl sharply in the side. The younger Dixon huffed and gave the elder a hard shove. It appeared Merle was giving Daryl shit over getting arrested by Shane that afternoon.

Rick nodded in agreement, otherwise, he ignored the Dixon shoving match. “No one is to be around him alone,” Rick said. “It shouldn’t be a problem out here but Shane does know where the farm is and he knows King County. Lori, I want you to consider staying out on the homestead with Glenn and Maggie. It would be safer for you and Judy.”

Rick had finally gotten out of Lori what Shane had said to her just before the meeting. Evidently, the man had demanded that she leave with him, he swore to protect her and Judith. He had rambled on about protecting the group and ‘doing things right’ before Daryl had jerked him out of her office.

“Rick,” Lori said sternly. She wasn’t ready yet to give up her normal life. Everyone else on the homestead had dropped everything. They had left behind friends, family, and careers but Lori wasn’t ready for that. After her discussion with Carl, she had promised herself to try but the deeply rooted fear that all of this was a dream or some kind of delusion wouldn’t leave her. “I have a job I can’t miss work.”

Rick frowned it was plain on his face that he wanted Lori to stay on the homestead if only for Judith and Carl’s sake. Lori seemed to gear up for a fight when Rick made to argue with her but Carol interjected. Carol had been running interference with Rick and Lori for a while now. “I’m still making use of the computers,” Carol said. “Until we get some kind of connection out here I need the library’s computers to work. I’ll stay at the hotel and go to work with Lori for a few more weeks.”

Reluctantly Rick nodded. “Alright, get a gun from the stuff Merle brought back if you don’t have one,” Rick said sternly. “We don’t go unarmed anymore. We’ve talked about other people remembering and we should have started while ago but I ... I got complacent.”

“We all did,” Michonne said speaking for the first time during the meeting. “It’s easy when walkers around actually walking around yet. It’s easy to pretend.”

“Exactly,” Rick agreed. “And it stops now. The supplies we have won’t last more than a few months with a group this large.” All together they were pushing almost twenty-five people not counting the babies.

“So what are we going to do?” Beth asked from her spot next to Grace.

“That’s what we are here to decide,” Rick said. “I want your input, all of you.”

“Oh! Wait for a second,” Sophia said pushing herself upright. “I’ll take notes!”

Rick quirked a grin and several of the other adults did as well and waited patiently as the little blonde girl rushed to her book bag that was sitting by the Dixons along the far wall and dug out a small red composition notebook. After a moment of deliberation, she grabbed the entire bag and tugged it over to where Carl and Penny were sitting. Rick watched the little girl that he had failed so badly open up her book and take out a pen, she looked at him expectantly and Rick chuckled just a little.
Rick and Carol had made the conscious decision to involve the kids as much as possible and it wasn’t just because Carl was mentally older than he looked. Rick had seen the way Carl had rebelled from the constant giving and taking away of responsibilities. Carl had been forced to be a man, then pushed to being a kid again over and over. The lack of stability and the general chaos of like after the end of the world had left the boy floundering more often than not. So Carol and Rick were working to keep the kids involved without having to do the really heavy lifting that had traumatized Carl so much last time.

“We have three main needs as this thing happens,” Rick began. He paced the length of the room as he spoke. “Food, protection, and shelter. We lucked out with shelter because of the Homestead. But food and weapons are always going to be a problem.”

“I want three people, one to be in charge each of our main needs,” Rick explained. After coming to the realization that they couldn’t make do like they had been Rick and Michonne had brainstormed the entire trip back to the homestead. They had come up with a system to hopefully make things easier the group would be split into three groups with different responsibilities revolving around their three most important things. Rick had an idea of who he wanted in charge of each group but he put it out there to see if others agreed. “The one in charge would be the person to coordinate with the others to get the supplies, decide what we need and make sure it gets done.”

“Like the council at the prison,” Maggie said clarifying what Rick was saying. “So we will have a three-person council with you at the head.”

Rick told Maggie that was how he envisioned it.

“Hershel should be in charge of shelter,” Glenn piped up. “He knows the best how to maintain this place and make it safe for the animals.”

“I agree. Hershel?” Rick turned to the older man who nodded his agreement to the position. Rick flicked his eyes to Sophia who was writing away in her notebook. “Daryl, Maggie, I want you two in charge of protection and food. Food is pretty straightforward but Daryl protection can be anything from weapons to medicine.”

Rick could tell Daryl didn’t know why Rick wanted him in charge and not someone like Glenn but the hunter would never ask. Instead, he just nodded and frowned thoughtfully. Rick knew the other man was already hard at work figuring out what was going to be needed. That was why he wanted Daryl in that position. Glenn was Rick’s right-hand man, as Negan had once called him, and if something ever happened to Rick, he wanted Glenn to be in a position to take over and have a fully functioning council with him. In a year or two Rick could see Hershel training someone, maybe Shawn, to take his spot on the council.

Having a small council that was able to vote on and discusses problems as they arose would hopefully make things easier. Rick would act as a tie breaker as needed and he knew that if he asked the group would defer to him unless something drastic happened. Three people to keep Rick in check and to help make decisions.

“Glenn I want you to work with Hershel, anything we need for the Homestead that’s for you,” Rick said. “Everyone will be drafted or can volunteer to work with someone. I want the start of a list of supplies from each of you by tomorrow afternoon.”

Rick watched for a minute as everyone started chatting amongst themselves making it clear who wanted to work with which group. Daryl found Carol’s eyes from across the room and nodded. Maggie leaned down to talk to Grace and Beth likely getting the youngest Rhee on her side. Rick thought that Charlie would probably reach out to Daryl later.
“Beth, have we had any luck with reaching out to any of the others yet?” Rick asked turning to Hershel’s youngest daughter.

“Tara deleted Maggie’s friend request and I’ve resent it with a message,” Beth said thoughtfully. “I found a fan page for Tyreese but no personal page. I’ve reached out acting like I’m a family friend but I don’t know if he’ll see it.”

“Eugene is still trying to reach out Abraham and Rosita, but I’m going to reach out with Maggie’s profile and see if that works,” Beth continued. “I found a news story with T-Dog’s name in it from Atlanta, he’s active in a church group there maybe someone can go to his church on Sunday and see if he remembers?”

“That’s a good idea, Beth,” Maggie said happily.

“What’s Tara last name?” Grace asked out of nowhere. Glenn’s twin was looking thoughtfully at her phone. “Is it Chamblr?”

“Yes, it is,” Glenn said. He gave his sister a surprised look, as far as he knew Grace had never met Tara before and had no way to know her last name.

Grace flushed a little and shook her head. “I ran into her at Target when we went to get supplies,” Grace explained much to the surprise of the group. “We’re going on a date this Friday.”

“Did she seem like she remembered anything?” Rick asked.

Grace bit her bottom lip and shook her head. “Not really,” the young Korean woman said. “She did seem to recognize my last name. I told her Glenn lived in the area but she didn’t seem to know him.”

“Bring her to the homestead,” Glenn suggested throwing a look at Rick. The older man had wanted to limit the number of people who knew they were living but Tara was one of them. “Maggie and I will be around most likely and maybe if she sees us she will remember something. We still don’t know what makes someone remember or not remember.”

The conversation turned to trying to reach more members of the group. Everyone tossed out facts they remembered from the others to try and find them. Michonne, who had been hunting Andrea, shared that she had finally found a number for the blonde woman. She was going to reach out soon and hope the other woman remembered. Eventually, when that died down Rick moved to his next point.

“We need more money,” Rick said bluntly. “Our supplies won’t last and we don’t have nearly enough to start of the walls or even fences for further out.”

The current plan was walled off sections of the grounds. They wanted the animal pens inside the walls and enough room for the tiny houses or other living spaces. Beyond the walls, they were going to set up high fences to prepare for expansions in the future and for further protection.

“Carol I know you and Eugene have been looking at online shopping,” Rick said. “How is that going?”

“I’ve maxed out Ed’s credit lines,” Carol said. “We’ve got a few generators coming to the farm soon. I agree it’s not enough, I’m going to try and open another few lines of credit in Ed’s name and maybe in my own if I can for more orders.”

“That’s a good idea,” Rick said thoughtfully. “We should all probably do that for supplies.”
“It’s not like our credit history is going to mean much in a few months,” Michonne tossed out. “I’ll open a few lines and maybe a store specific card? Like at Sears or something for certain items.”

“Anywhere we can get a freeze dryer,” Grace interjected excitedly. “The little dryers are nice but if we have a freeze dryer we could store food for decades. Freeze dried stuff can last up to 30 years, sometimes.”

“We used them in school, so if we can’t find one, a good culinary school might have one we can get later,” she continued thoughtfully.

“Make sure it’s on your list,” Rick said as he gave Maggie a look. The younger woman nodded and reached down to whisper with Grace for a moment.

Rick felt a touch of excitement in his chest. They were making plans, real plans that would help his people and keep them safe. The planning continued. Everyone over the age of 18 was going to apply for extra lines of credit, lying if they needed too to ensure they would have enough supplies. Carol had asked lists of bulk items that she could order from the computer library to be sent to her as they decided they would need them.

Maggie suggested a system to categorize supplies on a time and need-based schedule. She borrowed a notebook from Sophia, who was still taking down notes from the meeting and broke it down into three categories. Before, during, and after. Food, guns, and medicine were at the top of the list of all three categories. Maggie also took it upon herself to start gathering clothing as well and stuff that would be needed for the little ones.

The group planned together well into the night. Finally, when the kids had fallen asleep in the floor the group broke apart and went to bed. The established couples claimed bedrooms for the night. Hershel and Annette, Glenn and Maggie, and Rick and Michonne all grabbed one of the five bedrooms. Charlie moved into Grace’s room and took Beth with them. Carl, Sophia, Penny and the babies were tucked into the last free bedroom. Carol and Lori were each going to claim a sofa and the Dixons would either fight over the last chair or sleep in Daryl’s truck.

Before everyone disappeared for the night Rick asked the Dixons and Glenn to join him outside on the porch. Glenn glared at Merle who ignored him with ease. Rick and Daryl shared a look but the younger Dixon shrugged helplessly. There wasn’t much he could do about Merle, Merle did what he wanted.

“What’s this about Rick?” Glenn asked after a moment of listening to the crickets chirp.

Rick scratched his ever-growing beard. He never seemed to find the time to shave it anymore. “Shane,” Rick said in a raspy voice. “He’s going to be a problem.”

Daryl scowled. Even in the low light coming from the front windows, the dark bruise was partially visible on Daryl’s face. “He ain’t afraid to kill people,” Daryl reminded Rick. “He catches one of us alone ‘specially Lori …”

Rick grimaced as the hunter trailed off. Shane’s unstable nature was a risk and Rick could not abide by risks. Rick gave Glenn a look knowing the younger man wouldn’t like what he was going to say. “If you get a chance,” Rick began. “Shoot him.”

“Tha’s cold Officer Friendly,” Merle said with a dark chuckle. Glenn glared at the older man before he turned to Rick.

“Rick,” Glenn started. “We aren’t assassins.”
“No, but we aren’t gonna let him put us at risk either,” Rick countered. “I’m not asking y’all to go out and find him I’m saying if he finds us, we take care of the problem.”

The three men agreed, with varying degrees of enthusiasm. They spoke for a while more before Glenn sleepily bowed out. When Glenn disappeared back into the house Daryl eyed his brother warily.

“Go on lil’ brother,” Merle said jerking his head toward the house. “Me ‘an Officer Friendly here need ta’ have a few words.”

“Merle,” Daryl growled out.

“Ain’t no need fer that now,” Merle chided. “Get yer ass on outta here I’ll sleep in the truck tonight. I ain’t gunna start nothin’.”

Daryl gave Rick a look and the former Sheriff’s Deputy shook his head and waved Daryl off. “I can handle Merle,” Rick said. “Head on in.”

Reluctantly Daryl left the two alone and Rick waited. Merle obviously had something he wanted to say. “Ya came to me once ta’ do a job ya couldn’t do,” Merle said, his voice rough. Rick managed not to flinch at how easily he had once asked Merle to sacrifice Michonne. “I ain’t nobody's bitch but I ain’t ‘fraid to get my hands dirty.”

“What are you tellin’ me here, Merle,” Rick demanded. “Be clear with what you're offering.”

Merle gave the man a nasty grin. “I ain't-a nice man, Rick Grimes,” Merle said. He drew Rick’s name out mockingly. “I’ve done shit an’ I know good and well where I’m goin’ when I die again. But this place …”

Merle looked out at the dark grounds. “This place can be somethin’,” Merle said. “Better ‘n Woodbury and better ‘n that prison y’all had. Be a good place fer my lil’ brother fer them, kids, ya got in there.”

The older man took a minute and lit up a cigarette the glowing red tip clear in the darkness. “Yer gunna need a fixer Rick Grimes,” Merle said. “Someone who can get their hands dirty. I ain’t no assassin now, but I ain’t afraid ta’ do what I hafta.”

Rick took a deep breath and managed to hold back his initial response of a resounding no. Before, at the beginning, Rick would have never said yes to the idea of a ‘fixer’ Rick had been too stuck in his ideas of good and bad. Later Rick had gone to Merle because he hadn’t been man enough to own his own decision. Later, Rick clearly remembered early plans to take Alexandria and his orders to slit their throats if needed. Rick wasn’t afraid of who he was or of doing what he had to do to protect his family.

“I ain’t afraid of either,” Rick finally said. “Not anymore.”

Merle laughed strong and low. That was the last thing Rick heard before he went back into the house.

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**Thursday, June 28th - Early Morning**

The next morning the Homestead smelled like breakfast. Grace and Annette had whipped a plentiful buffet-style breakfast for everyone laid out on the large kitchen island. When Rick had
entered the kitchen that morning he was promptly presented with three handwritten sheets of paper with lists of supplies on them. Maggie’s list of food and clothing was double sided and from the way she was still scratching away on a notepad while Glenn tried to get her to eat, he knew to expect more. Daryl and Hershel’s lists were much the same. Rick scanned them over and handed them back with orders to delegate as they saw fit. Rick had wanted to get an idea of what was needed.

The group was spread out throughout the house. Some folks were eating in the living room and a few, like Rick and the new council, were in the kitchen.

“I’ve got everyone information for credit cards,” Carol said taking a sheet of paper that Maggie handed her. It was a list of things that she was supposed to start ordering today while she babysat Lori at the library. Rick could see the handgun at her hip and knew she was ready if Shane came around again.

“I’ll be heading back to the farm today,” Hershel said. “Shawn and I are going to go pick up some rabbits and hit the local feed stores. I’m going to see about some long-term livestock trailer rentals as well.”

Hershel’s list had included things for the building of livestock pens and the actual animals themselves. Hershel wanted chickens, rabbits, guineafowl, and sheep if they could get them. Rick had even seen something about some dogs to protect the animals and herd them. The goats would be moved as soon as their new pen was ready and the few cows they had kept would join soon after. The horses would take longer to make sure their new home was properly set up.

“Cars will not run forever,” Hershel said marking down the name of a horse rescue he knew about some many miles away. “We will want a good diverse gene pool until we find folks to trade with.”

Rick nodded and stuffed a bite of eggs in his mouth. “What are we planning on getting today?” Rick asked after he had swallowed.

“Daryl and Merle have agreed to start on a rabbit hutch, we found most of one in the barn,” Hershel explained. “When we bring the rabbits back I’m going to teach the children to take care of them. The rabbits will be their responsibility.”

It was a good idea. The rabbits would be quiet and fairly easy for the kids to take care of. Even if they were doing other jobs like take watch or even going on runs eventually the rabbits would be an easy first responsibility for Penny and Sophia.

“It will be a good chance to teach Penny the difference between pets and food,” Carol remarked off-handedly. “Ed decided we were going to raise rabbits a few years back and Sophia learned then. Even if we didn’t keep the rabbits long.”

Rick could easily imagine Ed quickly growing tired of the upkeep and demand of raising anything more strenuous than a cigarette to his own lips.

“After we do up the rabbit hutch,” Daryl said. The plate in front of the hunter was clear and licked clean and he eyed the biscuits hungrily before snagging another one. “Me’n Merle are gunna head to the Wal-Mart with the garden center in Jasper. Grab shit we’ll need fer the greenhouse. Maybe the automotive center too.”

“You taking your truck?” Rick asked.

“Yup,” Daryl said with a mouthful of biscuit. “Got something ya want us to pick up?”
“Yesterday I picked up a flyer for an estate sale outside of Jasper,” Rick said explained. “Had some stuff we might be interested in. Left the flyer on the bed, I’ll grab it in a minute. Might want ta’ swing by.”

“We’d need somethin’ bigger ‘n my truck,” Daryl said thoughtfully.

“Could rent a U-Haul,” Michonne said entering the kitchen. She had obviously heard the conversation, Andre was babbling happily on his mother’s hip. Rick smiled at the boy and made him giggle. Michonne happily passed the toddler over to her partner while she grabbed a plate. “We were talking about getting some, might as well start collecting now.”

Rick and Michonne had talked about needing the trucks that morning. Their small fleet of cars, a motorcycle, and two short-bed trucks weren’t going to cut it.

“Won’t rent ta’ me without a credit card,” Daryl said with a shake of his head. “Ain’t got one and if Merle does it sure as shit don’t got his name on it.”

A thin plastic card landed in Daryl’s lap as Hershel passed by to take his plate to the sink. “Farm card,” Hershel explained at Daryl’s confused look. “Plenty there to rent a truck if you have the cash for the estate sale.”

“Merle’s got the cash,” Daryl said pocketing the card with a nod of thanks.

“Use what you need,” Hershel said simply. “I’m going to check on my farm.”

“What about you Maggie? Glenn?” Rick asked turning to the young couple that had been whispering to each other all the while.

“We’re going to Sam’s Club with Grace and Charlie,” Maggie explained. “We’re planning on renting at least one truck. Maybe two.”

“Smart,” Rick said as he pressed a kiss to Andre’s forehead.

“What about you Rick?” Glenn asked. “What are you going to be doing?”

The other man shrugged. “I’m sure someone will put me to work if I stand around long enough,” Rick said with a grin.

Daryl snorted and shook his head. He stood and cleared away his, Carol’s, and Rick’s plates. “Come on Grimes,” Daryl said gruffly. “I’ll put ya’ ta’ work.”

“Guess I’m building a rabbit hutch,” Rick corrected himself, he also reminded himself to stop and grab the flyer for the estate sale from his room before he did. Rick handed the toddler back to his mother and snuck a quick kiss from Michonne as he did so. “Put everyone else to work before you go.”

Maggie promised to do so with an almost sinister gleam in her eyes. Rick had a moment of almost pity for the kids but it didn’t last long.
**Thursday, June 28th - Early Afternoon**

Merle was driving the U-Haul and Daryl couldn’t tell yet if that was a good idea or not. A loud honk behind him made Daryl think that maybe it wasn’t a great idea but they were almost to the estate sale anyway so he could put up with his brother’s honking. Getting the U-Haul been easy with Hershel’s farm card.

Merle, who had always possessed some bastardized form of charisma, talked his way around the woman doing the rentals and got them an extended rental period that should last well into the end of the world. At least that way they wouldn’t have the cops on their asses later for stealing a U-Haul.

The estate sale had been great. They had picked up a wood burning stove, more than a dozen oil burning lanterns, several pieces of good quality furniture including a chest of drawers and a dining set, six thick quilted blankets, three bicycles, two older model TVs, and a VCR and VHS tape collection. Daryl hadn’t been sure about the TV and tapes but Merle had said if they were going to have electricity they might as well have something to do when they weren’t working. Daryl smartly remarked that the movies were for kids and Merle ignored him and waved the Hogan’s Heroes collection that had also been included.

The stove and the lanterns would pay for themselves soon enough and even if the other items were not quiet at the top of their list of necessary items they were still nice to have.

Merle honked at Daryl again from behind it and the younger Dixon resisted the urge to slam on the breaks, it would only damage his truck. Merle had obviously spotted the Wal-Mart that was their destination up ahead. Daryl got into the turn lane and his brother followed behind.

The shopping center was busy, and the Dixons decided to split up. Merle headed to the automotive center and Daryl went to the garden center.

Hershel had set Daryl with a long list. He picked up three garden hoses that Hershel asked for and started looking for the drip irrigation systems the old man wanted. He didn’t see it so Daryl marked it on the list to pick up somewhere else.

The shopping cart wasn’t nearly full with just the garden hoses so Daryl grabbed reel mower that didn’t need gasoline and two shovels from Hershel’s list. From there Daryl made a beeline for the seeds. Hershel’s list didn’t specify what kind of seeds, it just said “seeds” and the was circled so Daryl grabbed a little of everything that looked edible.
His cart now significantly more full and with no seeds left on the shelf, Daryl turned to the outside covered area of the garden center where he could get actual plants. He passed the flowers without even bothering to stop and zeroed in on the small corner with tomato plants and herbs.

They would need to go to a different store for more options but Daryl wasn’t going to walk away from getting what he needed. The hunter looked over the tomato plants and grabbed the healthiest looking ones. He also put in his cart several small herb plants, like basil and mint. Grace had managed to ask him to get them, and Daryl agreed with her reasoning. Unseasoned squirrel got old really fast.

Cart now full, Daryl took a quick glance at his list and frowned. He needed to go to a Tractor Supply store or Home Depot to get the other items. There was still plenty of time before he was expected back at the homestead and unless Merle bought something outlandish they should have room if they stopped off at another store.

The younger Dixon took his cart to the checkout and made his purchases, in cash from Merle’s stash, and left to load the truck. By the time he finished he saw Merle pushing a cart and pulling one behind him, both nearly overflowing.

“The hell’d you get?” Daryl asked catching a toolset from slipping off the top of one of the full carts.

“Supplies, baby brother,” Merle said with a grin. The two brothers quickly loaded up Merle’s purchases. Daryl took a moment to snoop and found lots of tools, oil, coolant, and other random things Merle must have grabbed on his way to the checkout.

They manage to get all of their Wal-Mart supplies in the back of Daryl’s truck. This left the U-Haul a little less than half full. “Home Depot is just across the way,” Merle said. He could tell Daryl was thinking about it. “An’ I saw a Tractor Supply coming inta’ town.”

Daryl grunted his agreement and they loaded up. Home Depot wasn’t far and the others were in and out fairly quick. Daryl was able to get the irrigation systems that Hershel had wanted as well as more seeds and plants. He grabbed two more rain barrels went to check out. Merle had beaten him outside this time. The elder Dixon had went straight for the hardware. The back of the U-Haul was start to fill up with more tools, metal sheets, and even a large box that said “Wind Turbine Power Generator.”

The Tractor Supply was further away but both men were excited to get there. They would be able to pick up most of what was on Hershel’s list as well as grab anything else that would catch their eyes.

Daryl’s cart was almost full. He had grabbed more of the farming and livestock items from Hershel’s list and Merle was who knows where getting god only knew what. Daryl wasn’t worried though, Merle had taken to group life fairly well. He and Glenn still got on like oil and water but the elder Dixon was trying (and by trying Daryl meant Merle wasn’t being openly antagonistic). It was easy to see how he had integrated himself into Woodbury, by working hard and through his own special brand of charisma.

Thoughts of his brother aside, Daryl continued his shopping. The money they were using from his trip had come from Merle’s stash. Daryl didn’t like to think about how his brother got that money or who had it first but it certainly did the job. Daryl was sure Merle was probably using one of his credit cards (Merle had a thing for credit fraud) for his part of the haul.

Lost in thought Daryl browsed the store, he would stop every so often and grab something that he
knew would make life easier. He picked up solar powered lights for the outside of the Homestead, they wouldn’t be so bright so as to give away their location but bright enough to make sure they could see taking care of things at night.

Just as he reached out to grab another box a shout startled him.

“Claimed!”

Daryl jerked around like someone had stabbed him. He could feel his heart pounding in his chest and when he saw the man behind him Daryl felt the pounding of his heart melt into a roaring in his ears.

“Well, well, well, I guess that settles that now doesn’t it?” Joe asked with a dangerous smile. “I thought you might remember. How’ve ya been Daryl? How are your friends?”

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Carl really liked their new home. The Homestead had plenty of room for everyone and it was brighter than the prison. Carl knew that when the wall eventually went up it would be almost more like Alexandria but with his family around him, Carl knew the Homestead was going to be very different.

Shawn had brought six rabbits to the Homestead less than an hour ago. There were four girls and two boys. Shawn explained it was so the rabbits would have lots of babies that they could eventually have for food.

Penny had looked really upset when Shawn explained to her that the rabbits weren’t pets and that they shouldn’t name them. Sophia had done her best to comfort her new sister but it wasn’t working well. Carl managed to get her to stop crying by telling her they weren’t going to eat the rabbits now and they would get to live in their hutch for a long time.

Penny was interesting to the young-again-boy. Carl hadn’t met Penny before, he hadn’t even remembered she existed until Michonne had explained that she was the Governor’s daughter. She was very soft; soft in the way that she cried all the time and she didn’t seem to understand the danger the walkers would soon pose.

Carl knew that Sophia like Penny and wanted to protect her. Sophia had tried to explain the strange connection the two girls had but Carl couldn’t really understand. Penny and Sophia had both died and both been turned into walkers, Carl just couldn’t relate.

Part of that was why Carl was alone. Penny and Sophia were off exploring the grounds together leaving Carl to explore the main house. It was mostly empty. The little bit of staging furniture helped the house not to echo as his sneakers slapped the floor.

Carl knew better than to snoop through member’s of the group’s things so he decided to go through the empty rooms and see which one was better. The first room was empty and pretty small. It didn’t have a bed but there were several boxes of clothing. Carl wasn’t sure where the clothes came from but after digging through the box for a few seconds it was easy to see that it was likely supplies someone had picked up.

Most of the clothing was normal T-shirts and jeans. There were a few bright colored shirts like
Penny or Sophia wore sometimes and a flowy skirt that Carl thought Beth might like. The skirt’s material was gauzy and very pretty, it felt nice too.

Carl liked the pretty color and he liked how it felt. Carl couldn’t remember the last he saw someone wearing something like the skirt. When he had grown up the first time, after the world ended everyone wore practical clothing, sturdy, tough pants to protect from walkers, long sleeves. Judy had gotten to wear pretty things sometimes but that was it.

Carl carefully pushed the door to the empty room shut and stepped into the skirt. It was too big but his jeans helped keep the skirt up on his hips. Carl swished the skirt and laughed at the feeling. He liked how it looked, the pale silvery color glittered under the light and he liked the way the material moved when he spun in a circle.

Carl grinned and stepped out of the skirt. He wanted to show it to Sophia and Penny, they would like to spin in it too. So the youngster balled up the skirt and took it downstairs to put in his backpack to show the girls later.

“Carl!” Carl heard Shawn shout from downstairs. “Come help work on the goat pen!”

“Coming!” Carl shouted back as he stuffed the skirt into his backpack.

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The Rhee clan had collected two trucks between them, Charlie had even managed a first responder discount as an EMT. Maggie, riding shotgun in Glenn’s truck had dialed Grace’s number the minute they got in the trucks.

“Grace, you’ll get food,” Maggie said. “We want to prioritize the stuff that will disappear first. Charlie, you get medicine. Glenn and I are going to split clothing and stuff for the gardens. If you finish your lists, we’ll need baby things, lots of them.”

“How much baby stuff?” Grace asked over the phone. “We’ve only got Judy and Andre.”

Maggie and Glenn laughed. “We’ve also got a lot of couples,” Maggie said giving her husband a fond look. “Hopefully we end up with lots of babies so more is better.”

Charlie’s barking laugh could be heard over the phone. “Yeah Gracie, just ‘cause you’re not likely to have kids on accident doesn’t mean the rest of us aren’t at risk.”

“And it might not be an accident either,” Maggie interjected. “We managed to protect Judy, mostly on the road. Now we have walls, it’ll be much easier.”

Glenn shot Maggie a look, he knew what his wife was suggesting. Since their return, Maggie had obviously been missing their baby and the couple had argued long into the night about whether to actively try for a baby, simply let nature take its course, or wait until after everything had settled.

“Not that much easier,” Glenn said firmly, more to Maggie than his sisters. “We have food but there is no guarantee our stores will last and I remember how much Lori suffered from lack of food that winter.”

“We have a good stockpile,” Maggie shot back. “And we are going to get more. We’re much better prepared this time.”

“Maggie,” Glenn said with a heavy sigh.
“Well, this sounds like a conversation that Gracie and I don’t need to be a part of,” Charlie said from over the phone. “We will call you guy back when we get closer to Sam’s Club.”

Maggie frowned when Grace hung up without letting Maggie say anything. “Well, now my sisters are going to ask awkward questions,” Glenn said.

“I’m sorry,” Maggie said as she dropped the phone onto the seat beside her. “I didn’t mean to drag them into our fight.”

“It’s not a fight,” Glenn said. “Just a disagreement.”

“I don’t know,” Maggie said softly. “It sure seems like a fight.”

Glenn and Maggie had spent the previous night talking in harsh, loud whispers about their child. Glenn didn’t want to risk Maggie so early in the apocalypse. She had been sick that night that Negan found them and as much as he wanted a child with his wife, Glenn didn’t want to risk it. At least not right away.

Maggie had argued that sooner was better, they had access to more medicine, more supplies while the baby was younger. More than that Maggie was uncertain how to explain to her husband the loss she felt. Maggie had been months along when time reset and they woke up in the past. Maggie had spent hours, days even thinking about her baby. She had picked out a name, loved him and then he was gone. She let her hand drift to her midsection where the bump had once sat and she wished she felt the firmness of her child under her hand.

“Maggie?” Glenn asked softly. “Are you okay?”

Maggie sniffled and wiped at her eyes. “I miss the baby,” Maggie admitted with a watery smile. “It’s like he was never even there but I remember him.”

Glenn reached out and took Maggie’s hand and they drove the rest of the way in silence.

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“Well, aren’t you gonna say hello, Daryl?” Joe asked with that same smile on his face. The younger Dixon’s hand automatically went to the knife at his hip and he wished to the weight of his crossbow on his back. “None of that now, we don’t want to draw attention.”

Reluctantly Daryl moved his hand away from his knife, Joe was right. The Tractor Supply was crowded and him pulling his knife would do nothing but start trouble.

“What the hell ya want Joe?” Daryl forced out. He could remember the night he and Joe's group came across Rick, Michonne, and Carl. He could remember the threat they were to his group, especially to the kids.

“Oh you know, preparing for the end of the world,” Joe said easily. He had a buggy similar to Daryl’s not to far from him. “When, wouldn’t you believe it, I saw a familiar face and thought to myself. If anyone else remembers the cluster fuck that is coming, it’s going to be Daryl, the bowman. And I was right!”

“That’s a lot of stuff for one man, Daryl,” Joe said, his grin grew sharper. “I take it your group remembers too. What about your buddy, you know, the one that killed my guy and tore my throat out? Does he remember?”

Daryl snarled and moved quickly. He shoved the older man against the shelf behind him, no one
Daryl huffed and shoved away from Joe before they caused a scene. Daryl felt better with Merle at his back, while he knew he could take Joe if need be Daryl knew that Joe rarely handled things himself. He was the type of coward to run with a pack ready to jump when he said the word.

“Nah,” Daryl said, finally answering his brother. “Just another asshole who don’t know when to stay dead.”

“I’m hurt Daryl,” Joe said eyeing up Merle. In another life, maybe Merle would have run with Joe and his boys but not here and now. “After I took you in and taught you the rules. You were the one that lied.”

“I ain’t! They’s good people!” Daryl snarled back at the other man. “My people don’t hurt kids and folks that don’ deserve it!”

“Now, now fellas,” Merle soothed, a strange look in his eyes. Merle never soothed, he never tried to stop fights so Daryl’s hair stood on end. Something was wrong. “This ain’t ‘xactly the time to be dealing with this shit, so why don’t you march your happy ass outta the store and we’ll pick this up in a month ‘er so?”

Joe’s eyes lit up and Daryl could tell just what the claimer saw in his brother. It was the danger and the wildness that he wanted from Daryl during the short time Daryl ran with his group. The other man laughed jovially and shook his head.

“You drive a hard bargain there, friend,” Joe said almost thoughtfully. “But I’ll admit, you’ve got me outnumbered here so I’ll do the smart thing.” Joe moved to his basket of items and gave the Dixon’s a little wave.

“I’ll be seeing you, fellas, soon,” Joe said as he turned to leave. “Real soon.”

Daryl watched tensely as Joe happily pushed his buggy down the aisle and disappeared somewhere else in the store. “The hell was that?” Daryl demanded as he turned to his brother.

Merle looked to be made of stone in that moment, his fists were clenched tightly at his side and Daryl was suddenly worried for his brother. “I’m goin’ ta’ the truck,” Merle ground out. Daryl watch his brother stomp out of the store. It was only the two push carts full of supplies that stopped him from following right away.

Daryl made quick work of bringing the carts to the checkout and then out to the trucks. The Dixons made quick work of putting the supplies away but Daryl took a risk and raised the issue with his brother again.

“You know that asshole,” Daryl said, it wasn’t a question.

“Not now, Daryl,” Merle said forcefully. “Gotta get back and make some calls.”
“Man, what the hell?” Daryl demanded. “You run with that asshole or something ‘for the Governor picked you up?’”

“I ain’t never run with that pussy!” Merle roared. He stepped toward Daryl dangerously but Daryl held his ground. Years of scrapping with Merle had him more than read to defend himself if need be.

“You bes’ not have!” Daryl shouted back. They were starting to draw attention and they would need to leave soon. “That asshole and his guys were gonna rape Carl and Michonne.”

Merle roared with anger and swung his fist into the side of the rental truck. Daryl watched wide-eyed as his brother practically lost it and started punching the metal side of the truck, over and over again.

“Damn it, Merle,” Daryl swore. “Stop!”

The younger step up but knew better than to touch his older brother when he was in this kind of mood. Merle stopped, his knuckles red, and bleeding, and he turned to his brother.

“That sumbitch killed Joan and the kids,” Merle said panting. “Him and his boys.”

“What?” Daryl demanded. To be perfectly honest, Daryl had given little thought to Joan, Merle’s ex-wife and the two adult children he had fathered. Joan had wanted nothing to do with Merle or Daryl since the divorce and Daryl hadn’t blamed her.

Merle had never hit his wife but after years of screaming matches, using grocery money for booze and drugs, and sleeping around Daryl would admit Joan divorcing Merle was probably the best thing for her and the kids.

The kids, Marlie and Jackson, looked a lot like Merle but thankfully when Joan left his brother Daryl hadn’t seen much of his brother in kids. The last time he had seen then was almost 15 years ago and when the world ended the first time, Daryl had followed Merle and as far as he knew Merle hadn’t gone to check on them.

“How d’ya know?” Daryl demanded.

“Went back fer ‘em,” Merle admitted gruffly. “After tha’ Gov’ cleaned me up an’ Woodbury was all set up. Knew Joan would go to her granddaddy’s place in the hills found tha’ bastard an’ his boys sittin’ pretty.”

“How d’ya know they got up to the house?” Daryl asked. Joan lived in Atlanta or did last he knew getting to the house in the hills would have been difficult.

“’Cause they had Jackson fuckin’ corpse walking around like a goddamn guard dog,” Merle snarled. “Didn’t have the firepower to kill ‘em all. So I set tha’ shit on fire watched them sumbitches run. Recognized that asshole ya’ had in there. Didn’t even have the balls to shoot my boy, just left ‘em to turn.”

“Shit,” Daryl said as he rubbed his face. He could picture it, Merle getting it in his head to check on his blood since Daryl was off wandering the forests of Georgia and finding Joe and his boys instead. If Merle hadn’t been mostly sober at that time he would have likely rolled up and got himself shot trying to take the group by himself.

“Ya’ gunna get ‘em?” Daryl asked talking about Joan and the kids. “We got room at the Homestead.”
Merle scoffed. “How ‘bout I just shoot yer buddy in the head then it ain’t a problem no more,” Merle said fiercely.

“Let’s get this back,” Daryl said. “We need ta’ take a long way back ‘case he follows us.”

“I may talk dumb but I ain’t stupid boy,” Merle growled. “Git yer ass in the truck.”

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Dinner was a lively event. Almost everyone had returned to the Homestead, the Rhees and the Dixons with trucks full of supplies that had quickly been packed away. Hershel, Annette, Otis, and Patricia were still on the Greene Farm but everyone else was there.

The table the Dixons had picked up at the estate sale was put to good use and a table the Rhees found at a yard sale that Maggie had been unable to pass up helped to fit everyone in the kitchen for the meal.

“This is a good start,” Rick thoughtfully. They had made good strides that day. They had rabbits now with plans for construction of chicken and guinea fowl coops to happen the next day. The goats were ready to be moved as they had finished the goats new home on the Homestead. Hershel was going to join Rick the sometime in the next few days to start setting up the greenhouse.

The walls would start going up in weeks and Carol and Eugene had a steady stream of supplies coming into the outside points of contact to protect their home. Things were looking up, except there was something Daryl wasn’t telling him.

Rick had noticed right away that his self-proclaimed brother was hiding something. Carol had picked up on it too but Daryl refused to say anything. When Rick had spotted Merle’s busted knuckles he thought maybe the Dixons had just gotten into a fight, but Daryl didn’t have a mark on him and was more introspective than he would be if he had a fight with Merle.

Merle had disappeared after they unloaded the trucks without a word he even managed to take the bike that Rick so associated with the younger Dixon. Rick made a promise to himself to corner Daryl after dinner, if the other man didn’t come to him first.

“The wall needs to be our priority moving forward,” Glenn said breaking Rick’s train of thought. “The wall and figuring out where we are all going to sleep.”

“I liked Mathew’s tiny house idea,” Rick admitted. “Privacy it would keep us from living in each other’s pockets again.”

More than once someone had to break up a fight in the old timeline because living so closely for so long sparked tempers. Everyone having their own space would be good for the group.

“We should have daddy call him and start bringing them in,” Maggie said. Hershel was still their main point of contact with the real estate agent who was living in his home with Patrick (how hadn’t shown signs of remembering just yet) collecting supplies as well. “If one of the trucks out here can’t haul them, I’m sure we can find something.”

“How many will we need?” Carol asked curiously. “Do we want to plan for growth?”

“We’ll have too,” Rick said with a frown. “We need to at least plan for everyone from before but if we keep bringing in new people and family we’re going to have a lot of people to plan for.”

“Better tha’ way,” Daryl grunted from his spot at the table.
“I agree with Daryl,” Michonne said. “The more people we have to defend this place the better.”

The conversation mostly died shortly after. What had been designated as the ‘kids table’ burst out into laughter that set the tone for the rest of the meal. All too quickly though mothers and older siblings began herding youngsters to their designated sleeping spaces. The adult conversations split off as some members cleaned up or went to attend late night chores.

Rick caught Daryl’s eye and the two men ducked into what would become the infirmary on the ground floor.

“What happened out there today?” Rick asked curiously.

“Joe, that asshole with the group that claimed shit,” Daryl forced out. “He found me in Tractor Supply. Hollered ‘claimed’ and said some shit.”

“He remember?” Rick asked in a low dangerous voice. He remembered the man who had threatened Carl and Michonne. He remembered just what he had become that night to save Carl.

“Yeah,” Daryl told him. “Merle recognized him. He don’t like ‘em either!” Daryl said rushing to explain, so Rick didn’t get the wrong idea.

“Merle was married once,” Daryl said by way of explaining. “Nice girl named Joan had two kids, Marlie and Jackson. They got divorced almost 20 years ago but evidently before, after the Governor got Merle clean he went back fer ‘em but found the claimers instead. Joe ain’t no friend of Merle’s and my brother is likely to put a bullet in his head than anythin’ else.”

“Good,” Rick said. “We’re on the same page then.”

“What ‘re we gunna do?” Daryl asked. Their enemies were starting to appear and Joe made the second threat to remember what was coming.

“Nothing,” Rick said. “For now. We keep an eye out and we get ready. We’re not losing this place and we damn sure aren’t going to lose it to assholes like them.”
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

This chapter was fun to write, but expect a slight time skip for the next chapter. We’ll be jumping forward a few weeks or a month in the timeline. Also, the date between Tara and Grace happens in this one! Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Friday, June 29th - Afternoon

“Did you call Tara?” Maggie asked Grace as the two women sorted clothing. The Homestead had been buzzing for hours now. Everyone had taken to waking with the sun as they had in a different lifetime and immediately gotten to work to make their new home safe and ready.

Rick and Shawn had left to meet Hershel and Otis to transfer the goats, while Daryl and Glenn went to pick up the chickens and guinea fowl from the feed store. Carol and Michonne had followed Lori to work that day to continue internet orders and protect the woman from Shane. Privately Maggie thought it was a bit of a waste of manpower to have someone protecting Lori every day but she could see the use in the computers and protecting the supplies they had brought into town. Charlie was on baby duty while she sorted out the medicine the Rhees had brought back yesterday with the older kids popping in to help or work on their sign language.

Later that day the group had plans to start the greenhouse and Daryl had wanted to start mapping out the walls but the dark ominous clouds hinted that outside work might not happen that day.

“Yes,” Grace said tossing a child’s shirt into the kid pile. “I told her I’m staying with my brother and his friends while they renovate an old bed and breakfast. I thought it would be easier if she doesn’t remember.”

“Smart,” Maggie complimented her husband’s twin sister. She frowned down at the dress in her hand. “Pretty, but not very practical.”

Grace looked at the flowery sundress and smiled. “Well, we could keep it for special occasions?” Grace suggested. “We won’t always be running from monsters.”

Maggie gave the other girl a smile. “I suppose that’s true,” she admitted. “I’ll make a ‘for later’ pile or something.”

“If seeing everyone doesn’t trigger a memory we’re going to the little diner in town,” Grace said. “Tara couldn’t get a babysitter for her niece so it’s going to be the three of us.”

“What about Tara’s sister?” Maggie asked thinking back to what she remembered of Tara’s family. “Why isn’t she watching the little girl?”

“Tara said it was just her taking care of Meghan,” Grace explained. “I didn’t want to ask what had happened.”

“Another change,” Maggie muttered. “It’s strange how much has changed.”
“I wonder if it changed because of us,” Grace said thoughtfully as she tossed another men’s shirt into a pile.

“I don’t know,” Maggie admitted.

The two women fell into a comfortable silence. Grace and Maggie were still mostly strangers, even though they were now family. Grace had found herself closer to the younger Greene girl and felt awkward with her twin’s wife. Glenn and Grace had always been rather close even living as far apart as they did. Grace had been hurt when Glenn just up and invited them to a wedding to a woman she had never even heard of, and the realization of the coming end of the world had helped ease the hurt it left Grace still uncertain.

Maggie wasn’t sure of how to get to know her husband’s twin, because Glenn had rarely mentioned her before. Maggie knew that Glenn hadn’t said anything for the same reason that Maggie hadn’t been able to mention Beth or Shawn after they died. It left the women struggling to get to know one another while also trying to stay on good terms for Glenn’s sake.

“Do you know how to shoot a gun?” Maggie blurted out when the silence became too oppressive.

“Uh,” Grace said, she had been caught off guard by the question but quickly recovered. “No. I’ve never even really seen one before. Charlie promised to teach me soon but we’ve been so busy since we arrived.”

“Do you want to learn?” Maggie asked a small smile growing across her face.

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“What do you think he’s doing?” Jackson asked his sister. Jackson Dixon stood at almost six foot tall, looming several inches over his older sister’s head. Jackson kept his hair cropped close to his head and when he wasn’t thinking about joining the army he had a slightly too thick beard that even at 21 had a small thumb-shaped patch under his chin. Jackson had his mother’s deep brown eyes and a smattering of freckles across his cheekbones and nose from summers playing outside as a child. He had noticed two hours ago that his habitually absent father’s bike was parked down the street.

Marlie, named for her father, was shorter and built bigger than her tall and lanky younger brother. If Marlie had been born a boy Joan swore she would have looked just like Merle right down to the icy blue eyes. Marlie, a little older than her mid-twenties, of course, knew right away what their father was doing in their mother’s neighborhood.

Both Marlie and Jackson had, immediately upon remembering the looming end of the world, went to their mother’s house and to their everlasting shock found a little brother that had not existed before. Thomas Dixon was fifteen and angry at the world. He looked the most like his mother thin, delicate looking but with Merle and Marlie’s eyes.

“Probably remembers the biters,” Marlie said as she flicked ash off the end of her cigarette. “Our daddy is a tough son-of-a-bitch but betcha’ Uncle Daryl made him come check on us.”

“We gunna let him know we know he’s here?” Jackson asked a smirk. He knew his sister well and knew what she was likely to say.

“Hell no,” Marlie said with a grin. “Let him grow a pair and knock on momma's door.”

Jackson sniggered and let the curtain fall back into place and the young man went back to his phone.
It took Merle almost an hour after Jackson and Marlie’s conversation to man up and knock on the door. The first thing Joan noticed was that Merle was sober.

The woman blinked in genuine shock that her ex-husband was standing at her door. Merle had made it clear that he wanted nothing to do with her after the divorce and Joan had wanted less to do with Merle.

“Merle?” Joan asked confused. “What are you doin’ here?”

“Joanie,” Merle said just like he used too. “How ya been darlin’?”

Joan narrowed her eyes and scowled suspiciously at the man. Something about his tone set her off, made her think that he wanted something. “Merle Dixon, what the hell do you want?” Joan demanded.

“He's here about the dead people,” Jackson interrupted cheerfully as he came up from behind his mother. “Let him in mom. He's been sitting outside like a pussy all damn day.”

“The hell you say to me, boy?” Merle rumbled dangerously. “I'm still yer daddy and ya ain't gunna talk to me like that.”

Jackson, ever his father's son, just grinned dangerously and guided his confused mother away from the door and into the kitchen where Thomas and Marlie were waiting with coffee. Merle noticed his son didn't back down or apologize and promised himself to deal with the boy later.

“If you think I'm bad wait 'til you meet Thomas,” Jackson said with a harsh laugh.

Merle's oldest son laughed harder at Merle's confusion. Thomas was new to him as well. This was going to be hilarious.

“Hi daddy,” Marlie greeted giving her poor confused mother a mug full of coffee. Merle shot Thomas a confused look because, for as much as he resembled Joan, it was easy to see that Thomas was a Dixon. “Do you want some coffee?”

Marlie handed her father a mug and monitored his sugar intake to see if he was really as sober as he appeared. She smiled when she saw him take it black.

“Marlie Nicole, Jackson Wyatt you tell me what is going on right now,” Joan demanded. Joan was tall and willowy but her children easily bowed to her demand. “You both come home with no warning. Then you start hoarding things! And Jackson I saw those shotguns in your car, what the hell are you thinking boy! And dead people? What do you mean?”

“Mom,” Jackson tried to soothe his mother. “Just sit down and Mar’ and I will explain.”

Merle listened to his kids explained to their mother the looming end. All the while he kept an eye on the angry teenager that had to be his son but that Merle had no memory of. He wasn’t a quiet man but he didn’t want to fight, not with Joan and not with his kids, not right then. So Merle waited and listened. Joan didn't remember a thing but from the looks on Marlie and Jackson’s face when they talked about the house in the hills it was probably for the best. Merle was a possessive son-of-a-bitch and he didn’t want to think about Joan who had once been his suffering at the hands of those claimers.

“This is stupid!” Thomas shouted when Marlie and Jackson finished their story. Joan was sickly pale and shaken. Merle was irritated and wanted to get Joan and the kids to the homestead with Daryl and the others.
“Thomas Ray!” Joan shouted back a little bit of color coming back into her face. “You know better than to shout in my house!”

“Marlie and Jackson are obviously on drugs,” Thomas said irritably waving his arms. “Probably got them from him!” He thrust a thin finger in Merle’s direction much to the man’s ire.

“We ain’t on drugs, dumbass,” Marlie said rolling her eyes. She smiled sheepishly at her mother’s irritated look for her language. “Neither is he, not right now anyway.”

“Look, woman,” Merle said ignoring the drug comment. “I’m here ta’ tell ya’, ya’ should come with me somewhere safe. The whole damn world is gunna end in a few months and unless ya’ wanna die yer gunna come wit’ me.”

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Carol was having a very good day. She had made her purchases for the day: two generators, another wind turbine, and she had found forums for people who lived ‘off the grid’ to an extent and purchased a few off the grid kitchen appliances they suggested. She had picked up a powerful solar cooker and a hand crank meat grinder.

Now she was going to pick up lunch for Lori and herself, Carol had also made a point to stop by a talk to Ms. Margaret at the hotel where she and the Dixon’s still had rooms. Carol was slowly talking the woman around to visiting the Homestead where they would hopefully convince her to stay.

Carol pulled the car into the parking lot of the little diner where she had placed an order for lunch and waited. She had dozens of things on her mind and list of things to do that was miles long. Carol and Michonne had discussed offhand at breakfast one morning about an education for the kids. Carol wanted to get together some homeschooling things for the kids because while a good portion of the modern school curriculum would be useless there were some things they would need to know. Carol remembered a time on the road after they had lost the prison where the group took time just teaching Carl things to pass the time. It had all been practical and she was sure the boy would not have passed a state-sanctioned standardized test in certain subjects but it had been good for the boy and for the group. More than that Carol didn’t want to see Sophia struggle with reading or simple math like Carl had when they first made the prison their home.

Beyond the homeschooling items, Carol was secreting small things from the library back and forth to the Homestead under Lori’s nose. Books that Sophia and Penny asked for, a coffee maker from the empty office that no one used, and a map of the town. Carol had carefully mapped out King County and make notations of places to loot when the end came. She had marked all the places that would be hit first by other groups, places that would have to be hit within hours of the power going off, places that would need to be hit within a certain amount of days and so on.

Carol had plans to get a map of the nearest town to the Homestead and do the same thing. Looking over maps and planning like she had, Carol marked several places she would not have thought to loot before, including a piercing and tattoo shop (medical supplies), most restaurants if they could get them early enough for the frozen perishable food and then later or the longer lasting things, and office buildings for water. She had even placed several orders of water like large offices order for their water coolers.

It seemed with every purchase they made they were still only adding drops to a bucket that would become their lives. There was always something that needed to be done, always something more they needed. Carol knew they were working as fast as they could but she could feel it in her chest, they weren’t working fast enough.
The short-haired woman pulled herself from her thoughts and left her car. She got lunch and made her way back to the library where she had left Lori. The library was empty as it almost always was at this time of day.

“You need to leave!” Carol heard Lori say. “You can’t be here when Carol comes back.”

“You need to listen to me Lori,” Carol recognized that voice to be Shane’s. Carol drew the gun from her jeans, set the food down on the ground and crept forward quietly. The closer she got the more she could hear of their conversation and it didn’t sound like anything good.

“I can’t go with you,” Lori said. “Carl and Judy are with Rick!”

“So bring them to work with you tomorrow,” Shane said forcefully.

“Rick won’t let me!” Lori said her voice somewhat hysterical. Carol couldn’t tell if the other woman was on Shane’s side or not. “And Carol comes with me every day, I can’t sneak past her. She would notice if the kids disappeared.”

Carol thought for a moment about going in there and putting a bullet in Shane’s head. Ending the problem right then and there but the loud clang of someone slamming one of the double doors at the entrance stopped her.

“That might be Carol,” Lori said quickly. “You need to leave Shane!”

Carol quietly backed up and tucked her gun away. Lori and Shane both came out of Lori’s office and Carol watched as Shane ducked beside a stack and left the library. Lori turned to greet the newest library patron but her face fell when she saw Carol waiting with the food in her hands.

“How long has Shane been coming to see you?” Carol asked mildly.

Lori paled and Carol nodded her head. “Come on,” Carol said leading Lori back into her office. “You and I need to have a chat.”

Carol motioned for Lori to have a seat. The thin woman almost collapsed into her chair and looked ready to start bawling her eyes out. Carol stood by the door waiting. Lori started talking right away.

“This was the first time he came here since he arrested Daryl,” Lori said in a rush. “I swear! He showed up out of nowhere and I just wanted him to leave. He’s crazy!”

“What did he say to you?” Carol asked. Her face was blank and Lori couldn’t tell if the other woman believed her or not.

“He told me to leave with him,” Lori said in a rush. “Said he would protect me, Carl, and Judy. He knows that Judy might be his, and he wants us with him.”

“More than that, Shane wants Rick gone,” Lori said her voice trembling. “He wants him dead.”

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**Friday, June 29th - Early Evening**

Grace was practically bouncing on her toes as she waited for Tara’s car to pull into the long driveway of the Homestead. Beside her, Beth giggled at her excitement but Grace just rolled her eyes and grinned good-naturedly. She had been looking forward to the date all week. The two
women texted often, they had really seemed to hit it off. Tara was a nerd like Grace and the two had plenty in common.

Grace eventually learned that Tara’s father and sister died in a car accident three years ago and Tara had been left to take care of Meghan. Part of her hoped that Tara continued to not remember the walkers so they could actually enjoy their date, because if the other woman remembered it would be unlikely to happen.

Still, Grace was ready to go. She had on a nice, dark-colored button-down shirt and a clean pair of jeans. The rest of the Homestead was still working away settling the goats, taking care of the rabbits, finishing the coops for the birds, and putting the garden and greenhouse together. Grace was leaving Beth to finish putting away more supplies in the kitchen soon enough.

Grace liked the way things were running on the Homestead. Everyone had a job, even the people Grace would call the leaders worked and worked hard. She knew they were working against the clock but even as they were only a few days into this project things were going well.

“There’s her car,” Beth said spotting the vehicle she didn’t recognize coming down the driveway. Grace perked up and turned to the younger girl.

“You should get Beth and Maggie,” Grace said. “They wanted to be here in case Tara remembers them.”

Beth dashed off leaving Grace waiting for Tara’s car to come to a stop. Rick, who had been working on the greenhouse, made his way to where Grace was waiting. He was dirty and covered in soil they were repotting some mature plants from the Greene’s farm and preparing soil for the seeds and seedlings the Dixons had purchased yesterday.

“Hope you don’t mind,” Rick said as a greeting. “I want to see if she remembers us.”

““No problem,” Grace said. “Glenn and Maggie are going to do the same.”

Grace didn’t know Rick very well. The older man was incredibly busy with work around the Homestead or with his kids. Grace had liked seeing the man make time to check on Carl or to take care of the babies.

Everyone took a turn watching Judith and Andre, Beth ended up being Judy’s main caretaker and took care of Andre when Michonne was busy, it was something Grace didn’t understand because even when Lori was at the Homestead the woman didn’t have much to do with her kids. Michonne, on the other hand, did just as much work as Rick but she still found time to parent her son.

“Wow! This is place is gorgeous!” said Tara in a shocked tone. “Meghan come here, don’t wander off.”

Grace stepped up and greeted Tara warmly and made sure to crouch down and greet Meghan as well. Grace said with a smile. “I’m glad you found the place okay,” Grace said with a smile. “The Homestead is a little remote. This is Rick, he owns the place.”

Tara took Rick’s hand and something like recognition flashed in her eyes. “Have we met before?” Tara asked curiously. “You seem very familiar.”

Rick didn’t get a chance to reply because Glenn called out to Grace. Thankfully Maggie was not with him. “Hey,” Glenn greeted his sister’s date.

“Oh this is my brother Glenn Rhee,” Grace said with a sheepish laugh. “He thought your name was
familiar when I told him about you and wanted to see if you knew each other.”

Tara smiled good-naturedly. It wasn’t normal for Grace’s siblings to meet her dates, especially on the first date, but Tara was handling it great. “It’s nice to meet you,” Tara said cheerfully. “You know your name is really familiar but I can’t place where I know you from.”

“I’m sure it will come to you,” Glenn said with certainty.

Grace, Tara, and Meghan left soon after. The two women drove separately, with Grace taking Glenn’s car. The diner was small and cute. The walls were white and covered in road signs. Meghan giggled at the life-sized Elvis standing at the door. Grace shared a smile with Tara at the little girl’s excitement. Grace had been unsure about the little girl tagging along on their date but when the alternative was Tara canceling, Grace was glad she had said she was fine with it. The women took a booth at Meghan’s insistence.

The meal went well. Tara and Grace small talk, and took the time to get to know each other while keeping Meghan involved as well. Tara apologized several times for having to bring her niece but Grace waved it off.

“I wish I could place where I knew your brother from,” Tara said when they had finished their meals and were finishing up milkshakes. Chocolate for Tara, vanilla for Meghan, and caramel for Grace. “I swear, that Rick guy too. I know them from somewhere.”

Grace hid her thoughtful look in her milkshake and pondered how to explain to Tara the other timeline and the other girl’s time with Glenn’s group.

“Maybe you knew them before!” Meghan piped up. “In the monster world!”

“Meghan!” Tara scolded. “That’s just pretend, remember? We talked about this.”

Grace jerked in surprise. They hadn’t considered the little girl remembering when Tara did not.

“Sorry,” Tara apologized. “She’s been talking about a monster world for a while now and I can’t figure out where she got the idea. I don’t let her watch scary movies.”

“Aunt Tara I need to go to the bathroom,” Meghan said. Tara waved her niece off. Their table was in direct line of sight of the bathrooms and the two women and the little girl were the only patrons at that moment. The little girl bounced off to the bathroom leaving the two women alone for the first time that night.

“You’ve been great with Meghan,” Tara said warmly. “Thank you. Not many people would be so great about a seven-year-old tagging along on a first date.”

“It’s not a problem,” Grace said with a laugh. “She’s sweet.”

“So are you really staying out at that place? It looked amazing,” Tara asked. “What did you say your friend is using it for?”

“Oh the previous owners were going to make it bed and breakfast,” Grace said telling Tara what Matthew had told them. “Rick is just fixing it up. He wants to move his family out there. He has a really big family.”

“Tara,” Grace said after a moment of silence. “I, uh, actually know how you know my brother and Meghan’s monster world? It’s real. You know Rick and my brother because you were part of their group, the monsters are walkers and they eat people. I know it sounds crazy but some part of you
remembers even if you don’t think it does. I need you to trust me because if you don’t then you and Meghan could be a big trouble.”

Tara’s eyes went wide. “What?” she asked, the mass of information not yet absorbed.

“Look, come back to the Homestead with me,” Grace begged. “Glenn, Maggie, and Rick can explain. Please just for one night, nothing bad will happen I swear and if after you hear them out if you still don’t, believe me, I’ll lose your number and we’ll never bother you again. For Meghan’s sake.”

Just then the little girl rejoined them at the table. “What now Auntie Tara?” Meghan asked moving the straw from her milkshake around the empty glass. “Is it time to go home?”

Tara hesitated and Grace felt her heart jump up in her throat.

“We’re going back to Grace’s house for a little bit,” Tara said her voice hesitant but her the look in her eyes was resolute. “I need to talk to Grace and her brother before we leave, okay?”

The seven-year-old nodded cheerfully. “Okay!”

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“I think Lori is talking to Shane,” Carol told Daryl. The hunter was filthy from working in the greenhouse and with the goats all day but the showers were all currently in use. The woman had cornered the Dixon man and after dinner had been squared away and told her about what she had walked in on at the library.

Daryl grunted in acknowledgment that he had heard her. The two were on the porch watching Sophia, Penny, and Carl chase the lighting bugs that filled the night air.

“We know he wants Rick dead but as long as he’s around the kids are in danger,” Carol said her voice heavy and tired. “Carl is too smart to go with Lori but Judy is too little and Lori could run off with her.”

Daryl snorted in disbelief. “That’d mean she was ‘round to take ‘er,” Daryl said. “Lori ain’t hardly seen Judy since we started stayin’ out here. Beth’s been taking care of ‘er.”

“I don’t need the computers anymore,” Carol said thoughtfully. “Beth has my phone set up so I can order from there now. I’ll tell Rick we shouldn’t be around King County anymore, it’s too big of a risk that Shane’ll follow us one day. We should go once or twice a week to pick up supplies.”

“Waste of gas to go every day,” Daryl grunted. “Don’t need the money anyways.”

The two fell into an uneasy silence and the sound of two cars coming down the driveway broke it. “That’s Grace and Tara,” Carol said. “That’s good. That Tara is coming back. I’ll get someone to explain things to Tara, I’m sure she’ll have questions if she remembers.”

“Hey wait,” Daryl said catching Carol before she could disappear into the house. “Ya’ should know. Rick, he told me Glenn an’ Merle … he said ta’ shoot Shane iffin we got the chance.”

Carol nodded slowly. “Right,” the woman said firmly before disappearing into the house.

Daryl exhaled heavily and leaned against one of the tall pillars that framed the front of the house.
The lightning bugs flickered in the darkness of the sky and the laughter of the kids painted a peaceful picture that Daryl would soon come to an end. The hunter nodded to Grace and subdued looking Tara. The little girl at Tara’s side watched enviously as the other kids laughed and jumped around catching bugs.

“Meghan can go play,” Grace said softly. “Daryl is watching the kids, he won’t mind keeping an eye on her.”

Tara gave Daryl a hard look, there wasn’t recognition in her eyes but Daryl nodded slowly. “I ain’t got nothin’ else ta’ do,” he said gruffly.

Tara nodded slowly and gently set the little girl off to play with the others. “Are Glenn and Maggie around?” Grace asked the hunter.

“Carol’s gettin’ ‘em ‘n Rick,” Daryl told her. Grace smiled in thanks and lead the subdued woman into the house. Daryl watched the door close and turned back to watch the kids. “Yer doin’ it wrong.”

The four kids stopped and turned to the man in surprise. They hadn’t expected him to talk to them. “What do you mean?” Carl asked curiously.

“The ones ya squish,” Daryl explained. “Ya wipe the glowy stuff on yer face like warpaint. Like this.” Daryl plucked a bug that Carl had gotten too rough with and showed them how to put on their ‘warpaint’. It glowed on the man’s face and the kids all ooed over the discovery.

“Ain’t right to kill things just ‘cos,” Daryl warned. “Not even lightnin’ bugs but if ya kill it at least use it.”

The four all nodded, Carl, having already been taught that lesson from the man took it in again. “Do you want to catch fireflies with us, Mr. Daryl?” Sophia asked softly.

“Nah,” Daryl said waving the girl off. “I’mma get a smoke don’t run off the land ain’t fenced and I ain’t hunting fer yer asses in the pitch dark. Stay where I can see y’all.”

The kids agreed and went back to their games now when they accidentally squashed a bug they applied their ‘warpaint’ much to everyone’s delight. Daryl lit up a cigarette and watched them play.

Chapter End Notes

The thing with the lightning bugs I used to do with my cousins when we would catch them at my grandfather’s house as kids. Sorry if it’s gross, it seemed like thing Daryl would know/have done as a kid.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

We aren't going to talk about how long this update took. I blame it on the fact that I started playing Overwatch.

Tuesday, July 31st - Early Morning

Rick took a drink of his coffee and let his eyes drift to the chore board on the wall in the kitchen. Maggie and Annette had picked up a can of chalkboard paint and several boxes of paint and set out making it clear what needed to be done and that everyone needed to do their part. His own name indicated that he was supposed to watch Judy and Andre today, a nice break from working on the wall. Maggie, who ended up being in charge of schedules, did her best to make sure everyone had a break from hard labor and had time with the kids. It was to encourage everyone to feel connected to the group and it was working. Maggie also ensured that everyone had put in equal time keeping the Homestead running.

There were many names that Rick would have never imagined being on the board. The arrival of Merle’s family and Rick was shocked to find Merle’s ex-wife was surprisingly pleasant, had been a loud event. The two older children, Marlie and Jackson were good hands around the Homestead. Jackson was a less than a year from being a journeyman electrician having had attended the local vocational school for training. Marlie didn’t have any particular training but she was a hard worker and wasn’t afraid to get dirty to help. Thomas was a handful, he swore and sometimes refused to work and got into screaming matches with Merle on the regular. Rick overheard that Thomas was a change to the timeline, Marlie had explained it to Daryl after the Dixons got moved in, that the older siblings were still getting to know their new little brother. Thomas’ behavior only got worse when he was near the slightly older Beth Greene so Maggie made sure to keep them far apart on the chore rotations.

Tara and Meghan were also new additions to the Homestead. Tara was a familiar face but even as familiar as she found everyone she did not have true memories of the previous timelines. Still, she stepped up and did her best, Grace was a huge help in making Tara comfortable. Meghan, now the youngest of the kids aside from Judith and Andre followed Carl, Sophia, and Penny around like a little shadow. The kids did their best to include her in the lessons that Carol had started.

Carol using Carl as her helper had already started a school of sorts for the kids. She taught them sign language and other life skills on alternating days and would switch to reading, writing and general old world lessons. Thomas and Beth had standing invitations to the little school, and Beth attended the sign language lessons like some of the others did but otherwise, it appeared education would become voluntary around fifteen or sixteen years old.

Another exciting advancement at the Homestead was the arrival of three of the tiny houses. They were small things most only fitting at most two people but they had already made life easier. The first house, brought in by Merle using a truck rented by Mathew’s real estate company, was one of the larger ones that had a loft and a small bedroom on the main floor. Grace and Tara claimed that one and set the room up for Meghan.
The houses were a mix of tiny houses on wheels or that could sit on a foundation or on skids. The other two houses that had been brought in were elevated on skids, as opposed to Grace and Tara’s wheeled home. Glenn and Maggie took the next house and Carol and her girls had just finished moving into their tiny home just the day before.

Matthew promised the final two houses he had access to within the week when he would also be joining the group full time with Patrick. The rest of the group was making due with the rooms in the house, crashing on a couch or in tents outside. More exciting than even the arrival of the houses just the week before they had begun putting up the walls. It was slow going and Rick thought they had waited a little too long but they had spent hours working out the dimensions for the first round of walls.

The foundation for the walls was in place everywhere but the part facing the stream to the south. Around the foundations for the walls, they had put up tall, heavy-duty fencing for letting the animals graze outside the walls when it was possible and to help keep in mind locations for expansions in the future.

The animals at the Homestead had increased as well. Daryl and Charlie had gotten into the habit of bringing home puppies and dogs. The first time had been Daryl bringing home a runt of a puppy for Penny. The fragile girl had been so distressed by the idea of eating the rabbits that she had stopped eating but when Daryl put the dark brown, fluffy mutt in her arms she had begun to settle. Carol had given the hunter a thankful look and Sophia seemed to enjoy helping her new sister take care of the puppy.

After that Hershel had mentioned his desire to have dogs for herding and guarding so Charlie took the time to look around for trained herding dogs and brought a male and female pair for more money than Rick wanted to think about. They had a good little pack of dogs on the Homestead now, most of which would eventually be put to work with the livestock after training.

The flock of six goats was thriving on the Homestead, there was even talk of picking up a few more does for milk production. The rabbits were doing well and Rick could actually hear some of the newest livestock residents from his spot drinking coffee making a racket in the mudroom. The baby guinea fowl, or keets as they were called, were making lots of noise as they waited for their breakfast. The baby chicks being raised alongside them were contributing to the noise. Hershel insisted that while raising the birds from babies would take longer for food production it would be better in the long run to have the birds raised together to lessen any bullying from the guineas.

The cows were still at the Greene’s farm and wouldn’t be moved until later, the same with the horses. They weren’t sure if there would be room for pigs but Rick was sure in the future they could catch a wild hog or two when things fell apart if they ended up needing them.

“Good morning,” Michonne said as she entered the kitchen. Rick turned for a kiss and took a giggling Andre from his mother and pressed a good morning kiss to the toddler’s forehead.

“Oh, do you have a cup of that for me?” Michonne asked as she eyed Rick’s cup hungrily. The man chuckled but got Michonne a cup as she filled a plate. The breakfast crew, a glance at the chore board said it was Grace, Marlie, and Shawn had already started on chow for the large group even if not everyone was wake just yet. “Did you eat already?”

“Yeah,” said Rick. “Been up for a while.”

“Hmm,” Michonne murmured thoughtfully. “You’re worried about Lori.”

“Among other things,” admitted Rick as he gave Andre a biscuit to munch on.
It seemed like forever ago when Carol found him and explained what she had walked in on with Lori and Shane. The woman explained that she didn’t know whether their meeting had been the first time or if they had met before and Carol just happened to catch them in the end. Rick waited two days before confronting his ex-wife but when he did it had been a blow up that ended when Rick threw down an ultimatum: shape up or get out.

Rick promised that if Lori left the Homestead again she was not supposed to return and if she did Rick promised darkly her arrival would be handled. Lori had not handled that well and ended up locking herself in one of the room in the main house for almost a week. Now Lori almost haunted the Homestead in a half furious half melancholy state, she spoke to Carl and some of the other women but resolutely ignored Rick, Michonne, and Carol. It would not last forever but for now, they had reached an uneasy and uncomfortable peace.

“You know this is something you don’t have to do on your own,” Michonne said after swallowing a bite of scrambled eggs (store bought). “You did the right thing with the distribution of power and we are in a place where we can all contribute to those problems you’ve got rattling around in there.”

Rick sighed and gave his partner an almost sheepish smile. Rick suffered from tunnel vision, for a long time he had been the sole person in charge of his group. That meant if they went to bed with an empty stomach or cold it was his problem. He also had a tendency to brood and overthink which often lead to trouble.

“So,” Michonne said with a smirk. “What else is on your mind?”

“The changes to the timeline,” admitted Rick. “The sheer number of people that remember the first time thangs went to hell. Also our people, ya’ll haven’t made any more progress finding ‘em.”

“You’re worried about Thomas,” Michonne figured out. “Marlie and Jackson said he didn’t exist before and you’re worried about who else just appeared from nowhere or maybe doesn’t exist anymore at all.”

Rick winced and Michonne knew she had hit it straight on. Thomas was the biggest change they had come across. Everyone else had at least existed before, even if they had died or in Judy’s case been born earlier.

“There is absolutely nothing you can do about that, you know that right?” Michonne asked. “We can’t see the future Rick and we can’t change anything more than we already have. Somethings we just have to deal with.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” Rick said. The sound of footsteps, several sets, disrupted the conversation as the occupants of the Homestead finally started pouring into the kitchen for breakfast. “Can you take him? I want to check on Judy.”

Michonne happily took her son, she had finished eating and tucked him into one of the several highchairs they had in the kitchen. “Sure, it’s his turn for breakfast anyway,” Michonne said brightly. “That biscuit just didn’t do it for him.”

Rick grinned and disappeared up the stairs to find his daughter.

“Rick up?” Hershel asked from the door to the kitchen a short time after. The old farmer had been up since before the breakfast crew, working with the animals.

“Just missed him,” Michonne told him helping Andre guide the eggs into his mouth. “He’s getting
Judy her breakfast. You can probably catch him upstairs thought.”

“It’s fine,” Hershel said waving her off. “I’ll get Glenn. Good morning, Bethie.”

Beth greeted her father with a bright smile and slid into a chair across from Michonne. “Mornin’, daddy,” said Beth. The little blond turned to the chore board before she moved to get her breakfast and hummed. “Looks like I’m with you today, Thomas too.”

Hershel almost scowled at the mention of Thomas Dixon. The oldest boy at the Homestead when he wasn’t acting as a miniature of his father at his worst had noticed Beth and had started sniffing around. Daryl and Merle had both warned the boy off, Daryl more than Merle but Hershel didn’t like the thought of the boy getting involved with Beth. For her part, Beth seemed amused but not overly interested in Thomas.

“Good luck getting that boy to do anything,” Michonne said with a rueful smile at the old farmer. Hershel frowned thoughtfully. “I’m sure if anyone can straighten him out, it’ll be you.”

“Dear Lord,” Joan said as she entered the kitchen. She knew without asking that they were discussing Thomas. “What has Thomas done now?”

“Nothing, yet,” Hershel said reassuring the woman. “He’s supposed to work with me and Beth with the animals this morning and with the crops this afternoon.”

Joan grimaced and flicked her eyes to the board. More of the group trickled into the kitchen and grabbed plates. “I’m going to go ahead and apologize now,” Joan said. “Thomas is a handful and nothing I’ve said has reached him.”

Joan had taken to life at the Homestead with a grace and poise that would have surprised anyone else. She still had no memories of the last timeline, which according to her children was a good thing, but in the face of her two oldest children’s fear along with Merle’s own insistence of what was to come Joan had easily picked up and moved to the Homestead. She had brought with her a generator, all the food she had in her house, and a little 38 special handgun that Merle had got her when they had first gotten together.

“Shawn was the same way,” Hershel reassured her. “Annette and I struggled with him until he had a close call with the police and straightened up.”

Joan slumped in her seat and shook her head. “I’m hoping to avoid that kind of run in if possible,” Joan said.

Hershel shared a comforting smile with the mother and the conversation slowly shifted to the work of the day. It included work on the walls, two more estate sales that promised a good haul of farm equipment, and generally looking after the Homestead. The group maintained morning and late afternoon shifts. After consulting their medical staff Maggie and Rick agreed if possible they wanted to not work in the heat of the day and worked out a schedule where they took breaks in the afternoon during the worst of the heat and picked up when it cooled off. The rest of the group popped in and out to get food or to check on their assigned chores for the day and the Homestead slowly came to life for the day.

Shane hadn’t seen Lori since he confronted her in the library and the man knew Rick was to blame. The thin woman had evidently quit her job out of the blue and announced that she and Rick were moving out of King County. One of the other officers had at the station had seen Rick, Daryl, and a man Shane guessed was Glenn packing up the Grimes home and the family had not returned since.
Shane saw the Dixons and Carol around town but he was never able to follow them out of town. The one time he had tried to follow Carol out of town the woman had pulled over and sat on the side of the road staring at him until Shane had to leave. Later that evening Shane saw her car parked outside of the hotel in town and he knew he couldn't figure out where the Grimes had set up from her.

It had slowly been driving the man insane. Shane had been wracking his brain trying to figure out where Rick and his group would set up and Shane figured if he couldn’t follow anyone to their base, he would make them talk. That, of course, meant he had to find a person and he just happened to know where at least three of the shacked up.

Shane managed a charming smile at the woman who ran the local motel. Ms. Margaret was a chatty old woman but she had never liked Shane. As kids, Rick and Shane had busted the back window of her car by accident and while the woman (and her late husband) had warmed back up to Rick she had never accepted Shane’s apology.

Shane had pulled up to the hotel in his uniform even if he didn’t have an official reason for being there. He hoped that his uniform, his squad car and the general weight of his position on the police force would ease her hatred of him.

“Ma’am,” Shane greeted. “You’re looking well today.”

“Office Walsh,” Margaret greeted coolly. “Is there something you need help with, son?”

“Actually, ma’am,” Shane started. “I’m looking for a criminal and last I heard he was staying here in your hotel. Do you know a Merle Dixon?”

Technically Merle, Daryl, and Carol all still had rooms at the hotel. Since Rick and Lori had left their home in King County, and they had lost the contact point, the group had started using the hotel and Matthew’s home for supply deliveries. Margaret didn’t really know why Rick needed his mail delivered to her hotel but she happy to help if she could.

“I’ve had a Dixon rent a room here,” Margaret said with a suspicious nod. “I’m afraid that is all I’m telling you.”

“Ma’am,” Shane tried.

“You know better than that, Officer Walsh,” Margaret said in a scolding tone. “My Robert was a lawyer and I know your tricks, boy.”

Margaret and Robert Price had bought the only hotel in King County with their retirement savings. Robert had been a small town lawyer for years before his passing often acting a defense attorney.

“Ms. Price,” Shane began again trying to reason with the woman. “You don’t want me to come back with a warrant, do you?”

Margaret glared at the younger man over her glasses, she didn’t feel threatened by the man. “Son, a warrant is the only way you’ll be entering my hotel,” she said calmly.

Shane finally dropped his calm and genial demeanor and snarled at the older woman. “Oh don’t worry,” Shane said as he lost it. “I’ll come back with a warrant, you can bet your ass, you old bitch.”

“Get off my property!” Margaret demanded, fed up with Shane and his language. “Don’t you come back unless you got a warrant! Get out.”
Margaret watched the man storm out of her hotel lobby with an eagle eye and moved to the phone. She waited a few moments then picked the phone up off the cradle and dialed the internal number for the room where Margaret knew Merle Dixon was currently resting.

“Mr. Dixon? It’s Margaret from the front desk,” Margaret began cutting the man off from whatever he tried to say to her. “Honey, you might have a problem.”

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**Tuesday, July 31st - Afternoon**

Carl scowled down at the poorly stitched shirt in front of him and tried to ignore Sophia’s giggling. Patricia, who had been taking a moment to teach the children to sew, shushed the girl and smiled encouragingly at Carl. “Here, use the seam rippers and try again,” she urged him. “You’ll get it.”

Work on the homestead was difficult and often even with the ever-increasing amount of supplies they had gathered nothing was wasted so Carol insisted everyone know how to sew and mend to keep their clothing in good condition. Because everyone rotated chores (unless someone specifically asked for a certain job more often and even then they still were required to take other chores on occasion) and the laundry crew was responsible for mending clothing, Carl, Sophia, Penny, and Meghan were required to learn to sew. Carl and Meghan were having trouble with the sewing project Patricia had assigned them.

Carl scowled again and elbowed Sophia when the older woman turned away to help Penny. “You suck at this,” Sophia whispered gleefully. Carl normally had the upper hand on the survival lessons Carol and the others taught the kids. He didn’t rub it in Sophia’s face but everyone had noticed that the girl was irritated by Carl’s competence and would often compete to get skills first.

“Shut up,” Carl hissed. Patricia did not stand for squabbles and would not hesitate to assign the two extra chores for messing around when they had a task.

Patricia shot the two a steely glance that had them suddenly focused on their sewing. Carl worked at his project, somehow managing to further mangle the t-shirt that Carl was sure belonged to Glenn until the older woman glanced at the clock and freed them from their lessons for the day.

Free for the first time in a few hours Carl shot off to where he knew Michonne and his dad were likely to be. Construction on the walls had halted for while they tried not to work on the wall during the hottest part of the day and would often work late into the evening using the heavy duty lights that had been a lucky find in a storage unit auction Rick had attended.

One of the bedrooms in the main house had been converted to a nursery for Judith and Andre. Maggie had advocated that having a designated baby room in the main house would be a good investment in the long run. It was easily defensible and it made it easier on the one or two people that ended up watching the babies during the day. Carl practically bounced into the nursery where he could hear Andre babbling happily and Rick talking back just as cheerfully.

“Hey Carl,” Rick greeted his son. The young-again-boy grinned at his father and Michonne. Rick was in the rocking chair with Andre on his lap the toddler. Michonne was rocking a fussy Judith in her arms a few feet away.

“What’s wrong with Judy?” Carl asked. His sister was a remarkably placid baby, her great sense of when to stay quiet and even temperament was showing itself already and she rarely fussed without reason.
“We just had tummy time,” Michonne said solemnly.

Carl frowned but understood. Judith did not like tummy time and fussed for a long while even after it was done. Carl didn’t understand why it was a thing that needed to happen but Michonne told him it was good for his sister.

“Do you want to try?” Michonne asked when Judith continued to fuss. Carl nodded and took the baby into his arms and rocked her instinctively. “How was school? You kids were on laundry with Patricia right?”

Carl scowled but nodded. “I can’t sew,” Carl admitted reluctantly. “Sophia is better than me.”

Rick and Michonne shared a grin at the boy’s pouting and Rick shook his head. “I’m sure you’ll pick it up,” he said with a grin that made Andre giggle.

Carl made a face that told his parents just what he thought about that but quickly titled his head to look down at his little sister.

“How are you doing Carl?” Rick asked after a moment of silence. “We haven’t talked much about how different this all is.”

Carl knew his dad was really asking about his nightmares. Everyone at the Homestead had nightmares, living in such close quarters it was well known and more than once someone had woken up to a scream from some memory turned night terror. The past week or so Carl had woken up screaming the images from the night Glenn and Abraham died, Judith’s first birth, or the day he was shot by Ron playing behind his eyelids.

Carl knew his father had nightmares too, more than once Rick more haunted the Homestead than actually ran it. Somedays his eyes would grow increasingly dark and Carl knew what kind of horrors his father saw. Even the people that hadn’t been with the group the first time suffered from nightmares. There were some days Charlie wouldn’t leave Grace’s side (much to Grace’s irritation) or days when Merle’s children older children would grow quiet and standoffish.

“I’m fine,” Carl insisted not looking away from Judith’s sleeping face, the baby had drifted off while Carl was holding her. “It’s not like that now.”

“But that doesn’t mean it didn’t happen,” Michonne pushed. “Sometimes it’s hard to remember but all that stuff from before? It was real and it happened.”

“It’s not though,” Carl insisted shaking his head. “I still have my eye, Glenn is alive. It’s not real, not now.”

“Sometimes when I wake up and I hear Andre crying I can’t go to him because I’m scared if I pick him up he’ll be a walker,” Michonne admitted. The woman moved and took her son from Rick’s arms and cuddled him tightly.

“You dad has to go take care of him for me,” Michonne continued in a soft voice. “Just because it’s not our life now doesn’t mean it was not real. What we went through, the stuff we survived just because we don’t have the scars anymore doesn’t we don’t have the experience.”

“It’s hard,” Carl admitted softly. “I’m little again and sometimes people forget that. Or they treat me like a little kid. It’s hard to remember what is now.”

Rick had noticed that Carl was stuck in a weird place. The long-term members of the group would often treat Carl the exact same way they had before. People who hadn’t made it past the prison
tended to treat Carl like Sophia and the others. The constant shift between responsibility and restriction had to be a source of irritation for the boy on top of the trauma he was trying to work through.

“Maybe, we can -”

A sharp knock interrupted what Rick had started to say and Maggie’s head popped in through the open door. She looked stressed and her face was somewhat grim. “Rick? Michonne? A moment?” She asked her voice tense.

Rick and Michonne shared a concerned look. Carl moved to put Judith in her crib to finish her nap and took Andre from Michonne. “I’ll watch them,” Carl said knowing his parents needed some time handle whatever Maggie needed.

Rick and Michonne made the quick trip down to the kitchen. Daryl, Carol, Glenn, Hershel, and Maggie were waiting on Rick and Michonne at the large island that had become a bit of a command center when it wasn’t meal times.

“What’s wrong?” Rick asked when he saw the dark looks on his people’s faces.

“There have been walker sightings up north,” Maggie said grimly. “It’s contained for now whatever makes us all infected hasn’t happened yet, there was a car accident a few miles out from here with fatalities but no walkers, but a family claimed a relative died in his sleep and came back a ‘flesh-eating monster’.”

Rick frowned and shared a look with his group. The timeline they had pieced together had put the outbreak starting in late September. Now having walker sightings at the end of July made Rick’s hair stand on end. “We’re not ready,” Rick said obviously. “The walls aren’t up, the root cellar isn’t done and we don’t have enough room for everyone yet.”

“We knew this could happen,” Daryl said gruffly as he looked around at the others. “Just means we gotta get our asses in gear.”

“We’ve gotta get Eugene,” Maggie reminded them. “We promised we’d get him before all this started.”

“Let me think,” Rick said as he started to pace around the kitchen. “Where up north?”

“Montana,” Maggie said right away. “It’s been the only documented case other than the one Carol found from a few months ago.”

“More bad news,” Daryl said cutting in. “Merle lost Joe an’ hasn’t been able to pick up his trail.” After the run-in with the claimer, Merle had taken it upon himself to search the man out to try and stop a problem before it got to be a problem.

Rick swore but Daryl pressed on. “An’ Shane’s been sniffin’ around,” Daryl finished knowing that no one wanted more bad news. “Margaret at the hotel told ‘em to come back with a warrant iffn’ he wanted to snoop ‘round.”

“And he will,” Rick said tiredly.

“We need to go get Eugene,” Glenn said bringing the conversation back to their slowly ticking clock. “If we take the one or two of the trucks we can grab supplies on the way. Two or three of us can go and it won’t take much of the manpower away from the construction.”
“Are you volunteering?” Michonne asked the Korean man.

“Yeah, I’ll go,” Glenn said with a shrug. “I’ll take some guns and maybe one or two other people in case things get bad.”

“Who are you thinking?” Rick asked going over the list of people in his head.

“Marlie and maybe Daryl,” Glenn said right away. “Merle can give updates to Jackson. Marlie and Daryl can both drive the U-huals so we can switch off and make better time.”

Daryl frowned thoughtfully and bit at his thumbnail he wasn’t sure if him going was a good idea. He didn’t want to leave Merle without some sort of keeper and he wasn’t sure he wanted to be stuck with Eugene on the drive back.

Glenn gave the hunter an amused look like he knew part of Daryl’s hesitation was Eugene himself. “Hopefully we can get Abe, and Rosita while we are down there,” Glenn reminded everyone.

“That doesn’t change the fact that we don’t have enough room for everyone yet,” Maggie interjected. “Matthew doesn’t have enough tiny houses for us.”

“I might have a solution for that,” said Carol. “I was doing some research and I found a place that sells the tiny house shells. We would have to take care of the insides, but if we need to move up the wall construction, I don’t know that we will have time.”

“We could have people build up their own shells,” Hershel suggested. “They could work on them during the wall off time it shouldn’t hinder our progress much.”

“That’s not a bad idea,” Glenn agreed. “Can we get them cheap?”

Money wasn’t a real issue but if they wanted them before the end started cheap was better.

Carol nodded. “The company is local too,” she added. “Delivery would only take a few days at most if we had to move them from the farm.”

“Alright,” Rick said with a nod. “Let’s do that. Start ordering the shells, or completed houses if we can afford them. We’ll raid the place when things go down. Glenn, Daryl, tell Marlie to be ready as soon as possible. I don’t want y’all on the road when this thing happens if possible.”

“We can head out tomorrow afternoon,” Glenn said thoughtfully. “If we drive through the night and switch off we should make it within a day or so. Daryl are you in?”

Daryl grunted and nodded his head, almost reluctantly, “Yeah.”

“Alright,” Rick said thinking over the plan. “We can make this work. We’ve gotta be careful and we’ve gotta be quick. Carol, I want you to see about moving Ms. Margaret to the Homestead within the week, we could use the furniture from the hotel. Maggie, we need more people on the wall and to start work on the root cellar. Hershel, we need to start moving the cows and horses soon. Shane knows about the farm it’s only been luck that he hasn’t shown up out there yet.”

“Knock, knock,” Grace said from the door to the kitchen. “Sorry to interrupt, but it’s time to start on lunch. Can we come in?”

Rick shot a glance at the clock and nodded. “Yeah,” he said. “We’re done here for now.”

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“Tyrese!” Sasha Williams called out to her brother. “I think we finally found them!”

“Are you sure?” The man asked hopefully. The Williams siblings had been looking for their group since they woke up with memories of an alternate timeline. Sasha had immediately started looking for Bob not no avail and her brother started with search with Karen and found her living peacefully with a husband and a son with no memory of their shared life at the prison.

“It’s Beth,” Sasha said. “She sent a few messages to your facebook page maybe a month ago with a phone number. Toss me the phone.”

Sasha’s big brother handed her the wireless phone that sat on the kitchen counter and watched as she pressed the buttons and brought the phone to her ear. Tyrese waited anxiously as the phone rang.

“Hello?” Sasha asked after a moment and a wide grin stretched across her face. “Maggie? Is that you?”
Chapter 15

Wednesday, August 1st - Just Before Sunrise

Marlie yawned sleepily and gratefully took the travel mug full of coffee that Grace handed her. The breakfast crew for the day had prepared food and coffee for Marlie, Daryl, and Glenn. Rick, Maggie, and Michonne were standing next to two of the trucks talking to Glenn and Daryl about the trip. Marlie had been surprised to be asked along. It was easy to see the bond that connected some of the group members, Marlie’s uncle was one of the core members and so was Glenn. All the important jobs had gone to these core group members so to have Marlie on a job with two of them was unusual.

Two of the group’s U-hauls were waiting, gassed up and stocked for the trip to pick up this Eugene guy. Marlie wasn’t sure who he was or why he was important but the group wanted him on the Homestead and the woman wasn’t going to argue.

“Yer wit’ me,” Daryl grunted as he tossed Marlie a set of keys. “Put yer shit in the cab.”

Marlie nodded and moved to put her pack into the cab of the truck Daryl had indicated was theirs.

“You should have enough supplies to hold you over if things go wrong while you’re out,” Rick said to Daryl and Glenn. The three men were standing together between the two trucks, getting a few last-minute things hashed out.

“Got yer phones?” Rick asked as he pushed back a yawn.

“Yeah,” Glenn said. “We’ve got those car chargers that plug into the lighter too, so we should always be in contact.”

Tara had suggested them when she heard the group of three was going on a road trip. Grace had packed supply packs full of food and basic first aid, everyone hoped that the trip would be easy but the looming apocalypse made sure they were prepared.

Marlie watched the group say their goodbyes, the woman having told her mother and brother goodbye the night before. She slid into the passenger seat when bid and closed the door behind her. Daryl appeared in his seat and scoffed when he saw Glenn still sucking face with Maggie next to the truck he was going to drive.

“Move yer ass!” Daryl shouted through his open window at the younger man. Marlie sniggered when Glenn jumped half a foot in the air from surprise. “Gunna leave his ass.”

Marlie smirked and shook her head when she heard her uncle’s muttered words. Daryl then turned the key and the U-Haul’s engine rumbled to life.

“Git yer shit off the dash,” Daryl grumbled. Marlie snatched her coffee off the dash where she had sat it as she got into the truck. Daryl had stuffed his travel mug of coffee into one of the two cup holders in the cab but Marlie could smell it just as strongly as she could her own.

Coffee was one of the must-grabs when getting supplies. The Homestead had an ever-growing supply of coffee in many different forms. Little Grace Rhee had been sure to put it on every list and Hershel had even promised a special spot in the greenhouse for coffee beans.

“Best, rest up,” Daryl said gruffly. “Got an estate sale a couple of hours out that we’re gonna hit.
You can switch wit’ Glenn, then.”

Marlie just nodded and sipped her coffee, the cab falling to a comfortable silence between Marlie and Daryl. For all that Marlie was named for her father the eldest of Merle Dixon’s children most closely resembled her uncle. Daryl could remember back before Joan took the kids how Marlie had followed him around like a shadow. The girl had toddled after his ass as Daryl had done to Merle.

Part of him felt guilty for how he had abandoned Joan and the kids in the past, he hadn’t even given them a thought when he and Merle lit up out of the woods and part of him felt worse because Merle had ended up going to check on them.

Still, there was nothing to be done now and all Daryl could do at this point was to make sure his sister-in-law and his niece and nephews were safe. Marlie didn’t see the glance her uncle shot her, her eyes were closed, and her head was leaned back against the headrest of her seat. Daryl snorted soft and tugged the cup out of her lose hands and put it in the cup holder by his own. “Dumbass,” he muttered when the younger woman didn’t even stir.

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Wednesday, August 1st - Noon

Michonne wiped the sweat from her brow and gazed out at the property of the Homestead. Daryl, Glenn, and Marlie had been gone for almost six hours. Glenn had called an hour or so before and told them everything had gone well at the estate sale and the Homestead had a few more pieces of antique farming equipment.

Michonne peered up at the sky, mostly out of habit before chuckling and glancing down at the digital watch on her wrist; noon it read. “Wrap it up!” The woman called loudly she was several others were working on the wall. The only ones who weren’t working on the wall were the folks making lunch, watching the kids, or on the road. “Break time!”

Michonne took a moment to take a deep breath and enjoy the cool breeze. Working on the wall was hot work, dirty too. Her skin was coated in dirt and her pants were damp from the water needed to mix the concrete. Her stomach rumbled ominously and Michonne gave a wave to Ri who was leading the construction that morning.

Instead of waiting for him to finish Michonne stowed her tools and began the trek back to the main house. It didn’t take long before she found herself being turned away from the kitchen by an amused Joan Dixon with strict words to wash up and get the kids. Carl and the others were playing with Andre and Judy in the nursery Michonne had been told.

With a fond smile Michonne took care of washing up, she didn’t take long, as the rest of the crew would be making their way back to the main house soon enough. Once clean the woman took the steps up to the nursery and pushed the door open to greet the kids.

Michonne stopped, confused and a little surprised when she found Carl standing in front of the other kids in a pretty silver colored skirt. The little boy was in the process of spinning, the gauzy material twirling around him but he froze when he saw Michonne.

“I was just playing!” Carl shouted instantly. He immediately pushed the skirt down off his jeans, it pooled on the floor. “It’s just a game!”

The boy’s voice was pitched high, Michonne could hear that he was scared. Sophia and Penny took their cue from Carl and started immediately defending him. “We were just playing,” Sophia agreed quickly. “Me and Penny wanted to see it spin.”
“Is Carl in trouble?” Penny asked softly.

Michonne could see Carl’s face turning red with shame. Tears pooled in his eyes and Michonne moved to embrace him. “Hey, it’s okay,” she told him gently. “No one is in trouble. Girls, would you go down and help with lunch? Carl and I need to talk.”

Sophia gave Michonne a skeptical look but allowed her younger sister to tug her from the room, and then it was just Carl, Michonne and the babies.

“Why do you think you’re in trouble?” Michonne asked gently. She had never seen Carl this way before. The boy had been frightened before, but the fear and sheer terror Michonne was seeing now was far out of character for the boy she knew.

“Boys aren’t supposed to do that,” Carl whispered harshly. He sounded his age but there was a knowledge in his voice that had Michonne hurting. He had sidestepped Michonne’s attempt at a hug and moved to stare at his little sister in her crib. “Boys don’t wear skirts. It’s not right.”

“Well that’s stupid,” Michonne said simply. “Whoever told you that was wrong.”

Carl just hunched his shoulders and didn’t say anything.

“Hey, I’m serious,” Michonne said firmly. “It’s just cloth. It doesn’t change who you are.”

“I like wearing pretty things,” Carl admitted softly. “We never got to wear anything nice last time. Ever. Not even when something good happened.”

Michonne’s heart went out to the little boy. She moved to wrap her around his shoulder and this time he let her. “Sophia painted my nails again last night and Mom didn’t like it,” Carl admitted. “She made me take it off.”

Carl showed Michonne his bare nails. “It was a pretty blue color,” Carl told her. “She said I couldn’t do that anymore, that boys don’t paint their nails. She told me it was wrong.”

Michonne took a calming breath and let Carl finish. It was easy to see how hard this was for the kid and Michonne wanted nothing but to make him stop hurting. It was easy to see that there was something about the skirt and painting his nails that made Carl feel good, safe even.

“I just wanted to show Penny and Sophia the skirt,” Carl said. “I liked the material.”

Michonne fell quiet and the two of them watched Judy wiggle and reach for her big brother’s fingers. She didn’t know what to do from here, part of her wanted to find Lori and demand to know why Carl had been so scared, why he had reacted so strongly. Michonne knew Rick adored his son and there was very little that would ever throw him about his kid.

Part of her couldn’t help but wonder, what if Carl did want more than just to wear the skirt. Michonne didn’t know many transgender people, they did live in Georgia after all and the South was not typically kind to those who were straight. Or white for that matter. Still, Rick had never seemed the prejudiced type, even Lori hadn’t seemed like she would start something even after the hesitation with the nail polish at Maggie’s wedding. Could the boy be gay? Transgender?

“Sometimes people just like wearing fun clothes,” Michonne said finally breaking the silence. “Just because I wear pants and not a dress doesn’t mean anything about me one way or another. And even if it did it wouldn’t matter because I know you, your dad and the rest of the group would still love me.”

Carl nodded but kept his eyes on his sister and didn’t say anything.

“I’m serious,” Michonne said bumping Carl lightly with her hip. “Your dad and I will love you no
matter what. So will your mom, now come on, let’s go get some lunch.”

Lunch was lively, as all meals tended to be at the Homestead voices melted together and shoulders bumped as the large group found their food. The lunch crew did fantastic as always, lunch was leftovers sandwiches. Annette introduced the idea of using dinner leftovers as sandwiches for lunch whenever possible. There were several types of bread from the store-bought white and wheat to dinner roles and crusty bread from the week’s breakfasts. Different meats (brisket, pulled pork, chicken breast) were available as well as anything anyone could want to put on their sandwich.

Michonne made sure that Carl didn’t see her lean over to Rick and whisper in his ear. “We need to talk tonight,” She told him softly, she quickly explained a little to keep the panic out of his eyes. “Everything is fine. Carl just needs some support.”

Rick met her eyes curiously but nodded. Michonne knew he would, Rick would do anything for his children.

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Wednesday, August 1st - Late afternoon

“Maggie?” Shawn called out. “Are you up here?”

Shawn had been sent by his mother to track down his sister to help coordinate the evening wall shifts. Merle had hurt his back lifting that morning and Hershel insisted the man take the night off, that meant someone else had to take his shift and Maggie was the person to deal with that kind of issue.

The last anyone had seen her Maggie had ducked up to the nursery to check on Judith and Andre. “Maggie?”

The second floor of the main house was empty but Shawn could hear the soft sound of someone crying from the nursery. Fearing the worst the man move quickly and pushed the door open. “Maggie?”

Maggie was sitting in the rocking chair holding Andre, Shawn could see tears streaking down her face and could hear her breath catching with each sob. Shawn rushed to her side. “Maggie? Are you okay?” He asked as he scanned his sister’s hunched over form. The baby in her arms whined unhappily and patted her face trying to get her attention.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” Shawn asked when he couldn’t find anything physically wrong with his sister.

“I’m not pregnant,” Maggie said quietly. “I thought I was and I was so happy but then I took the test and it’s negative.”

Shawn let out a soft, “oh” and settled himself on the floor next to the chair where Maggie was seated. “Oh, Maggie, I’m sorry.”

Everyone knew that Maggie wanted a baby. Everyone was also aware that Glenn was uncertain if the timing was right. The couple had never public argued about it but more than a few Homestead occupants had happened upon their disagreements.

“I miss my baby,” Maggie admitted in a whisper. She rocked Andre and managed a watery smile for the boy who looked so concerned for the woman holding him. “Glenn doesn’t understand. He just doesn’t want me to get sick like I was last time, but I don’t care! I want my baby, Shawn, I want him back!”
Shawn swallowed harshly but couldn’t find it in himself to reply. His sister was hurting, and in a lot of pain but he didn’t know what to do or say to make it better. Shawn and Maggie had never been particularly close. When Hershel and Annette had married the boy and girl hated each-other. Maggie had been sure her daddy was replacing her mama, and getting the son he had always wanted. Shawn had been certain that his mother was foolish and shouldn’t trust the man she was in love with. To make matters worse his mother had insisted that he get along with the spoiled little girl who was only a year younger than him and hated his guts.

Neither Maggie or Shawn had been happy to hear about Beth at first either but Shawn quickly fell in love with his little sister and doted on her endlessly. Maggie grew to love her sister when she realized the Greene girls outnumbered the boys. Still, as they aged as with most siblings they grew closer as they matured, but Shawn and Maggie were never particularly close.

Seeing his sister hurting, crying, and suffering made Shawn do the only thing he could. He was there for her.

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>bold>Wednesday, August 1st - Late evening after the last wall shift

Rick hung up the phone and grunted in pain. Everything hurt and his muscles were not happy with how much work he had put in today. The body Rick had woken up in was not the one used to the kind of hard work and manual labor that Rick was mentally prepared to perform.

Several folks on the Homestead had similar problems, even though they mentally knew what needed to be done their current bodies couldn’t keep up. In the Old World before the Walkers, Rick had lived a fairly active lifestyle but his life after the turn had left him a fantastic shape made from hard work and even harder living. Getting back into shape was proving harder than Rick remembered.

He had just finished talking with Marlie, Glenn was passed out and Daryl was out getting dinner at a 24/7 road stop, and got an update on their progress. According to Merle’s oldest, the group was making good time and expected to arrive in Texas sooner than expected unless Daryl got his way and the group stopped at every yard sale, auction, and tractor supply from Georgia to Texas. Michonne was putting the babies to bed and she wanted to talk with him before they both went to say goodnight to Carl. Rick wasn’t sure what Michonne wanted to talk to him about, when she said she wanted to talk about Carl Rick had immediately feared the worst.

No one but Michonne knew about the nightmares Rick had every night. Rick’s nightmares were of two variations, one was the night Carl was shot. Rick would never forget seeing Carl at that moment. His son had almost died, probably should have died but through some miracle, Carl had survived and Rick thanked a god he wasn’t sure he believed in every day. The second version of his nightmare was the night they had met Negan. Rick had never been more terrified than when that monster put Rick’s people on their knees and killed two of their own. Rick knew that it hadn’t just been the Abraham and Glenn’s murder that shook his so badly. No, Rick’s nightmare was what happened after. The RV, the threats to Carl, the ultimatum of Carl’s arm or his life.

Rick did not have pleasant dreams and after what felt like a lifetime constantly on the move fighting for his life Rick did not take threats to his children lightly.

Michonne entering their bedroom broke Rick from his dark thoughts. The man smiled at the woman and she smiled back. “Andre and Judy are all tucked in,” Michonne unclipped the baby monitor from her belt loop and put it on the table beside their bed.

Nothing in their room matched, furniture wise. Most of the beds in the main house didn’t even have frames. They were just mattresses sometimes on box springs and sometimes not. Rick had won the
nightstand in a poker game a few nights ago from Shawn. Poker nights were becoming a standard way to relax most people would bet furniture or chore swapping and Rick found he liked the tradition.

Michonne let herself drop onto the bed next to Rick and the two sat close for a moment. “I found Carl wearing a skirt today,” Michonne said simply.

Rick visibly startled and a confused look crossed his face. “A skirt?” he asked hesitantly.

Michonne nodded.

“He said he liked the fabric and thought it was pretty,” Michonne explained.

“Is this like him painting his nails at Maggie’s wedding?” Lori had come to Rick and hesitantly told him about Carl painting his nails. Rick hadn’t seen the appeal but neither did he see a problem with it. Having watched as Carl grew up in a walker infested wasteland, his son wearing nail polish wasn’t that big of a deal.

“I don’t know, Rick,” Michonne answered. “He was defensive and angry that I saw him like that. He thought he was going to be in trouble.”

“Why’d he think he was going to get in trouble?” Rick wasn’t sure what was going on. He didn’t know what Carl wearing the skirt meant but he didn’t like the picture Michonne was painting. “Lori made him scrub off his nail polish yesterday,” Michonne told him seriously. “Hold it it was wrong a boy to wear, Rick something about that hurt him. That wasn’t embarrassment that I saw today. It was shame on that boy's face. You need to talk to him.”

“Did he ever say anything about this to you before?” Rick asked. Rick was so far out of his depth with this problem. Rick was a fairly progressive man for a small-town Georgia sheriff but before the end of the world, Rick had never even met someone who was openly gay.

“No,” Michonne admitted. “But tomorrow, you should take him with you while you work and talk to him. Let me know that we love him and that he didn’t do anything wrong.”

Rick nodded thoughtfully. “And what will you be doing?” Rick asked curiously. He could tell Michonne had something in mind but he wasn’t sure what it was going to be.

“I think it’s past time that Lori and I had a serious conversation,” Michonne said firmly. “Woman to woman, we need to discuss some things.”

Rick winced. The last thing the Homestead needed was a fight but he knew Michonne was right, Lori was long overdue a talking too. Everyone helped out on the Homestead. Every, except Lori. The thin woman spent her time haunting the main house occasionally helping with Judith and talking to Carl.

Lori was the kind of person that needed structure, she needed routine and if she didn’t have these things she got irritable and could eventually shift into a depressed state. Rick didn’t have the time or the desire to baby her as he had in the past. The whole group was working as hard as they could to get the walls up, if they weren’t working on the walls they were shopping or farming, there were never enough hands to get everything done. Rick knew that even with Tyrese and Sasha arriving in the next few days with their supplies it wouldn’t be enough. There could never be enough. But still Rick was uneasy thinking about Michonne confronting Lori, the black woman was deadly and loyal beyond measure to the Grimes men. Rick knew she would tear Lori a new one for upsetting Carl and she would do again for the other woman’s refusal to contribute.
“Come on,” Michonne said after she pushed herself up off the bed. “We need to go grab something for dinner before it’s put away. You also need to tell Maggie that you and Carl need some time to talk tomorrow.”

Rick groaned but let himself be pulled into standing. The former police officer smiled at his partner and pressed a soft kiss to the side of her head. “I don’t know what I’d do without you,” Rick admitted to her before they left their room. “I don’t.”

“Die probably,” Michonne teased. Her eyes danced playfully and she pulled Rick closer for a real kiss. “Then I’d run this place.”

Rick broke the kiss with a laugh and shook his head. “We’d be ready for the walker in 48 hours if you ran the Homestead. Maybe you should take over?”

Michonne gave a half-shrugged. “The end of the world isn’t supposed to be easy,” Michonne said. “You give it a shot and if it doesn’t work I’ll stage a coup and take over.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Rick agreed with a nod and a wide smile.

End Notes

Join us on discord to talk about the fic! https://discord.gg/mGZ3AaF

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!